*She’s real. She’s really real.*

Emma knew her mind hadn’t been playing tricks on her. Knew, deep down, that it hadn’t been some psychotic lapse or stress-induced dream.

But seeing her again—the woman from the picture, the *ghost*—standing in the doorway in that same outdated dress, the same stiff hairstyle and that hazy blue glow bleeding softly around her edges…

That was another matter entirely.

It confirmed everything—everything Emma had researched, doubted, and secretly hoped was both true and impossible.

That maybe there really *was* more to this library than met the eye.

It took every ounce of willpower to tear her gaze away, but when she did, she found Gracie beside her—jaw nearly scraping the ground, eyes wide enough to swallow the moon.

“Who—what—is…” Gracie stammered.

“That’s her.” Emma’s voice came out steadier than she felt.

Gracie turned toward her, shivering—whether from the sudden chill or from fear, Emma couldn’t tell. “What—what do we do?” she whispered, her knuckles white where she gripped the iron gate.

As if in answer, the ghost-librarian raised one translucent hand, waving them forward.

Gracie went utterly still. The shivering stopped—along with, it seemed, her breath.

Every logical thought in Emma’s head screamed *run*, run for home and don’t turn back—but something else rooted her in place. An unexpected calm rising from her stomach.

“We do what we came here to do,” Emma said, willing Gracie’s wide eyes to meet hers until they did. “We go talk to her.”

Gracie spun the ring on her thumb round and round, her eyes drifting to the backpack slung over Emma’s shoulders—remembering what was inside.

“One hour…” Gracie murmured, more to herself then Emma

“One hour,” Emma echoed.

Gracie closed her eyes, rolled her neck from side to side. She stretched her fingers, then shook out her shoulders like she was warming up for a match.

When she opened her eyes again, there was a fierceness there Emma hadn’t seen before. Where moments ago the calm blue of her eyes had quivered, now they churned like storm-tossed tides.

“Let’s do this,” Gracie said, sticking out her hand.

Emma looked at it for a heartbeat, then clasped it in a firm grip. “Perfection.”

Gracie grinned ear to ear, and together they pushed through the squeaking library gate—hand in hand—toward the ghost that awaited.

Side by side, they trudged forward, their hearts pounding harder with each step. The distance wasn’t far, but it felt like a mile by the time they reached the first step of the porch.

Palms sweating, knees aching, arms heavy, Emma looked up at the woman staring back at her in the same exact way she had done only a few nights ago.

“I’ve been expecting you!” the woman screeched, her voice like ice and with far too much cheer.

“You—have?” Emma mumbled, Gracie’s grip tightening in her own. The feeling in Emma’s bones now buzzing, she wondered if Gracie was feeling the same.

The woman’s eyes narrowed, as though it were a stupid question to ask. “Well yes, yes of course!” she said, scanning Emma from head to toe—peeling through every layer beneath—before flicking her gaze to Gracie and doing the same. “And you brought a friend! Oh, how lovely! Please, come in, come in!”

The woman drifted to the side, offering space for them to pass, her form shivering like fog in the doorway—waiting unnaturally still, a sinister smile twisting her lips.

Emma and Gracie’s eyes found each other. *One hour*, they said silently, before forcing their feet forward.

Each step up the porch creaked and sagged beneath their weight. Shadows grew longer, crickets grew quieter. And if Emma had been able to focus on anything other than the hazy-blue woman standing before them, she might have noticed the faint flicker of light in the upper windows—like someone else was moving inside.

Emma’s breath clouded in front of her as she and Gracie sidestepped through the entryway—the woman’s depthless eyes tracking every twitch of their muscles. Emma couldn’t get over the way she moved. The wrongness of it. Her eyes seemed to operate separately from her head, her head from the rest of her body. It was entrancing, the way—

The doors slammed shut.

Emma didn’t know where her scream started and Gracie’s ended—only that the sound was ripped from both of them before vanishing into the cold air.

In a blink, the woman was there—nose to nose with Gracie—so close their eyelashes could have brushed.

The temperature plummeted. The air thinned.

“What’s the matter, little miss?” the woman asked, her voice syrup-sweet with a concern that wasn’t real. Her expression looked practiced, as if she’d studied the art of empathy but never mastered it.

Gracie wasn’t moving—wasn’t blinking—as she stared into those empty, glassy eyes, hypnotized.

“The—the door,” Emma stammered, her teeth chattering. “The noise… startled us.” Each breath came as a gasp, the cold air burning her lungs.

For heartbeats that dragged like a slow drum, the woman remained fixed on Gracie. Emma worried that if she didn’t move soon, Gracie might pass out from lack of air. Slowly, Emma reached a trembling hand behind her back, inching the zipper of the bag upward—each tooth of it sounding impossibly loud in the silence.

Then, at last, the woman tilted her head, lips twitching.

