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Friendly Man

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Introduction

Every town has its mysteries, its little pockets of secrecy nestled among familiar faces, its stories whispered across kitchen tables and over backyard fences. “Friendly Man” was born from the simple observation that every so-called ordinary community holds within it a tapestry of the extraordinary, woven quietly and often invisibly by the actions of its inhabitants. This novel invites you to walk the uneven sidewalks of Maple Lane, to peer through lace curtains and listen to hushed conversations—if only for a while.

At the heart of this story is a man whose presence seems unremarkable at first glance. He has lived a life marked by routines: morning coffee, evening walks, polite nods on the street. Yet, as the people around him begin to notice, his seeming friendliness conceals more than it reveals. Through encounters that range from the mundane to the unexpected, the townspeople come to realize that even the friendliest among us carry stories untold—sometimes heavy with grief, sometimes illuminated with hope.

As the seasons change and friendships blossom or fade, each chapter moves closer to uncovering the layers that make up both our protagonist and the community itself. Here, the simplest gestures—a smile, a helping hand, a shared meal—ripple through lives in ways that are sometimes hard to see but impossible to ignore. Friendliness, after all, is more than just a surface: it is an invitation to connection, but also, perhaps, a shield.

This novel is a work of fiction. All the people and events contained within its pages are creations of the imagination. And yet, like all fiction, it seeks out a truth that lies beneath the factual—asking not just who the “friendly man” really is, but also what it means to be known, accepted, and understood.

In reading “Friendly Man,” you are invited to put yourself into the shoes of its characters: newcomers and residents, loners and joiners, those who terrify and those who comfort. Their joys and sorrows might echo your own, or they might introduce you to perspectives and lives utterly new.

Ultimately, this story is about the longing for connection that lives within each of us—and the courage it often takes to reach out. Whether friendliness is a gift, a disguise, or a bridge to something greater, it is through our interactions with one another that we become truly visible. Welcome to Maple Lane. The story, and the search for meaning in small acts, begins here.

CHAPTER ONE: Shadows on Maple Lane

Maple Lane had a particular scent in late autumn: damp leaves, woodsmoke curling from chimneys, and a faint, sweet decay that hinted at secrets buried just beneath the surface. It wasn't a grand street, not with towering oaks or sprawling mansions. Instead, it was a modest collection of two-story houses, each with a neat lawn and a welcoming porch, suggesting a quiet predictability that residents cherished. Children's bikes lay on some sidewalks, overturned, waiting for afternoon adventures. Sprinklers whirred on others, even as the air grew crisp.

The day Mrs. Gable's prized garden gnome went missing was, in retrospect, the first crack in Maple Lane's placid facade. Mrs. Gable, a woman whose entire existence seemed tethered to her petunias and the precise alignment of her lawn ornaments, discovered the gnome's disappearance just after her usual 7 AM coffee. It was a sturdy, red-hatted figure she'd named Bartholomew, a gift from her late husband. Its absence left a startlingly empty patch beside her hydrangeas.

She called her neighbor, Martha Perkins, immediately. Martha, whose voice perpetually sounded like dry leaves skittering across pavement, offered commiseration and a suggestion to check the garbage cans. "Kids these days, Clara," she'd rasped, "no respect for property." Mrs. Gable, however, knew it wasn't kids. Bartholomew was heavy. And besides, no teenager had ever dared venture onto her meticulously manicured lawn without explicit permission, which was never granted.

The sun climbed higher, casting long shadows that seemed to stretch and distort the familiar houses. Mr. Henderson, a retired postal worker who meticulously cataloged local bird species from his living room window, noticed something odd that morning too. A flicker of movement in the old, overgrown lot at the end of the lane, the one people usually avoided. He'd seen a figure, indistinct in the morning mist, standing perfectly still for a moment, then disappearing. He dismissed it as a trick of the light, or perhaps a deer.

Later that afternoon, a smaller, more unsettling incident occurred. Young Timmy Miller, aged seven, reported that his brand-new red ball had simply vanished from his front yard. He'd left it by the mailbox while he ran inside for a drink, and when he returned, it was gone. His mother, a perpetually stressed woman named Sarah, blamed Timmy for being careless. But Timmy swore he'd only been inside for a minute. His lip trembled, not just from the loss of the ball, but from the inexplicable nature of its disappearance.

