A scream pierced the air—

but not from Emma.

Emma froze in the doorway, staring at Gracie, whose wide eyes made her look like she’d just been caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

The computer lab was pitch black, the iron shutters warding off every bit of light—except for the soft blue glow of the monitor in front of Gracie and the projector screen it was paired with.

*I guess that explains the glow,* Emma thought.

She noticed her fists were still clenched and realized she probably looked like the Kool-Aid Man breaking through the wall.

*And that might explain why Gracie looks so startled.*

Forcing herself to relax, Emma raised a hand in greeting.

“Hey, Gracie.”

“Hey...”

“What—what are you doing in here?” The words slipped out before Emma could think better of them. Not knowing what to do with her hands, she shoved them into her pockets and glanced around the room like she hadn’t just burst in here.

Gracie dragged a hand over her face, then looked around too—as if only now realizing how dark it was in there. There was still a trace of concern in her eyes.

*Did I really startle her that much?*

Gracie’s blue eyes met Emma’s brown, and after a hesitant pause, she offered, “Just doing a bit of research.”

Emma nodded, mostly to fill the silence, and turned toward the projector screen to avoid Gracie’s gaze scraping over her. “Right, sorry,” she muttered, already half-turned to leave. “I’ll leave you to it—”

The words caught in Emma’s throat.

Her eyes locked on one of the women projected on the screen.

If it hadn’t been so dark, Gracie might have noticed the color drain from Emma’s face. Still, she could tell something had changed.

“What… what is it?” Gracie asked softly.

Emma heard the words, but they sounded far away—muffled and distant, like she was underwater.

It was the woman.

The ghost-librarian.

Emma was sure of it.

The woman looked younger in the picture up on the screen—her face thinner, cheekbones more defined—but it was her alright. The same face. The same nose. The same lips. Her hair was pinned back just as Emma remembered it that night in the library. *This* library.

The photo was grainy, decades old most likely, but unmistakable. The woman stood beside Mrs. Willoughby in the image, both posed stiffly, the kind of formal portrait meant to outlast time itself.

Emma’s heart hammered. She *knew* what she’d seen that night was real—or at least, she’d believed it. But as the days passed, doubt had crept in, whispering maybe it was all in her head.

But now...

Now the woman was right in front of her.

“Who is that?” Emma asked, not daring to take her eyes off the picture, fearful it might slip through her fingers somehow.

Gracie looked between Emma and the image projected on the screen.  
“Mrs. Willoughby? She’s—”

“No, not her,” Emma said—her words more clipped than she meant to. “The other woman. Beside her.”

“Oh—her?” Gracie tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and squinted at the photo. “I’m not sure. I think she used to work for Mrs. Willoughby, though. You can tell she’s standing a little behind her—not beside. Like staff or something.”

*Staff*, Emma pondered.

Gracie turned to Emma then, brow furrowing. “Why? Do you… recognize her or something?”

“She looks… familiar.” *Or something*… Emma cleared her throat.“Why are you looking into the Wiloughby’s?”

Gracie looked surprised by the question, and Emma couldn’t blame her. She was never this forward—this intrusive—but she *had* to know. A week’s worth of searching and dead ends, and one chance run-in with Gracie and her schoolmate had turned up a picture of the woman she’d been looking for.

There was a long enough pause that Emma thought Gracie might not answer. But after a heavy sigh, Gracie indulged her curiosity.

“Self-interest, I guess you could say? I—” Gracie hesitated, then let out a quiet, humorless laugh. “Have you noticed anything weird lately? Like, at school, I mean?”

*Weird, to say the least. But at school…*

Emma studied Gracie for a moment, considering the question. Her thoughts flicked to Lincoln—how he’d gone from pip-squeak to school bully seemingly overnight. To Zayne, the class clown who’d been eerily quiet all week. To friend groups shifting, loyalties splintering—

“Never mind,” Gracie interrupted, shaking her head. “Forget I asked. Probably just me overthinking everything, per usual.” She chuckled, dragging a hand over her face.

Surprising even herself, Emma walked over and sat in the chair beside Gracie, setting her bag down by her feet.

