Emma lay in bed that night, gripping the sheets in frustration. She’d tossed and turned relentlessly, and her mind didn’t seem quite finished with her yet.

The final bell had rung hours ago, and she realized she’d spent the entire period staring at Lincoln, not hearing a single word her teacher had said. A group of girls had giggled as they walked out, and Emma could only hope it hadn’t been about her.

She had been dreading that class, knowing Lincoln would be there, but an apology was the last thing on her mind now. Emma didn’t know him well—him or anyone else at school, really—but she never could have imagined him doing what she’d witnessed. He had always been quiet, soft-spoken, the kind of kid who wouldn’t hurt a butterfly. And now… well, now Emma had no idea who he was.

All period long, Lincoln slouched in his desk, one arm draped over the chair, flipping his pencil up and down with casual indifference—clearly not paying attention either. It was as if someone had flipped a switch in him overnight.

Word had spread about what happened at lunch like wildfire. Emma guessed Travis had run crying to the principal’s office, and the rest of the school must have overheard along the way. She was surprised Lincoln hadn’t been sent home after that—but maybe the principal didn’t quite believe it either.

Even so, it was clear the other kids were already treating Lincoln differently. Some wary, some curious. One boy even asked if Lincoln wanted to go to the library after school—but Lincoln refused. Almost instantly, actually. The moment he heard the word *library*, he shook his head like it was poison.

Was this just what happened when you hit eighth grade? Everything turned upside down? Would she be the next one pushing kids into lockers, yelling in their face?

Emma turned and tapped her cell phone lying on the nightstand. 11:29, it flashed in iridescent blue.

She groaned. This was a nightmare. Actually—a nightmare might have been preferable. At least then she would have been asleep.

Flip. Flop. Flip again.

11:32.

This isn’t working.

There had to be something—sheep? No. Warm glass of milk? Ew. Definitely no. Count to a million? *Meh.*

What Emma needed was to put these thoughts to bed, literally. And the only way she knew how was either to confront them head-on—hard to do at eleven o’clock at night—or find something to calm the waters. Something relaxing. Something zen.

Something like… a library.

No. Absolutely not. She couldn’t. Wouldn’t. Her dad would lose his mind if he ever found out.

But… on the other hand… it would kill two birds with one stone, wouldn’t it? Confront the source of her thoughts *and* give her just the kind of zen she needed.

And her dad was at work for another couple of hours. The library was barely half a mile away. That’s what, a ten, fifteen-minute walk? Less if she jogged part of it. And the route was safe-*ish?* She could take neighborhood streets almost the entire way.

Stop. No. She promised. And a promise is… well a promise. Words with meaning she guessed. That’s how trust is built. And even if it was “mostly through the neighborhood,” her dad was right—nothing good happened after midnight. It only takes one bad person. One wrong place, one wrong time.

Although… she did have that giant can of mace…

No! No, no, no. The answer is no, and that’s final.

Emma tapped her phone. 11:34.

…She’d be quick.

Okay, so the walk was more like twenty minutes—but that included getting dressed and evasive maneuvering to make sure no one saw her. Emma made a mental note to leave extra time to get home, just in case.

There was a brief part of the journey where she needed to cross the main road under the wash of a yellow streetlamp, quickening her steps, but then slipped gratefully into the cover of shadows again.

And once she slipped into the grounds of the library, she may as well have been a shadow herself. There were enough shrubberies and statues and neatly trimmed landscaping to hide her in plain sight.

A positive, *and* a negative.

But, for now, at least she felt comfortable to walk the property without feeling the need to cower away whenever a car passed by.

Emma stared wide-eyed at the front of the library looming over her. She knew the estate was large, but this close was a different story. An eerie story, at that. Movies could have been filmed here. Scary movies. With like gargoyles and vampires and stuff.

How, and *why,* a single family wanted to live in a place this big, this… eccentric was beyond her. Maybe it hadn’t been like when the Willoughby’s lived here? Although, how different could it really have been?

Windows as tall as doors framed each side of the front entrance, four on each side before the house turned toward the side yard. Each one looked as ancient and withered as the next.

