Door closed, lock latched, backpack dropped, shoes kicked off, and couch flopped—Emma landed face-first, cheeks squished against the worn-down cushion of her well-traveled couch.

Seven moves in eight years, and somehow this couch had survived them all.

She closed her eyes, willing her mind to drift anywhere but back to Mill Street. First days of school were exhausting enough—new classes, new teachers, new routines, and way too much overthinking. What she wanted, what she *needed*, was peace, quiet, and the sweet relief of zoning out at home.

“I just farted on that cushion, so you know.”

Emma shot up like a rocket. “Ew! Dad, gross!” She snatched up a pillow and hurled it at him.

Leaning in the kitchen doorway, he caught it against his chest with one hand, still crunching into his apple with the other. “Kidding! I’m only kidding.”

Emma groaned, flopping back dramatically. “Sure you are.”

Two strides and he was beside her, plopping down and trapping her in an over-tight squeeze—his favorite way of proving he was both her dad *and* a nuisance. “So,” he said coolly, arm draped along the back of the couch, “how was school?”

Emma crossed her arms and delivered a deadly side-eye, the universal language of *drop it*.

Her dad nodded, chewing. “That good, huh?”

Emma rolled her eyes and steered the conversation away. “What are you doing home? I thought you were supposed to be at work.”

“Andrew needed someone to switch shifts. I offered.”

“Again? Why does he always need to switch?”

Her dad chuckled. “Three kids, honey. He’s got his hands full. And we should—”

“I know, I know. *Help others when we can, everyone’s going through something, yada yada yada.* Please spare me the lecture.”

He only grinned and polished off his apple. “So you *do* listen.”

Emma tilted her head in mock defeat. “Unfortunately, yes.”

“That’s my girl.” He patted her leg, ignoring the sarcasm, then studied her for a long moment. Questions flickered in his eyes, ones he knew better than to ask. Instead, he settled on, “Tell me one interesting thing about your day. Just one. Then I’ll leave you alone.”

Emma shot him the deadly side-eye again. He just raised his brows, immune. She knew she wouldn’t shake him until she gave in.

“Fine.”

He smiled, waiting her out. Emma searched for something—anything—that wouldn’t trigger more questions. School was… school. Classes, cafeteria pizza, her teachers seemed fine, English might be tough—but none of that would satisfy him. There was only one way out.

“They reopened that library on Mill Street today.”

Her dad’s eyes lit up. “They did? And you didn’t go after school?”

Lincoln flashed through her mind. Travis too. She shoved them aside.

“Thought about it, but I was tired. I’ll go later this week.”

He nodded, content. “You should. Just let me know when, so I don’t worry, okay?”

“I will,” Emma sighed.

“You know…” He leaned back, a teasing spark in his eye. “I heard a little something about that place.”

“You have?” Emma’s brows pinched. Her dad wasn’t the type to even remember the name of the town they lived in, let alone care about its historical landmarks.

Her dad huffed a laugh. “Don’t act so surprised!”

“I’m not surprised, I’m just—”

“…Surprised?”

The corner of Emma’s mouth twitched upward. “Okay, fine. Maybe a little surprised.” She pulled a pillow onto her lap, bracing herself for any scrap of information he might’ve picked up that she hadn’t. “So? Are you going to tell me or what?”

Dad crossed his arms and pulled a dramatic pout. “Hmm. I don’t know if I want to anymore.”

Emma rolled her eyes and swung the pillow at him. “Tell me!”

“Fine, fine! If I must.” He threw his hands up in mock surrender, then leaned back against the couch with that storyteller’s glint in his eye.

“Back in the day,” he began, lowering his voice, “the library wasn’t a library at all. It was the Willoughby estate. Biggest house in town, and the family—well, they had money, power, everything. They practically owned this place. But…” He paused, chewing on the word. “They weren’t exactly loved. Folks said Mr. Willoughby ran his businesses with an iron fist. And Mrs. Willoughby? Sweet as sugar on the outside, but strange. Always reading those old, dusty books, holding story hours for children no one could quite place.”

Emma tilted her head. “No one could place?”

Her dad shrugged. “People swore those kids weren’t from the neighborhood. They just… showed up. And when story hour was over, no one ever saw them leave.”

A shiver ran down Emma’s arms. She gripped the pillow tighter.

“Then one night,” her dad went on, “the whole family vanished. Some said they were murdered. Others said Mrs. Willoughby finally went mad and locked the doors tight. Neighbors heard screams, the sound of glass shattering, even saw lights flickering in the windows. But when the sheriff broke down the doors the next day…” He leaned closer. “Empty. No bodies. No blood. Just the smell of smoke and soot, though the house never burned.”

Emma’s throat went dry. “So then they turned it into a library?”

“Years later,” Dad said, nodding. “After the whispers faded a little. People figured—hey, Mrs. Willoughby loved her books, maybe she’d approve. But some folks still swear they’ve seen her shadow in the windows. And every so often, a kid swears they hear pages turning when no one’s around.”

He gave Emma a playful nudge. “Bet you can’t wait to check it out.”

Emma pressed her lips together, hiding the smile tugging at them. “Maybe.”

Dad patted Emma’s leg and stood. “I should get dinner going. Chicken parm work?”  
Emma nodded, though she barely heard him, her mind still snagged on what he’d just said.

“Oh—almost forgot.” He pivoted back. “I work tomorrow night. The shift I traded with Andrew.”

A flicker of thought flashed across Emma’s face before she smothered it. Too late—her dad caught it. His eyes narrowed.

“Should I call someone over here? Keep you company? Keep an eye on things?”

