“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.

Who. Was. That.

Or, rather—*what* was that?

It took a lot of convincing, and more than a few deep breaths, to make herself believe what had just happened. That—*that* actually happened.

Emma had sprinted home faster than she’d ever run in her life. The glowing blue lady’s image was seared into her eyeballs. Everywhere she looked, she saw her.

And even now, it was only starting to click. The light around the woman—the aura, maybe, was a better word—the fuzzy, transparent edges, the way she moved like her joints weren’t connected quite right… none of that was something Emma imagined in her delirium.

That those things were real. And whatever Emma had just seen didn’t walk this earth anymore. Not in flesh and blood, at least.

That, that lady… was a ghost.

Right?

What else—*who* *else*—could that have been?

The thought of it all, the disbelief of it—even though Emma *knew* it was true—sent a shiver down her spine. The same cold shiver she’d felt when the woman stood near her. It wasn’t that Emma didn’t believe that ghost weren’t real… but to see one in real life was a different matter.

There was no sleep that night. (Not that she counted the “catnap” in the library.) And she might as well not have gone to school the next morning—she would’ve learned just as much either way. If anyone had cared to notice her, which they didn’t—by design—they might’ve said something. Concern over the bags under her eyes, or the way she kept drifting off into space. But no one did. So they didn’t.

She couldn’t take her mind off the woman. Couldn’t stopreplaying every single second of that night.

From the moment she opened her eyes on that cushioned leaf to when she fell and looked up to see the woman smiling down at her over the railing. That strange, almost *predatory* grin. And everything in between.

At least she wasn’t thinking about Lincoln anymore. So… that was something.

Although, there was one bit of gossip she picked up at school that day. That not only was Lincoln still acting weird, but he’d apparently teamed up with Travis’s two goons—Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dumb—a pair of ticks if there ever were any.

As for Travis himself, he was nowhere to be seen. Not that Emma was looking. (At all.)

But that all seemed like small potatoes compared to what she’d discovered last night.

All through History, Math, and whatever other classes she had drifted through that day, Emma had made up her mind: she was going back to the library.

How could she not?

She had to find out more about that woman—the ghost librarian, as Emma liked to think of her. If nothing else, just to confirm she hadn’t completely lost her marbles. Seeing a ghost once was one thing. Seeing one *twice*? That was proof.

She’d go after school. Yeah, that was the plan.

Emma didn’t exactly expect to find the ghost during the day—though honestly, what did she know about ghosts? Maybe she’d learn something anyway. The woman clearly had some connection to the place, and if nothing else, it was still a library. There had to be books on the supernatural. And if not? The computer lab would have the answers.

What she couldn’t find in books, the internet would handle.

The thought of it—the anticipation of going back to that place—sent a jolt of nervous excitement through her, even with fatigue hanging on her like a heavy jacket.

The hours that followed dragged on endlessly. Seconds stretched into minutes, minutes into hours, and hours into what felt like days—but eventually, the final bell chimed.

Emma took her time packing her things, sliding each item neatly back into her backpack.

She let the others filter out of the classroom first, then refastened her ponytail and adjusted her glasses until they sat squarely on her face. With a deep breath and a quiet nod of confirmation, she slung her bag over her shoulder and began the long trek to the library.

While the day may have dragged, the walk to the library passed in the blink of an eye. No games were needed this time—no distractions to fill the silence. The image of the ghostly librarian was enough to occupy her thoughts.

When she reached the cracked square of sidewalk—the one that always looked like a tiny volcano in her mind—she paused, just for a moment. Then she stepped over it, bracing for that familiar chill.

None came.

Emma wasn’t sure whether to feel relieved or disappointed.

Either way, she pressed on, slipping through the iron-wrought gate and staring up at the already familiar double oak doors—the very threshold she’d crossed only hours ago.

She lingered there, giving herself a moment. Kids she recognized from school brushed past her and disappeared inside, granting her quick glimpses of the foyer, the librarian’s desk, and the banister where the woman had stood.

With a sharp inhale, Emma stepped forward—or tried to. She meant to cross the threshold back into the mystical library that had captured her heart and struck it with fear all at once. But her feet wouldn’t move.

She looked down at her black Vans, glued to the cracked concrete, then back up at the doors. Again, down at her shoes.

*Move,* she told them. *Come on, feet. It’s literally your one job.*

They weren’t listening. *Move feet!* She commanded them again—

A shiver ran down her spine.

The air shifted.

Eyes were watching her. She could feel it. Sense it.

Suddenly, it wasn’t just her feet that froze. Her entire body locked up. Her lungs constricted. Air stopped flowing in.

She tried to turn, to see who—or what—was staring at her, but nothing moved.

Desperately Emma wished to cry for help, to scream, but nothing was working.

The edges of her vision darkened. Color fading to black. The library feet away, blurring before her eyes, pixelating—

“Emma?”

A voice. Familiar. Close.

“Emma? Are you… okay?” A gentle hand landed on her shoulder.

Like a gust of wind, air flooded back into her lungs. Her body jolted free.

Emma gasped and whipped her head from side to side, scanning every window, every shadow—searching for that face. The woman.

But there was only Gracie, standing beside her, hand still resting on her shoulder.

The concern in her classmates eyes pulled Emma all the way back. She shook her head quickly, like trying to shake off a brain freeze.