This was going to be a cake walk.

Emma walked confidently to the first window, looked to her left and to her right for good measure, planted both hands at the base and gave it a good thrust upward half-expecting it to move with ease—it didn’t budge.

Okay, window number two then… same thing. Well, you know what they say third times the—nope. What the heck?

She turned on her phone flashlight and pressed it to the glass. The beam vanished like it hit a sheet of black paper. Heavy curtains? Thick blinds? Some sort of sun-blocking film? Emma didn’t know, and she didn’t like it—all she wanted was the tiniest peek inside. Was that too much to ask?

Determined, Emma looked at the windows to the other side. One of these windows had to have been left unlocked, or had a faulty latch, or something. And if they didn’t—well, she was going to make it be so.

But there wasn’t.

And she didn’t.

Emma circled the entire building patting and pushing on every single nook and cranny that looked remotely like it might lead her inside, but not one of them budged.

There was even a terrace in back; she climbed a sturdy trellis with a small spark of hope only to find a pair of old swinging doors that wouldn’t so much as cough open. The whole place seemed insulated with iron. Nothing getting in or out unless you had a key.

It felt a little crazy, like trying to break out of Azkaban. Or, rather *into* Azkaban in this case. After dropping back to the ground, exhausted and annoyed, she stood and stared up at the building in defeat.

The only other option was breaking glass—a line Emma wasn’t willing to cross. There was something about forcing your way inside that felt wrong, even if the end result would be the same. Besides, with her luck, she’d probably break the window just to meet a brick wall behind it.

Emma look down at her phone. 11:59. Only a few more seconds until midnight struck and the day began anew. May as well head home.

Probably for the better. At least now she can keep her promise to her dad. That and not break any laws. Guess that’s somewhat important too.

Emma shook her head at herself, “*Priorities, Emma, priorities.”*

Head hanging, hands shoved into her pockets, she walked back to the front of the library for one last look. Again, it would have to wait.

*Tomorrow*, she decided. Classmates or not.She gave the building a small, resigned wave and turned toward home.

Goosebumps prickled the back of her neck. An odd prickling, like the feeling you get when someone’s watching.

Emma spun back on a heel. No one. Only the heavy oak doors—and… was that a blue light slipping beneath them?

She blinked. The light was gone.

Was someone in there? Watching her fail to break in?

Nah. Who would be here at this hour… besides her? And even if someone was in there, there was no way they could see out with those windows covered, right?

*Unless they just moved the blinds, Emma.* Gosh she really did need some sleep.

Probably just a trick of the light. Or exhaustion. Or her imagination.

It dawned on her then, she never tried to see if the front doors were unlocked, did she?

They were sure to be locked, *everyone* remembers to lock those door, but… well why not give it a try. She had already come this far, scaled half the building for goodness sake, might as well check—even if she knew it would be pointless.

Emma walked up the creaking steps and onto the sagging porch—weren’t they supposed to have renovated this place?—until she stood in front of the twin oak doors.

Square in the middle was the metallic door handle as long and as heavy as Emma’s arm. She reached out. Then froze.

What if someone really was inside? What if they heard her?

No. No one was here. That would just be silly. This was a public building. No one lives here anymore, and no city employee would be here at this hour.

But still her heart thrummed.

She stretched out her hand until her fingertips brushed the metal—then jerked back as if burned.

The handle was *hot.* Or—no, not hot. Cold. Freezing cold.

Emma pressed her hand again, slower this time. Definitely cold, though not as shocking when she braced for it. Still, her pulse thundered in her ears.

Every ounce of her was screaming at her to run away, run and run fast, but Emma felt…

*Click*.

The door latch had given way. The door… stood slightly ajar.

Emma blinked. Did she do that? She didn’t remember… wait a second, the door was open? The door was open! The front door was *actually* open!

She was here. At the library. In the middle of the night. And it was… open.

Emma pushed the door the rest of the way open and stared into the darkness, her eyes only able to see as far as the light from outside permitted.

No blue light, and more importantly, no one looked to be waiting inside.

It was empty.

Emma took one last glance behind her and walked inside.