Emma rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. “Dad. I’m thirteen. Almost fourteen. I’ll be fine.”

“Really. No—oh, I don’t know—sneaking out to the creepy library after hours?”

Emma’s face stayed carefully blank. “No.”

“You sure?”

“Yes!”

“Alright, alright.” He pointed a finger at her, half teasing, half warning. “I’m holding you to that. Library only during daylight hours, capeesh?”

Emma sighed, but a chill crawled up her spine. “Capeesh.”

It was only the second day of school, yet somehow everyone already seemed settled into their new routines.

Students drifted from class to class, teachers lectured like it was the most important subject in the world, and the whole place thrummed along as if summer had been a lifetime ago. Emma followed suit—though not in the cafeteria.

Instead, she went straight to her usual spot: the deserted hallway.

The hall wasn’t glamorous—scuffed tiles, the faint smell of bleach, lockers that rattled if you leaned against them—but it had its perks. Quiet. Familiar. Safe. Emma could sit with her own thoughts without the constant hum of other people’s laughter and chatter. She got enough of that noise during class, didn’t she? And there was no chance of repeating the disaster of what happened with the volleyball girls yesterday.

Not to mention Lincoln.

Emma *was* planning to say something to him—an apology, probably. She wasn’t sure what she was going to say exactly yet, but she knew she owed him one. Just… not yet. Maybe tomorrow.

Or the next day.

Definitely before the end of the week.

With a sigh, Emma dropped her head back against the wall and took a bite of her peanut butter sandwich. Dad had packed it with his usual flourish—0a silly note tucked inside, just like always. She barely even read it before filing it into it’s proper filing cabinet—the trashcan. At least here in the hallway, there was no chance of anyone noticing it. See, another perk.

Three periods left in the day, and oddly enough Emma found herself wishing there were more.

It wasn’t the homework or the classes she cared about—it was the distraction. No matter how hard she tried, her thoughts kept drifting back to the library.

First came what her dad had told her, which spun into wondering what the place was even like inside, which dragged her back to Lincoln, which circled her straight around to the library again. Round and round, like her brain was stuck on some haunted merry-go-round. It was a vicious cycle really.

Which is exactly why she needed to get this apology over with Lincoln already. Put an end to this endless loop of mental madness. That, and go to the library—but that might have to be further delayed.

Emma had been planning on going after school, even had her phone out to text her dad about it before math started, when she overheard Bianca and her little posh squad—friends she’d somehow managed to finagle her way into sitting next to during class—chattering about their plans. Apparently, they were all heading to the library after school to meet up with some boys.

Since when was a library the *hangout spot*? That was Emma’s place. Her turf. Her sanctuary.

Or it had been.

Now, unless she wanted to deal with Bianca and her giggling entourage, Emma would have to bus it to the next closest library. Which, of course, was more than five miles away. Her dad hated her taking the bus—he acted like she was still seven, wanting her to text every five minutes—and Emma hated it too. Loud. Smelly. Too much trouble. Definitely not worth the hassle.

There was another option though… one that kept creeping up in the dark corners of Emma’s mind. But like an exterminator, she squashed that bug the moment she spotted it.

The problem was, this particular bug was more like a cockroach. It just wouldn’t die.

See, Emma was—by all accounts—a pretty good kid. At least, she thought so. She listened to her elders, followed the rules (for the most part), held the door open for people behind her, and always remembered her pleases and thank-yous. If she still believed in the fable that was Santa, she would’ve proudly put herself on the nice list.

But there was this one teeny, tiny, little, insignificant thing she used to do—up until recently—that could be considered… not so good.

Okay, fine. It was bad. But it could’ve been worse!

The truth was, every now and then, Emma had snuck out at night—without her dad knowing—and slipped into public libraries after hours.

So yeah, just a little traveling alone at night. And breaking and entering.

Okay, *definitely* not on the nice list.

But in her defense, it wasn’t like she was doing anything *bad* once she got inside. She wasn’t stealing books, or graffitiing encyclopedias, or being a pyromaniac. She just… wanted to be there. The environment. The vibe. Like the hallway, the library during the day was a quiet sanctuary—but at night, alone, it was… mystic. It felt like… home.

But none of that mattered now, because the last time was the last time—

BAM!

A loud *thud* vibrated the row of lockers in front of her.

Emma’s corked her head to the side. What was that?

She looked left, looked right—no one.

A cold breeze brushed against her ankles. She shivered.

Did the A/C just turn on? Could that have rattled the lockers? It *was* an old building, after all—BAM!

Emma jumped. She was just about to bolt when she heard murmuring voices.

She wasn’t alone.

All of last year, she’d spent her lunches in this hallway—and not once had she’d seen or heard a single person.

Bam! Bam! Another *thud* rattled the lockers, louder this time. Emma went from cold to frozen. Who was that? She couldn’t make out the words, but the voice sounded familiar.

Gently, Emma picked up her backpack and tiptoed her way down the hallway until she reached the corner. The muddled voices became clearer:

“Think you’re a funny guy, huh? Huh? Well, not so funny, are you? Are you!” the boy said, venom dripping from each word.

“I’m… I’m sorry! Okay! I’m sorry. Please, just—ow! Ow!”

Another slam against a locker. Hard. So hard, she was sure the metal dented.

All the blood drained from Emma’s face. These voices clicked into place… but something wasn’t right.

She dared to peek around the corner. Her glasses almost slid off her nose from her jaw dropping.

It was Lincoln. And Travis.

Except… Travis wasn’t the one picking on Lincoln. It was the other way around.