Emma had spent a considerable amount of time that afternoon—and many afternoons to follow—combing through the stacks of the Willoughby Library.

It went without saying that the vibe during the day couldn’t have been more different than at night.

Between the groups of people murmuring to one another and the rambunctious children pulling out every book they touched, the once-mysterious rooms seemed ordinary—almost theatrical.

In the daylight, the corn maze looked more like a painted backdrop than real stalks of corn. The splattered blood resembled ketchup more than the metallic goo that oozes from our skin. And the scholastic statues in the nonfiction section—well, those were still just as boring.

Emma still hadn’t been able to bring herself back to the Nurturing Tree, even though, from a distance, it somehow managed to hold on to its mystical charm.

Anytime she neared the looming trunk, her skin would tingle, and she’d turn right back around. Which was fine by her. That was where most of her classmates hung out anyway—and most of those books were the fictional kind.

Although, maybe those fictitious, fantastical worlds beneath their covers would’ve been more fruitful than anything else Emma had managed to find in the library.

After a week of research, Emma had compiled a whole lot of diddly-squat.

Oh, there were *plenty* of books claiming to know all about the spirit world, but most of them contradicted one another—and sometimes even themselves. The internet was, unsurprisingly, even worse. Too much information, and most of it swarming with clickbait. What else is new.

All in all, only a few things remained constant:

1) Ghosts stayed tied to their place—either to a location itself or to some trinket.

2) Most lingered because of unfinished business or an unwillingness to move on.

3) Cold spots. Chills.

That last one struck a nerve with Emma. How many times had she already felt that sudden blast of cold air—the doorknob, the volcanic sidewalk?

There were other tidbits she wasn’t sure held any truth, but she kept them in the back of her mind just in case: mirrors acting as traps, salt as protection, and iron—especially wrought iron—repelling spirits and other supernatural beings.

Since most ghosts seemed tied to a specific place, Emma chased the idea that the mysterious woman she’d met that night might’ve been Mrs. Wiloughby herself. But one quick look at the portrait hanging over the fireplace in the study—the only room still dedicated to the family’s memory—put that theory to rest.

She’d studied every face in the old photographs of friends and relatives she could find, but there was still—no resemblance.

Emma then went on a scavenger hunt through the library, searching for anything that looked old—or at least old-ish. Artifacts, trinkets, dusty display cases—there were plenty to choose from. Too many, really. Emma had no idea how to tell what might actually mean something and what was just decoration. She couldn’t even be sure half of what she was looking at was real.

When that led nowhere—at least nowhere without more information she didn’t have—Emma headed to the archive section. She scrolled through every digital record she could find, searching for anything about the history of the house or the Wiloughby family.

But as it turns out, when you’re the wealthiest family in town—and happen to own part of the local newspaper—there’s not much written about you that you don’t want written. And what *is* written, well, only what you approve.

Emma confirmed the basics: the family was rich, Mr. Wiloughby had a hand in nearly every business in town—including the paper—and Mrs. Wiloughby was the town’s beloved philanthropist, humanitarian, community servant, and every other good-doer term imaginable. Honestly, Emma had learned more about them from a two-minute conversation with her dad than from an entire week of research. Oh, how he’d love to hear that.

By the end of the week, Emma was starting to lose steam—and maybe her sanity. On Friday, after one last half-hearted search about “common ghost behavior,” she gave up and decided to find a cozy corner and an actual book worth reading.

It was becoming more, and more apparent that the only other logical next step was to go back to the library… at night… to try to see *her* again. But Emma wasn’t sure she was ready for that. Not yet.

While her research proved difficult, at least the library seemed to be disimating as the local hang out spot.

At least the place was starting to clear out. Each day, fewer kids from her school showed up. Fads changed fast, apparently. So did people. Lincoln’s new normal had somehow become… well, normal. Groups were splitting up, new ones forming. The class clowns had gone quiet, and the quiet kids were suddenly loud.

Emma might’ve lived in the shadows, but it was as good a place as any for observing. With high school just around the corner, she guessed now was the time for everyone to start practicing who they wanted to be. That—or hormones. One of the two.

Crack!

Emma felt more than heard the vibration against the bookshelf beside her.

Jerking upright from the beanbag, she yanked out both earbuds just in time to hear a girl laughing.

“Abigail, what the heck? Stop—”

Thwap! Crack!

Emma jumped halfway to her feet, enough to see the tops of Gracie and Abigail’s heads.

“Seriously, Abby, stop! You’re going to get us kicked out of here.”

Gracie reached to grab Abigail’s arm before she could do whatever she was about to do with the children’s toy in front of her.

And okay, yes—Emma was in the children’s section on that glorious Friday evening. At this hour, there were barely any kids. It was quiet, cozy, and even with all its cheesiness, kind of comforting. A few nostalgic reads she liked to revisit sat on the lower shelves, and it made a great spot to do homework undisturbed.

Usually.

But Abigail jerked her arm away and yanked the pendulum contraption in a way it was *definitely* not meant to be yanked.

A head full of long, flowing hair—kept tidy in a single braid—swung around the corner. “Is there a problem here, ladies?” the librarian asked, peering over her half-moon glasses.

“No! No problem. Sorry, Mrs. Cobbler, we were just—” Gracie started.

Crack! Abigail giggled.

Mrs. Cobbler sneered at her. “Excuse me, that is *not* how that’s supposed to be used. This is a toy for the children’s section. I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

Abigial shrugged, “Meh. No thanks.”