Floorboards groaned with each step, echoing through the vacant facility. If anyone else had been here at this hour, Emma may as well have been banging pots and pans to announce her presence.

Seeing little reason for stealth now that she was inside, Emma flicked on her flashlight. A cone of yellow light cut through the dark, guiding her forward.

The entrance opened directly into a wide foyer where a half-moon desk stood sentry. Stacks of books perched neatly on top, waiting to be returned to their rightful shelves. Empty mugs, strings from forgotten tea bags still dangling over the rims, seemed glued to the surface by pale rings beneath them. The computers sat dormant, their red scanner lights blinking like watchful eyes—the librarian’s desk.

Emma swept her light beam higher, tracing the desk, up to the ceiling, then back down again. A grand stairwell with polished wooden railings curved toward the second floor, with another flight beyond that disappearing into shadow. Below, the main level stretched wide, rooms branching off on either side of the hallway.

The vintage wallpaper—faded greens, pinks, and yellows—clung stubbornly to the walls, holding onto the building’s history. Between each doorway hung portraits in ornate frames, faces of strangers whose painted eyes seemed just a little too intent on watching her pass.

Again Emma was struck by the sheer size of the place. It felt endless—so much to explore, and so little time.

She turned her light beyond the librarian’s desk, to the first room on the right. Once, it must have been a parlor or living room. Now, it was the children’s section.

Half-sized shelves zig-zagged across the room, painted to resemble stalks of corn—a corn maze! Bright, colorful hardcovers lined the shelves, beanbags lay scattered like steppingstones, dollhouses huddled in the corners, and everywhere Emma looked, some kinetic contraption clicked, spun, or whirled as if alive.

It was, without question, the most wickedly wonderful children’s section Emma had ever seen.

Connected to the children’s center was what must have once been a formal dining room. Now, it was crammed with tables and mismatched chairs, and oh-so conveniently attached to a coffee and pastry bar.

Emma guessed the bar had once been the estate’s grand kitchen, or what was grand for its time. Behind the gleaming espresso machines and ovens, the original mosaic tiles still shimmered faintly in the beam of her flashlight—easily a century old, and still beautiful.

From there, Emma wandered from room to room, each one transformed into its own little world.

A murder mystery wing complete with chalk outlines and splatters of fake blood that looked a little *too* realistic.

A Sci-Fi section that hurled you into outer space with glowing stars, silvery panels, and a faint hum like the inside of a spaceship.

A romance section Emma practically sprinted through with her eyes cast to the floor—no need to linger about in *that* one.

And even a nonfiction hall lined with statues of the world’s greatest thinkers. That one was… well, let’s be real—still boring. But compared to every other nonfiction section Emma had trudged through, this was at least the least boring of them all.

But the crown jewel of the palace—the part that stole the show, and with it Emma’s heart—was the Nurturing Tree.

At the far end of the house, they had gutted an entire second living room, and the floor above it—maybe even another beyond that—to make space for a colossal tree. Its wide trunk rose from the floorboards as though its roots burrowed deep into the earth below, a spiral staircase winding through its core and carrying you higher and higher into the canopy.

Each level swept its adventurers from title to title: the nightmarish dimensions of Stephen King, the fantastical landscapes of Nora Roberts, the pulse-pounding thrillers of James Patterson, and everything in between.

From the trunk sprouted thick branches, each hollowed into a nook or fashioned into a miniature treehouse, every one of them begging for someone to climb in, curl up with a book, and vanish into another world.

It was no wonder this place had become the local hangout for her school. And it was here, beneath the Nurturing Tree, that Emma could go no farther. The bookworm inside her rose up and demanded she stop at once.

She spotted a title quickly—an old favorite she hadn’t read in years—and wandered to a branch where a leaf-shaped cushion seemed to be politely requesting her presence. Who was she to refuse a leaf-shaped cushion asking so nicely?

With her legs tucked under her, and her flashlight fastened against the wall, Emma rest her head to the side, and let the words wash over her.

With her legs tucked beneath her and her flashlight propped against the wall, Emma rested her head to the side and let the words wash over her.