“Kids are acting weird.”

Relief washed over Gracie’s face—a confirmation she hadn’t known she was seeking. She threw her hands into the air. “Right?! Thank you. What is up with that?”

Emma shook her head, thinking. “I thought it might, well, you know, just be hormones or something.” She said the word like it was taboo, then quickly added, “Or maybe with high school around the corner, everyone feels like they need to change their personalities?”

Gracie picked up her pen and spun it between her fingers, contemplating. “Yeah, maybe…”

Emma’s gaze drifted back to the projector screen—Mrs. Wiloughby and the woman beside her. Or rather, as Gracie had pointed out, *behind* her. She glanced back at Gracie, who seemed lost in thought, connecting unseen dots.

“Do—do you think this has something to do with the Wiloughby’s?”

Gracie’s eyes went wide with embarrassment; at the connection Emma had made.

Sheepishly, Gracie glanced back at the picture on the screen, hesitation flickering across her face. “You’re probably going to think I’m crazy…” she murmured.

“Try me,” Emma said, deadpan.

Gracie leveled a stare back at her. Drawing a deep breath, she started spinning the pen between her fingers even faster. There was no easy way to say it, so Gracie just blurted it out.

“I think there’s something wrong with this place. This library—or house, I mean.”

She paused, searching Emma’s eyes for any hint of mockery, but was surprised to find none. So she went on.

“I’ve known a lot of the kids from our school for a long time—since elementary for most of them. And while I might not be best friends with everyone, I know them well enough. I know who they are at their core. Their personalities, their quirks. Stuff that doesn’t just change overnight. Not like snapping your fingers—as much as we’d all like that sometimes.”

Gracie’s gaze went distant.

*Gracie was a bit of a social butterfly, wasn’t she?* Emma thought.

She wouldn’t have called her “Miss Popular,” but Gracie seemed to fit in with whoever she stood beside. Never a problem with anyone, always finding common ground. At least, that’s what Emma had gathered from afar. It was part of why she’d tried to sit by Gracie that first day of school.

“Like Abigail?” Emma offered, pulling Gracie out of her thoughts.

“Exactly like Abigail.”

Emma considered, eyes flicking back to the photo on the screen. The woman’s simple gaze seemed to stare right through her, just like it had from the balcony. Emma swallowed. “And… you think this place has something to do with it?”

Gracie nodded, feeling more sure of herself. “I do. Everyone was acting normal—like themselves—until this library reopened. Then the whole school started flocking here like geese and… changing.” She leaned forward slightly. “Abigail—I’ve known her since first grade. She’s always been a sweetheart. Calm, mild-tempered. Reserved, even. Kind of like you.”

Emma knew those same words could have sounded like an insult from anyone else, but Gracie meant them as a compliment.

“But then, just yesterday,” Gracie continued, “Abby and I met here to start that project for Mr. Flan—”

Emma couldn’t help but roll her eyes. Not even one week into school and *Mr. Flan*, with his wiry chest hair—*ew*—had already assigned a yearlong project worth a third of their grade. Who does that?

Gracie laughed. “Seriously—only Mr. Flan. Anyway, I had to leave early for volleyball practice, but when I saw Abby today it was like she was a completely different person. Loud, obnoxious, not caring about anyone or anything around her. *Totally* unlike her. I could barely drag her back here to work on our project, and once I did—it got worse! You saw her in the kids’ section, right?”

Heat rose to Emma’s cheeks remembering being caught hanging out in the where the children play. Gracie caught the look and waved it off, putting Emma at ease. “And Abby’s not the only one. There are others, too—”

“Like Lincoln,” Emma murmured.

“Yes!” Gracie said, eyes lighting up.

Emma’s thoughts flashed to that first day—Lincoln being chased into the library by Travis. And the very next day… bam. Lincoln was the one doing the shoving.

“But what I don’t get—or haven’t been able to figure out yet,” Gracie went on, chewing on the end of her pen, “is how. And why.” She sat back in her chair and huffed, the look of defeat settling over her face. “I haven’t been able to find a single thing, actually. Not even a hint or lead to go off of.”