A sound escaped her—soft at first, like the cracking of ice—before breaking into full, unrestrained laughter. It filled the room, high and sharp, ricocheting off the walls until Emma wanted to clap her hands over her ears, pleading silently for it to stop.

“Oh, little misses,” the woman finally said, her grin widening, “there’s nothing to be afraid of. Isn’t that right, Emma?” Her head turned like an owl’s—the motion too smooth.

*She knows my name? How does she—*

“Here,” the woman clasped her hands—and vanished. Her voice came from behind them now, echoing through every corner of the room. “Why don’t I give you and your friend a tour? How does that sound? That way, she can see what a loving, safe place this is.”

Gracie gasped, her muscles unlocking as she turned to Emma—eyes hazy, returning from a daze.

Emma gave Gracie a lasting look until she inclined her head—confirmation that she was alright. Gracie’s eyes flicked to the backpack slung over Emma’s shoulders, noting the slight opening in the pouch. Together, they turned toward the woman, the dark study of the library looming behind her, waiting patiently for an answer.

Emma forced the words past the tightness in her throat. “A tour—would be great.” *Her name, get her name.* “Miss…?”

For untold seconds, the woman stared at Emma, her eyes narrowing. “My… name?” she asked coolly—the word almost foreign on her tongue.

“So that we may address you properly, our lady,” Gracie piped in, bowing her head in natural deference.

Something flickered in the woman’s eyes. “Oh. Well… of course. You may address me as Miss… Everdeen.”

“Everdeen,” Gracie murmured under her breath.

“Yes,” Miss Everdeen snapped, face pinched as though displeased with her own name. “Do you need help with the pronunciation?”

“No, ma’am.” Gracie cleared her throat. “It just sounded… familiar.”

“Yes, well. Everdeen blood runs deep along these streets,” Miss Everdeen said, her eyes drifting distant. Then, smoothing the ruffles of her dress, she suddenly brightened and clapped her hands together. “So! A tour—yes, a tour for you both indeed. And then, how about some story time! Doesn’t that sound lovely, little misses?”

“Story… time?” Emma echoed.

Miss Everdeen chuckled, the sound light but somehow hollow. “Well of course story time, my dear! Is that not why you’ve come back?”

“Uh, yes—yes, that’s why. Sorry, I—”

“Long day at school,” Gracie finished, patting Emma on the back.

Miss Everdeen showed all her teeth as she smiled. “Wonderful! I thought so. We had such a pleasant time last time, didn’t we, Emma?”

Emma blinked, head tilting slightly. *Last time?*

Gracie shot her a look, one Emma didn’t know how to answer.

“Let’s get started then, shall we?”

One moment Miss Everdeen stood before them; the next, she was gone—reappearing by the entrance to the children’s section. Every time, it was just as startling as the last.

“Please, keep up, if you will. Much to see, and little time to spare.” Miss Everdeen said before gliding into the room without sound.

Emma took the opportunity to slide the salt from her backpack into her front pocket as her and Gracie crept forward.

“What happened last time?” Gracie whispered into Emma’s ear.

“I—I have no idea what she’s talking about,” Emma whispered back. “Nothing I didn’t tell you already.”

Gracie studied her face. “Weird. Maybe she’s confusing you with someone else? She couldn’t even remember her own name at first.”

“Yeah,” Emma muttered, rubbing her neck, “maybe…”

Miss Everdeen was waiting for them in the center of the room as they entered, hands clasped, smiling wide. “This,” she announced, sweeping her arm around, “is the parlor.”

“The… parlor?” Emma repeated.

“Yes, the parlor,” Miss Everdeen said, matter-of-fact, her eyes roaming the space with pride.

“Not the children’s section?” Gracie asked carefully.

“Children’s section?” Miss Everdeen’s smile faltered for only a breath before tightening again. “Ah. Yes. Quite right. They’ve—ah—redecorated, haven’t they? Strange, these modern fashions.” She gestured vaguely at the posters of alphabet animals. “All so bright. One does wonder what they were thinking.”

The girls exchanged a glance.

“Anyway!” Miss Everdeen chirped, drifting deeper into the room. “This is where we would gather each evening—fire crackling over there, piano playing over here, tea steaming in porcelain cups. The heartbeat of this home, you could say.”

“Who’s *we*?” Gracie asked, her voice steadying with purpose.

“Well, Madam Willoughby, of course.”

“Were you related?”

“Heavens, no.” Miss Everdeen looked almost offended.

“So you worked for her then?” Gracie pressed, her confidence growing. “A maid or something?”

Miss Everdeen’s expression went blank, the light in her eyes dimming for an instant—then snapped shut like an iron trap. In one blink, she was across the room; in the next, she was nose-to-nose with Gracie.

“It is *rude*,” she hissed, “to interrupt one’s host—especially one graciously offering you a tour.” Her hair floated upward, twisting as though caught in a silent current.

Gracie staggered back, but Emma’s hand found her spine, steadying her just in time.