“Forget your way home?” Emma’s dad asked as the front door clicked shut behind her.

Emma knew that tone—sarcasm stretched thin over frustration. He always tried his best not to raise his voice, to let calm do the talking. But there was no mistaking it—he was mad. Or, as he liked to say, *not mad, disappointed.*

“No…” Emma stepped lightly into the living room, glancing toward her dad in his favorite armchair. One of the few pieces of furniture that always survived their many moves.

Her dad checked his watch—pointedly. “Really? Because you texted me over thirty minutes ago that you were on your way home.”

Emma rolled her eyes, knowing full well it would poke the bear. “Ugh, Dad, can we not right now? I’m tired, and I still have homework.”

“Um, no, I think we *can* right now, Emma James—”

Oh boy. *Middle name.*

“What took you so long? And no text? No call? Immediately after I ask you to do just that, no less.” He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Emma, I need to know where you are. Who you’re with. As your father, I need to know these things. I get that you’re a teenager now, but as long as you’re under my roof—”

“I met a friend at the library, okay?” Emma snapped before she could stop herself. “I was leaving right after I texted you when I ran into a girl from school, and we… we got to talking for a bit. I’m sorry, alright? My. Bad. I’m sorry. Can you not give me the fifth degree?”

Her dad opened his mouth to argue, then closed it again. He blinked, caught off guard. “You did?”

“Yes,” Emma scoffed. “Don’t act so surprised.”

“Surprised?” Dad reached up to scratch the back of his neck. “No, not surprised, just… uh… who is she? Or, he?”

Emma looked at him flatly. “*Her* name is Gracie.”

Dad didn’t bother hiding his relief. “Cool. Cool, cool, cool.”

Emma raised a brow. “Really?”

“What?” he said, hands up. “I’m just saying—it’s nice you met someone.” He smiled sheepishly, clearly aware she’d caught him. “Look, I’m *really* glad you made a friend, Em. I’ve been saying since we moved here you should—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Emma cut in, already knowing the rest.

“But,” he continued, holding up a finger, “that doesn’t change anything. I still need communication, alright?”

Emma rolled her eyes—less dramatic this time. “Alright,” she conceded.

Dad’s grin could’ve powered the house. He crossed the room and pulled her into a tight bear hug.

“Ugh, Dad, seriously, can you *not*?” Emma managed to wheeze out.

He chuckled, letting her go, giving her a playful nudge on the shoulder. “I do trust you, you know that, right? You’re a good kid. I just—”

“I know, I know,” Emma said quickly, guilt already prickling her chest. “Spare me from hearing it a third time. Communication. Got it.”

Dad raised his palms in surrender, zipping his lips and locking it with an invisible key.

“Takeout tonight?” he called as she started down the hall.

“I don’t care,” Emma said over her shoulder.

She closed her bedroom door and leaned against it, sliding down until she hit the floor. The quiet wrapped around her like a blanket she didn’t quite want—warm, heavy, and filled with everything she couldn’t say.

Emma barely touched her dinner that night. She managed to choke down a few bites, but mostly pushed the food around her plate to make it look like she’d eaten before excusing herself from the table.

Nerves had twisted her stomach into one giant knot.

She set an alarm—just in case she somehow dozed off while lying in bed—but that turned out to be pointless. Sleep wasn’t coming.

She stared up into the darkness at the few glow-in-the-dark stars she’d stuck to her ceiling, their weak yellowish-green glow pulsing faintly above her. She kept tapping her phone, checking the time, swearing ten minutes had passed when only one had. Images of the ghost-librarian kept flicking through her mind.

All week, Emma had done well to push the woman out of her thoughts—but tonight, it was all she could think about.

That, and the eerie feeling creeping along her bones. She told herself it was just nerves, but it felt… different. Something she couldn’t quite name. Similar to being watched—but not quite. It was more like someone was waiting for her. Expecting her.

When her dad finally went to bed, Emma crept into the kitchen and gathered her “supplies.” The salt shaker. The little silver cross necklace from her jewelry drawer. Her hand mirror—though she wasn’t sure what good *that* would do. And, from the cupboard, a cast-iron skillet—the only piece of iron she could find.

How to use any of them was still up for debate. Emma hoped they wouldn’t need to be used at all, but she felt better having them than not. She zipped her bag, then paused, staring down at the odd assortment inside. If anyone searched it tonight, she could only imagine the look on their face.

Now all she could do was wait.

One hour passed. Then two. Still no word from Gracie.

Emma started to wonder if she’d changed her mind—or just forgotten. She sat on the edge of her bed, then paced her room, then flopped back onto her comforter, repeating the cycle again and again until, finally, her phone chimed.

