“Pardon me?” A distant voice tickled the back of Emma’s mind.

Ugh, already? “Dad, five more minutes…”

A cold wind brushed over Emma’s skin. She reached for the blanket but found nothing but air.

“Darling, it’s time to wake.” The voice drifted closer, followed by another chill.

e must’ve turned on the fan. That butt. “Dad, can you not! Two more minutes.”

Again, Emma groped for the blanket, eyes struggling to open. Blue light fluttered in and out between her heavy lids. Morning already?

She rolled onto her side, curling into a tight ball.

“Little miss, I must insist. The library will be closing soon.” A woman’s voice said firmly. Why was her dad talking like that? And library, what—library! She fell asleep!

Emma’s eyes snapped open. She rolled over—

—and there she was.

The woman who had been speaking, the one Emma almost convinced herself was only a voice in her head.

She stood inches away, hands folded neatly behind her back, smiling down at Emma as if she’d been standing there the whole time.

A shriek clawed its way up Emma’s throat, but terror locked it in place. Not a sound escaped.

Emma rubbed her eyes. Blinked twice.

The lady was still there.

She wore an elegant dress with a fitted bodice, her hair pinned neatly back. A crescent-moon necklace sparkled against her long neck and heart-shaped face.

Her expression was kind. Too kind. Something about her was… wrong. Emma couldn’t put her finger on it, but the longer she stared, frozen on her back like a cavewoman discovering fire, the wider that smile seemed to stretch.

“S—sorry.” Emma croaked, forcing the words through her dry throat.

“Oh, not to worry, dear. Happens all the time. Is there anything I can help you with?” the woman asked. Her voice was both warm and cold at once—not accented exactly, but too polished, too precise, like a recording from another era.

Emma shook her head. Barely. The woman’s smile widened, just a fraction too far.

“Well then, like I said, the library will be closing soon.” She continued smoothly. “Best be getting home. It is rather late, and you never know what might be lurking in the dark.”

Emma wasn’t sure if she answered or only mouthed words. Her body felt like it belonged to someone else as she pushed herself into a sitting position, then up onto wobbling knees.

The woman towered above, her eyes glinting with something that looked far too much like delight.

Emma edged sideways, careful not to turn her back. The woman didn’t step—she *pivoted*, smoothly, almost gliding, always keeping Emma in her gaze. Emma dared a glance at the lady’s feet, but the dress swept down to the floor, hiding everything beneath it.

Still facing her, Emma shuffled backwards.

“Have a good rest of your night, dear. Walk safe.”

“Th-thank you. You… too.”

The woman watched as Emma stumbled into the railing of the spiral stairwell, and the moment her foot hit the first step, she bolted.

Emma tore down the spiraling tree, leaping three steps at a time. One misstep would have sent her tumbling into the void, but she didn’t care. She only cared about *getting* *out*.

Books and woodland creatures blurred past. The stone-faced scholars seemed to track her every move, and a strip of caution tape snapped as Emma burst out of the murder mystery section—“Umph!”

She tripped, and tumbled, and landed in a heap, the air punched from her lungs. Gasping, Emma pushed up on shaky elbows and shot a glare at the model spaceship now cracked clean in two—then froze. She felt it, like a weight pressing down on her—the woman’s eyes. They were watching her from the floor above.

Every nerve begged her to curl into a ball, to squeeze her eyes shut and vanish. But she didn’t. With trembling legs, Emma forced herself upright, half-limping, half-running, until the double oak doors boomed shut behind her.

What. Was. That? Or rather—*who* was that?

Emma didn’t sleep a wink that night—unless you counted the catnap she’d stolen in the library, which she did not. If it hadn’t been for that… woman—librarian?—she probably would’ve slept until morning. Or until her dad blew a gasket and called her phone repeatedly until it buzzed her awake.

Who was she? Why was she there? Why didn’t she care that Emma had been there? And why did she feel so *wrong*? It wasn’t the outdated dress, or the stiff, unnatural way she moved—although seriously, what was up with that?

No, it was something else. Something Emma couldn’t pin down. It hovered just out of reach, like a word she almost remembered but couldn’t quite say.

At least she wasn’t thinking about Lincoln anymore. Or about what the library was like inside. She’d simply traded one endless spiral of questions for another. Maddening—but at least it was a new kind of maddening. Silver linings.

Nevertheless, the questions looped in her head, chasing each other the whole walk home. Following her until she slid under her covers, just in time before her dad rolled in from work.

Then she blinked, and it was suddenly time to get ready for school. Blinked again, and Emma somehow found herself sitting at her desk in first period.