Like a magnet, Emma’s gaze was drawn back to the woman beside Mrs. Wiloughby.

*It had to be connected. What else were the chances?*

If what Gracie said was true—and Emma had no reason to doubt her—then there had to be some link between this woman and the kids acting strange at school.

“I think I might know,” Emma started softly, catching Gracie’s full attention. “Or… at least an idea of where to start.”

“Where?” Gracie asked, brows knitting.

Emma shook her head. “You’re going to think I’m the crazy one now.”

“Try me,” Gracie said, with a hint of a smile—stealing Emma’s own earlier line.

Emma smiled faintly in return, but it vanished as she tried to figure out how to explain what she’d seen—who she’d seen—and why. Her fingers twisted together, fidgeting in place of a pen.

“Uh, you see, I—well, I kind of do this thing. Or, used to do this thing—” The words began sticking in her throat. She wasn’t used to being this open with anyone. Not even her dad. She’d become very good at putting up walls—and keeping them there.

Gracie reached across the table, placing her hand over Emma’s. “It’s okay. You can tell me.”

Emma met her eyes. They were soft. Genuine. Like a calm, blue sea. And, for better or worse, Emma believed her. She *felt* like she could trust her.

Drawing a deep breath, Emma looked down at her hands. “You see, me and my dad, well—we move. A lot. Every year, for as long as I can remember. This is the longest I’ve ever been at one school, actually. And… each place we lived, I always found comfort in the library there. The homes changed, but the libraries? They were always kind of the same.” She chuckled. “Well, except for this one that is.”

Gracie mirrored her laugh softly, but didn’t dare interrupt.

“About four years ago,” Emma continued, “I had trouble sleeping one night. Happens a lot, actually. My bed was uncomfortable, my room was stifling, and my mind just wouldn’t be quiet. There was only one place I knew would help. One place where I could curl up in a corner and just… breathe.”

“The library,” Gracie picked up.

Emma met those ocean-blue eyes again and nodded. “Exactly. So I went there. It was on the other side of our backyard otherwise I would have been to scared to even try. But I did. I climbed over our fence, and as luck would have it, saw a window cracked open—just a little—but enough for me to squeeze through.

After that, it kind of became a habit. One that stopped after my dad caught me one night. That was… a fun conversation.” She twisted her fingers again. “Then we moved here, and for the first time, I didn’t live close to a library. Not until this one reopened.”

Gracie’s eyes widened. “You… snuck in here? In the middle of the night?”

Emma sighed and nodded. “I did.”

Emma could see the gears turning behind Gracie’s eyes—trying to piece everything together. Then it clicked.

“Did you find something? When you came here at night?”

Emma swallowed. “I did…”

Gracie leaned in, hanging on every word. “What did you find?”

“Uh, well—it’s less of a *what* I found and more of a *who*.”

Gracie’s brow furrowed.

Emma nodded toward the picture on the screen. Gracie followed her gaze.

“Mrs. Wiloughby—” Gracie started, then stopped herself. “Wait. No. When you came in, you asked about *her*.” She nodded to the other woman in the photo. “You saw her? The staff woman?”

Emma nodded again.

Gracie blinked, confusion and awe battling on her face. “But how? This picture’s at least eighty, maybe ninety years old. Unless…” She turned to Emma, eyes widening until they almost swallowed her face. “Are you saying you saw the *spirit* of this woman? Like, her ghost?!”

Emma gave a small, helpless shrug. “I told you you’d think I was crazy.”

Gracie shook her head in disbelief, turning back to the two women on the screen. She stayed quiet for a long moment before huffing, “No crazier than a mystical library that turns middle-schoolers upside down.”

Emma didn’t realize she’d been holding her breath until she let it out just then.

Gracie tilted her head at Emma, eyes narrowing as the dominoes started to fall. “So, you… saw a ghost? Like, for real life? In this very library?”

“Yep.”

Gracie looked around the room as though the spirit might pop out at any moment. “And you *still* came back here after that?”

It dawned on Emma then just how crazy that might have been—seeing a ghost, and then returning the very next day. She chuckled, pulling her knees up to her chest. “All week, actually.”