Gracie’s name popped up on the screen—

*“You ready?”* Gracie said with a winky face.

*“Born ready…” No. No. No.* Delete. Delete. Delete. *“You know it…”* Delete. Delete. Delete. *Ugh, Emma don’t over think this! “Yep. Ready when you are.”*  Send.

*Gracie liked your message, “What’s your address?”*

*“555 Grimstone Pl.”*

*“Omg, ur in the next neighborhood over! I’ll swing by your place, then we’ll walk over together?*

*“Sounds perfection!” Perfection? Seriously? What the heck am I thinking*! Emma slapped her palm to her forehead.

*Gracie sent a crying laughing emoji, “See you in five!”*

Emma’s stomach fluttered. She went back to pacing until her phone chimed again.

*Message from Gracie— “Out front!”*

Emma drew a deep breath. *Here we go*.

Grabbing her bag, she took one last look in the mirror, straightened her ponytail, and adjusted her glasses. Apparently, she needed to look good for the ghost.

Willing her door to stay silent, Emma crept into the dark hallway, stepping only on the parts of the hardwood floor she knew wouldn’t creak.

Passing her dad’s room—door slightly ajar—she paused. Snores that could rival a rhinoceros echoed from inside. Emma exhaled softly. She was in the clear.

Still on tiptoe, she made her way to the front door, unlocked it, and slipped outside, easing it shut behind her before quietly locking it from the outside.

From the porch, she scanned the street for Gracie, but didn’t see her—

“Boo!”

“What the—!” Emma gasped, nearly jumping out of her skin.

Gracie popped up from behind a bush, covering her mouth to keep from laughing too loudly. “Sorry,” she whispered between giggles, “I couldn’t resist.”

Emma pressed a hand to her chest, heart still thundering back down from orbit, and shook her head with a grin. “You better be ready for some payback.”

Gracie spread her arms with a mischievous glint in her eye. “Bring it on, girlie.”

A beat of silence hung between them until Gracie looked from side to side.  
“Well,” she said, “shall we get off your porch and go visit our wonder woman?”

“We shall.” Emma inclined her head solemnly.

“Perfection.” Gracie winked with a mock smile, earning an embarrassed laugh from Emma. There was something about the way she said it—light, teasing, but never mean. A rare talent, Emma was quickly learning, that Gracie seemed to possess.

“Alright then, Miss Night Crawler,” Gracie went on, gesturing toward the street, “want to lead the way since you’ve done this a time or two?”

“Night Crawler?” Emma tried it out as she stepped off the porch, falling into stride beside Gracie. “I kind of like the sound of that.”

“Nicknames are my specialty.” Gracie tipped an invisible hat. “Also, what’s in the bag? Planning to knock out a little homework while we’re there?”

Emma shrugged, deadpan. “Figured if we don’t see the ghost-lady, might as well be productive.”

Gracie shot her a look. “Huh. Well… okay then.”

“I’m kidding.” Emma grinned. “It’s ghost supplies—stuff I read about that’s supposed to help. Salt, iron, a mirror, and a cross.”

“Ah, good thinking.” Gracie tapped her temple. “Now I feel unprepared.”

“Eh, you can share mine if we need to.”

They laughed, but the sound trailed off when the seriousness of that *if* hit them both.

“Do—do you think we’re actually going to need them?” Gracie asked softly.

Emma squinted, lifting one shoulder. “Hopefully not? I didn’t last time, at least. But… I guess we’ll find out.”

Gracie gulped. “Maybe we should, uh, come up with a plan, then.”

“My plan is just to run faster than you.”

Gracie shot her a flat look before realizing she was joking, then snorted. “You’re sneaky funny, you know that? Too bad for you, I’m wicked fast. Volleyball thighs—built for speed.”

“Nuts, didn’t think of that. I should have thought of bringing someone slower.”

“To late now, crawler.” Gracie smirked.

“So,” Emma breathed after a beat, the humor fading from her voice. “A plan. Maybe we should have one for what we’ll do when we get there—what we’re actually trying to achieve—and another for if we need to, you know… bail?”

Gracie nodded slowly. “Yeah, that’s smart. Like Mrs. Gateau always says—state your objective and plot your main points.”

Emma smirked. “Pretty sure she meant that for essays, not ghost hunts.”

“Same principles apply.” Gracie shrugged. “Introduction, body, conclusion—preferably not ours.”

“Well, in that case, our objective is not only to find the ghost lady, but also to see if we can figure out why kids have flown over the cuckoo’s nest. That, and getting our behinds out of there safe and sound.”

