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.”

“Oh, I work tomorrow night now, by the way. It was the shift I switched with Andrew.”

Emma’s eyes flashed with a thought, but quickly she smothered it before her dad could notice—but he seemed to anyways.

Her dad’s eyes narrowed, “Should I get someone to