“Crap! Crap, crap, crap!” Emma bolted off the oversized chair shaped like a leaf and tore down the spiraling tree.

The Willoughby Library had been everything she imagined it would be—more.

Thirteen rooms she counted (thirteen!) and all of them had been a story of it’s own. And when she spotted that tree, and that cozy little nooked which she curled up in, in the darkened library all to herself, she should have known. Known *exactly* what could, and absolutely did end up happening by mistake… she fell asleep.

And now, with each leap, Emma took three steps at a time down the spiraling tree. One misstep and—well, she tried not to think about that. There wasn’t time! Her dad would be home any minute, and she still had a fifteen-minute trek ahead of her.

So down the tree she went with books and woodland creatures blurring, through the non-fiction section where the stone-faced scholars seemed to follow her with their eyes, and escaping with her life out of the murder mystery wing as she broke through the caution tape.

A blue glow pulsed ahead near the front doors, faintly lighting her path. Sunrise already? No—no time to think. She just had to make it home before—

“Umph!”

Emma tripped. She tumbled, rolled, and landed in a heap, the air knocked out of her chest. Wincing, she propped herself up and shot a glare at the model spaceship now cracked in two. Limping, she pressed on.

If she was going to beat her dad home, she’d need luck on her side. She was already imagining the look on his face, the disappointment, the questions, the—

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

“Thank you. You—”

Emma froze mid-step. She turned her head just enough to glimpse the librarian’s desk.

And saw her.

A lady stood there. Clear as day. Hands folded neatly behind her back. Smiling, as though Emma wasn’t a trespasser sneaking out in the middle of the night.

Emma rubbed at her eyes. Blinked twice.

The lady was still there.

She stood wearing an elegant dress and her hair pinned neatly back. A small, crescent moon neckless fell below her long neck, and sparkled beneath her heart-shaped face.

The lady smiled, and while her eyes were kind, there was something… not quite right. Something… Emma couldn’t quite put her finger on.

Like a stalker, Emma stood transfixed on the women. Frozen like a caveman and would have stayed like that for who-knows how long if not for the Lady speaking again, breaking Emma from her spell.

“Is there something I can help you with, dear?” 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 touch too far.

“Well then,” The lady said. “Best be getting home. It is rather late. And you never know what lurks out there in the dark.”

Emma’s felt her mouth move, but she wasn’t sure if any words came out.

Step by step, she backed away. She didn’t turn until the heavy door swung shut behind her on its own.

It was then, and only then, that Emma noticed—it was still dark out, and the blue light was coming from inside.

Throwing caution to the wind, Emma flew down the streets, racing to beat her dad home.

It took her a moment to collect herself, standing frozen on the porch of the library. A moment she didn’t have. Too many questions about *what the freak* had just happened swarmed her mind. The woman—*that lady*—both frightened and intrigued Emma to no end. She wanted to peek back inside and run for the hills at the same time. Which, she remembered, was exactly what she needed to do once she managed to reconnect her brain to its brain stem.

Jumping hedges, skidding corners, Emma tore across the pavement until she reached the place she called home, for now.

The lights were still off, and her phone hadn’t exploded with messages from her dad—it appeared she beat him home. But, as luck would have it, the second she latched the lock on the front door, the garage began to open.

Emma bolted across the living room, narrowly dodging the side table and the lamp wobbling on top of it—that would’ve been a disaster. She flew into her room and dove under the covers just as Dad walked in from the garage.

Emma struggled to slow her ragged breathing as his keys clunked against the kitchen counter and he let out a grunt of relief, pulling off his boots.

Her bedroom door creaked open. Emma forced her heavy breathing into long, obnoxious snores. Not her best acting, but it would have to do.

Heavy footsteps lumbered across the floor. The bed dipped as her dad sat on the edge, brushed her hair back, and kissed her forehead good night.

And then he was gone.

Emma let out a massive sigh of relief.

She made it. She actually made it.

Now, the only trouble was, how on earth was she supposed to fall asleep?

She didn’t. Not even a wink. Save for the catnap at the library, which was starting to feel more like a dream than reality in her delirium.

After three hours of tossing and turning, analyzing and reanalyzing, Emma’s alarm chimed angrily, demanding she get ready for school.