“Right. Find ghost-lady, find library weirdness, get out of there. For the first point—do you think we’ll have any trouble finding her? How did she, uh, appear to you the first time? She wasn’t there when you got there, right?”

Emma shook her head, thinking back to that night. “No, she wasn’t. I’d taken my own little tour of the library, read for a while, and then bam—there she was.”

“Hm, okay. Well, if she’s not there when we first get there, we’ll start looking around for anything weird. And if she is there…”

“We’ll talk to her. See what information we can pull out of her. Maybe she can give us some clues about the library that we wouldn’t be able to find otherwise.”

“I like it. Hopefully she’s a nice, chatty ghost. And if she’s not…”

“I chuck everything I have in my backpack at her, and we test out those volleyball legs of yours.”

“And there’s our exit plan.” Gracie laughed, then cleared her throat. “If we do need to run, should we, like, choose a meet-up spot or something?”

Emma bobbed her head from side to side in consideration. “I think while we’re there, we should stick together as much as possible. And if we need to run, we run all the way home. If we happen to get split up somehow…”

“We’ll rendezvous at the bush outside your house—the one I scared you from?”

“I don’t recall that, actually…”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever, Crawler. But we’ll plan on meeting there, just in case. That way we both know we made it back safe.”

“I like it.” Emma nodded her confirmation.

They walked the rest of the way in silence, their minds twisting and contorting with the possibilities to come.

Gracie tried to picture what it would be like to meet a ghost in real life. Would she cower and hide, or stand tall and pretend to be brave? And if she *did* see one—could she even tell anyone? Would they believe her?

*She* believed Emma, didn’t she? When Emma had claimed she saw that woman on the screen, Gracie hadn’t doubted her for a second. Even with how impossible it all sounded.

The logical part of her brain scolded her for being naïve. She barely even knew Emma—a quiet drifter at school, a loner if Gracie was being honest—which was starting to be a mystery.

Their encounters had been brief up to this point, but Emma seemed so… personable. Funny. Lighthearted. Someone Gracie could see herself hanging out with, easily.

Emma’s thoughts on the other hand were fighting in the opposite direction. Her mind kept trying to convince her that everything she’d seen and felt up to this point wasn’t real at all. That she was leading Gracie on a wild ghost chase for nothing. Nothing except proving to the only girl she’d ever really talked to that she was completely delusional.

By tomorrow, the whole school would know—the awkward loner girl wasn’t just quiet anymore. She was the crazy one. A ghost in her own way, soon to be the cray-cray girl everyone whispered about in the halls.

She could turn around now. Claim her stomach hurt. Say her dad called and she had to go home. Maybe Gracie would have second thoughts about going alone and turn back too…

Emma shook her head. She was being silly. Even if they didn’t see the ghost woman, Gracie wouldn’t do her dirty like that—would she? Gracie was the one who thought the library was making kids go crazy in the first place. So why would *she* be the one to tell everyone that Emma claimed to see a ghost they couldn’t even find?

All too quickly, the iron-wrought gate came into view—dagger-tipped and foreboding—and beyond it, the library.

Emma and Gracie stood across the iron gate, staring up at the looming library. Its stone walls, tinted with withered purple, seemed more decayed than ever.

The sagging windows drooped like tired eyes, and the spiraling towers cut into the sky like blades. Under the moonlight, the jagged rooftop looked like a crooked grin—sharp teeth smiling down with a sickening sort of pleasure.

“Do—do you think she’ll be there?” Gracie asked, her voice small, like it hadn’t been used in days.

Emma scanned every window, every doorway, searching for a sign. The library looked lifeless—dead—but that strange sensation from earlier now thrummed through her bones, stronger than ever. She didn’t realize how long she’d been silent until she caught Gracie watching her, fear oozing across her school mate’s face.

If Emma pulled out her mirror right now, she was sure she’d see the same look staring back.

She swallowed hard. “Only one way to find out.”

Gracie nodded stiffly, still unable to look away from Emma. “Let’s set a timer,” she said, voice trembling. “One hour. We leave then. No more, no less.”

“Okay,” Was all Emma could manage to respond.

Gracie pulled out her phone. The screen glowed: 12:00 AM. “It’s midnight. I’ll set the alarm for one. Then we’re done.” She stuffed the phone back into her pocket. “So… how do we get in?”

Emma didn’t answer. Her face had gone pale as the moon, eyes locked on the library.

“Emma? What’s wrong?”

Slowly—inch… by inch—Emma raised her arm and pointed through the iron bars.

Gracie hesitated, then followed the line of Emma’s trembling finger toward the library doors she had been too afraid to face.

The double oak doors now stood wide open. Pitch-black beyond them.

And in that darkness, framed in the doorway—

Was the ghost librarian.