Gracie’s jaw dropped. “Why?”

Emma shrugged. “I had to see if I could find out anything. I knew my mind wouldn’t let it go if I didn’t try. And, if nothing else, just to try and prove to myself I wasn’t crazy. That it wasn’t some wacky dream.”

Gracie nodded slowly. “And did you learn anything?”

Emma pressed her lips thin and shook her head. “Not really. A bit of town history and a bunch of random ghost facts—but who knows if any of that’s even true.”

Gracie tucked her legs beneath her chair and smiled faintly. “You’re brave.”

Emma huffed. “I don’t know about that…”

Gracie flapped her lips. “Please. Don’t be modest. I don’t know many people who’d see a real-life ghost and then waltz back into the same place the next day.”

Emma couldn’t help but smile.

Gracie reached down and pulled out a sleeve of Oreos from her backpack, setting them on the table between the two of them to share. Tucking her hair behind her ears, she looked at Emma with mock seriousness. “Tell. Me. *Everything.*”

Emma chuckled, grabbed an Oreo—and did just that.

She told Gracie how the ghost looked, how it felt, how she’d reacted. What the woman did. What she said. How Emma tripped, and how the ghost-librarian stood over the banister looking down at her. With every word, Gracie’s eyes grew wider, rounder—until they seemed impossibly large.

“… and have you come back here since then?” Gracie asked. “At night, I mean?”

“Heck. No.” Emma laughed, and Gracie joined in. “You might call me brave, but I’m not *that* brave.”

Emma’s eyes drifted toward the floor. “Although—admittedly—I have been… considering it. Seeing as the most I’ve found about this ghost woman is randomly stumbling into you with her picture up, it was the only next thing I could think to do. But truthfully…” She gave a small, nervous laugh. “I doubt I’d have had the courage to come back by myself.”

Gracie drummed her fingers along the table, mulling something over. Then she turned to Emma, a spark of mischief lighting her eyes. “Let’s do it.”

Emma cocked her head. “…Do what?”

“Come here. At night. See if we can find the old broad—and who knows, maybe we’ll also figure out why some of the kids at school are acting all crazy with her.”

Now it was Emma’s turn for her eyes to widen. “Are you serious?”

“Dead serious.” Gracie grinned. “Pun intended.”

Emma blew out a breath and ran a hand through her hair. “I… I don’t…”

“If you don’t want to, I get it. Seriously—no pressure. But…” Gracie’s voice lifted with nervous excitement. “I think… yeah, I think I’m going to.”

“You are?”

Gracie mulled it over for no more than a heartbeat. “Absolutely.”

“When?”

“Tonight, I think. It’s Friday—no school tomorrow, no volleyball practice… perfect night to stay up late.”

Emma chewed on the inside of her lip. Butterflies swam in her stomach. She *wanted* to go back too—she really did—but who was she kidding? She was downright scared. Who wouldn’t be.

Still, she knew it was the next step if she wanted to keep following the rabbit hole she’d stumbled into.

By herself, it would be terrifying. But with Gracie? Maybe not so bad?

And could she really let Gracie go alone? What if something happened to her? She’d never forgive herself.

“Okay.” The word came out with more confidence than she felt—blurted before she could change her mind. “I’ll do it. I’ll come with you.”

“You will?” Gracie’s eyes widened with relief.

Emma smiled and nodded. “Yeah. Absolutely.”

Gracie grinned back. “Alright… alright! We’re really going to do this.”

Emma sighed. “We’re doing this—”

“Girls!”

Emma and Gracie screeched, nearly leaping from their seats—startling poor Mrs. Cobbler enough to make her clutch her pearls.

“Ladies,” Mrs. Cobbler began again, regaining her composure. “The library is now closed. It’s time to leave.”

Emma and Gracie exchanged a silent look. *Tonight,* their eyes both said.

“I’ll text you,” Gracie murmured, slinging her bag over her shoulder as she brushed past Mrs. Cobbler, muttering apologies.

*Tonight,* Emma thought again, a nervous smile tugging at her lips.