These were small things, trivial almost. A missing gnome, a fleeting shadow, a

vanished toy. Yet, in a community where the biggest drama was usually Mrs. Gable's annual rose competition or the occasional noisy dog, these incidents felt...off. They were like tiny ripples spreading outwards in a perfectly still pond, hinting at something beneath the surface that wasn't quite right.

The unspoken agreement on Maple Lane was that life here was safe, predictable. People left their doors unlocked during the day, children played freely in the streets, and neighborly disputes rarely escalated beyond passive-aggressive lawn mowing. This unspoken contract, however, was starting to fray.

It was during the evening constitutional that Walter Davies, the man who would become known, somewhat ironically, as "Friendly Man," first registered the change. Walter was a creature of habit. Every evening, precisely at 6:30 PM, he would emerge from his impeccably maintained home, number 14 Maple Lane, and embark on a brisk twenty-minute walk. He always wore a sensible windbreaker, even on mild nights, and offered a polite nod or a brief "Good evening" to anyone he passed.

Walter wasn't new to Maple Lane. He'd lived there for fifteen years, a quiet, unassuming presence. He worked from home, something vaguely technical, and kept to himself, though always with a pleasant smile and an approachable demeanor. He never joined the neighborhood watch, nor did he attend the annual block party, yet he was universally liked, simply for his consistent, genial presence.

As he walked past Mrs. Gable's house that evening, he noticed the unusually bare patch by her hydrangeas. Mrs. Gable herself was on her porch swing, looking decidedly forlorn, her usual stern expression softened by an unfamiliar sadness. Walter paused. "Evening, Mrs. Gable," he offered, his voice a smooth, low murmur. "Lovely evening, isn't it?"

Mrs. Gable sighed, a sound like deflating tires. "Not so lovely, Mr. Davies. Bartholomew is gone." Her voice, usually so sharp, was tinged with genuine sorrow.

Walter tilted his head, a gesture of concern. "Bartholomew? The gnome?" He knew of Bartholomew; everyone on Maple Lane did.

She nodded miserably. "Vanished. Poof. Like he was never there. And I know it wasn't the kids. This feels different, Mr. Davies. Just... different." She wrapped her arms around herself, as if a sudden chill had swept through the warm evening air.

Walter offered a sympathetic hum. "I'm very sorry to hear that, Mrs. Gable. I hope he turns up." He didn't linger, his politeness not extending to drawn-out conversations. He continued his walk, but the conversation, and Mrs. Gable's unusual distress, stayed with him.

Further down the lane, he saw Timmy Miller's mother, Sarah, stooping to pick up what looked like a tattered kite from her front lawn. She straightened up, dusting off her hands, a weary frown etched onto her face. He gave his customary nod. She returned it, but her gaze was distant, troubled.

Walter rarely paid close attention to the small dramas of Maple Lane. He preferred the quiet hum of his own life, the predictable rhythm of his days. But tonight, the air felt charged, a subtle undercurrent of unease that even his practiced detachment couldn't entirely ignore. It was as if the very shadows on Maple Lane were deepening, growing longer, obscuring more than they revealed.

The usual evening sounds – the distant bark of a dog, the faint melody of a television show from an open window, the gentle rustle of leaves – seemed muted, as if the street itself was holding its breath. Walter finished his walk, the familiar route feeling subtly altered, though he couldn't pinpoint why.

Back in his home, the quiet was absolute. He made himself a cup of chamomile tea, a nightly ritual, and settled into his armchair by the window. From here, he could see a good stretch of Maple Lane, illuminated by the soft glow of streetlights. He watched, for a moment longer than usual, the flickering porch lights, the dark rectangles of unlit windows.

A car drove by slowly, a dark sedan, its windows tinted, a car he didn't recognize. It was probably just someone visiting, or perhaps lost. But it seemed to linger, just for a second, before turning the corner and disappearing. Walter blinked, shaking off the slight prickle of unease. He was being fanciful. It was just a car.

He took a sip of his tea, the warmth a comforting presence in his hands. Maple Lane, with its quiet routines and friendly facades, was shifting. And whether its residents knew it or not, the first shadows were already starting to fall. The perfect stillness of the pond had been broken, and the ripples, however small, would continue to spread. The friendly man, too, would soon find himself drawn into the unfolding mystery, a bystander no longer, but a participant in the strange events that were just beginning to unfold on Maple Lane.

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