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 between the two of them was the metallic door handle. 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 city funded building. No one lives here anymore, and no city employee would be here at this hour.

But still her heart pounded.

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 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 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.