“Abby!” Gracie hissed, her face flushing red. “What has gotten into you?”

“Young lady,” Mrs. Cobbler said, voice sharpening, “you will leave now—or I’ll call security. And your parents.”

Abigail sighed and rolled her eyes. “Fine.”

Crossing her arms, she sauntered away from the toy and *just so happened* to “accidentally” knock a book onto the floor in front of Mrs. Cobbler.

Emma couldn’t help but let out a small gasp.

Gracie pinched the bridge of her nose and glanced over in surprise to find Emma there. She gave a quick lift of her brows in greeting before hurrying after her friend—but not before scooping up the fallen book and offering the librarian a flurry of apologies.

Mrs. Cobbler looked to the ceiling and shook her head, as if questioning every life choice that had brought her here, before stomping off to wherever she came from.

Emma plopped back into her beanbag and shook her head, too.

Hormones, indeed.

*Buzz, buzz, buzzzzz…*

*Buzz, buzz, buzzzzz…*

*Buzz, buzz, buzzzzz….*

…Do-da-doop.

For the second time that evening, Emma’s head snapped up from the beanbag, this time her skin peeling off the sticky leather.

She rubbed her eyes and squinted against the blue glow of her phone.

*Miss call: Dad*.

For goodness’ sake—she’d fallen asleep. *Again!*

*What is wrong with me?*

Quickly, Emma scanned her surroundings. Dim light still filtered through the windows, though dusk had started to settle. They wouldn’t close the library with her still in here… right?

*They would if they didn’t think to check for a sleeping thirteen-year old in the children’s section!*

She scanned around for anyone—preferably *living*—and relaxed at the sight of an elderly man sipping what was presumably tea near the coffee bar.

Emma let out a breath. She stuffed her notebooks into her bag and shot off a quick text: *“Sorry! Lost track of the time. At the library—coming home now.”*

*Dad liked your message.*

*“Little heads-up next time, kiddo. Yeah?”*

Emma rolled her eyes and shoved her phone into her bag without deigning a reply before slinging it over her shoulder.

On heavy, sleepy feet, Emma wound her way through the maze of corn stalks, leapt over scattered books, and slipped out of the children’s section with her head down—just in case someone she knew happened to see her.

With a quick nod of farewell to Mrs. Cobbler, she passed the librarian’s desk and crossed the foyer, just reaching the double doors—when a cold breeze brushed the back of her neck.

Emma halted.

Slowly, she swiveled her head around like an owl.

Mrs. Cobbler still stood behind her desk, occupied with whatever was on her computer monitor, seemingly unbothered by the sudden chill. Emma squinted, scanning the room. A low hum followed by a faint rattle pricked her ears. She tilted her head up—an air vent.

The A/C. Just the air conditioning—

A flash of blue caught her eye.

Emma sucked in a sharp breath and scanned the library, but the light was gone.

Was this it? Was *she* really here?

Emma swallowed, her pulse quickened.

“Everything alright dear?” Mrs. Cobbler asked, peering over her glasses just as she had done earlier.

Emma drew a deep breath, steadying herself.

“Yeah, I—I just thought—”

Another flash. This time not a flicker, but a pulse. Like a beacon. Calling her. Near the nurturing tree.

“Yes?” Mrs. Cobbler prompted.

“Sorry, I… think I forgot something.”

Mrs. Cobbler frowned, the lines of her face used to the movement. “Well, be quick about it if you can. The library will be closing soon.”

A shiver ran down Emma’s spine at the familiar words. She nodded and gripped the straps of her backpack, willing her feet forward—they listened this time—scurrying past Mrs. Cobbler while keeping the blue light in focus.

“Walking feet, dear!” Mrs. Cobbler called after her, but Emma was too focused on what was ahead. *Who* was ahead.

All week, Emma had studied everything she could get her hands on about ghosts—habits, behaviors, anything that might explain who this woman was and how she operated from the other side of the veil.

But deep down—okay, not *that* deep—Emma knew her best chance at learning more was to see her again. To find her. To talk to her.

But that would have required sneaking out at night and coming here.

Alone.

At night.

But now? In daylight? With witnesses… that didn’t seem so daunting.

Fearful the chance might slip away, Emma picked up her pace.

She rounded corners, blowing past paintings, statues, and sections of the library that had become all too familiar by now—heading straight for the nurturing tree in the back.

Past the sci-fi section. Past the archives—

There.

Just ahead. Just before the nurturing tree, actually—wait. Not the tree. The… the computer lab.

Emma stopped at the threshold. The pulse of blue was brighter than ever now—alive, breathing almost.

Blue. Black. Blue again.

The door was half-closed, and between each flash, the room disappeared into darkness.

Tiptoeing closer, Emma pressed her ear to the door.

Nothing. Maybe a shuffle—or a faint clicking—but it was so soft she couldn’t be sure it wasn’t her imagination.

Suddenly, Emma felt very alone. Vulnerable. She glanced over her shoulder and could just make out Mrs. Cobbler’s silhouette at her desk, but no one else.

*She’d hear if I screamed, right? And if she did… what could she even do?*

Her thoughts started to spiral. She took a step back—then stopped herself.  
*No. The time is now. There is no bravery without fear. Be brave.*

Emma steeled her core, repeating the mantra again and again until her pulse slowed. Then she balled her fists and barreled through the door.