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# Friendly Girl

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## Introduction

Welcome to *Friendly Girl*, a novel that explores the gentle intricacies of growing up, forging friendships, and learning to navigate the unpredictable currents of life. This work of fiction invites you into a world shaped by small-town rhythms and the universal dilemmas of youth, where moments of joy and sorrow often sit side by side, each one a stepping stone toward understanding and empathy.

At the heart of this story is a girl—someone not unlike the friends we've cherished or the selves we've once been. She is candid, kind, sometimes shy, sometimes bold. Through her eyes, we rediscover the nuances of first meetings, the awkward thrill of shared secrets, and the bittersweet lessons that come with misunderstanding and reconciliation.

In piecing together her story, I sought to reflect the warmth and pain that friendship brings: the way confessions spill under rainy skies, how laughter echoes in sunlit kitchens, and how even the most innocent acts can ripple outward in unexpected ways. Friendship is not always easy for young hearts; sometimes, it is as fragile and impermanent as summer days, only to prove itself resilient and enduring in the face of life's greatest tests.

*Friendly Girl* does not promise grand adventures or sweeping escapades across distant lands. Instead, it celebrates the quieter heroics—the courage it takes to say “I’m sorry,” and the generosity that forgives, the strength to admit vulnerability, and the simple, profound beauty of being there for someone else.

As you read, I invite you to remember your own stories of friendship. Recall the friends who shaped you, the fears and hopes you carried, and the moments that seemed small at the time yet remain shining in memory. Let this book be a gentle companion, a mirror for joy and struggle alike.

Thank you for joining me on this journey into the tender, ordinary, and remarkable world of a friendly girl. Turn the page, and step onto Willow Lane—her story is about to begin.

## CHAPTER ONE: The New Neighbor

The summer sun beat down on Willow Lane, baking the asphalt until it shimmered like a mirage. Ten-year-old Clara stood on her porch, meticulously organizing her collection of polished stones. Each one had a story, a memory tied to a scraped knee or a whispered secret. Today, however, her attention was split between her geological treasures and the commotion next door. A moving truck, an enormous beast of faded green, was parked haphazardly in front of the house that had stood empty for months.

Mrs. Gable, a woman whose smile was as warm as her freshly baked cookies, had lived there since before Clara was born. Her departure to live with her daughter in Arizona had left a gaping hole in the neighborhood, a quiet void where laughter and the faint scent of cinnamon used to drift. Now, new people were arriving, a concept both thrilling and slightly terrifying. Would they have children? Would they be friendly? Or would they be the kind who kept their curtains drawn and their conversations hushed?

Clara adjusted her spectacles, which had a tendency to slide down her nose when she was deep in thought. She liked things to be predictable, orderly, much like her stone collection. New neighbors, by their very nature, were an unpredictable variable. She watched as two men, broad-shouldered and sweating, wrestled a large, suspiciously lumpy armchair out of the truck. It looked like a giant, moss-colored marshmallow.

Suddenly, a small, quick movement caught her eye. A girl, no older than herself, darted out from behind the moving truck. She had a shock of bright red hair that seemed to catch fire in the sunlight, and she wore faded denim overalls speckled with what looked like paint. In her arms, she clutched a worn, headless doll. Clara's breath hitched. A girl! And she had a doll, albeit a damaged one. This was promising.

The red-haired girl paused, squinting up at the imposing house. She looked a little lost, a little overwhelmed by the organized chaos of the moving process. Her eyes, an intense shade of blue, scanned the street, finally landing on Clara. Clara, caught in the act of staring, felt a blush creep up her neck. She quickly averted her gaze, pretending to be utterly absorbed in a particularly smooth river stone.

A moment of awkward silence stretched between the two houses, punctuated only by the grunts of the movers and the distant buzz of a lawnmower. Clara's heart hammered against her ribs. Should she wave? Say hello? Offer to help? Her mother always said it was polite to be neighborly, but Clara's inherent shyness often wrestled with her good intentions.

Just as Clara was about to make a decision, the red-haired girl took a tentative step

forward. Then another. She was walking straight towards Clara's porch, her headless doll clutched tighter. Clara's mind raced. What did one say to a new neighbor, especially one who carried a doll missing its head?

"Hi," the girl said, her voice surprisingly clear and a little raspy, like she'd been shouting. She stopped at the edge of the lawn, a respectful distance from Clara's meticulously edged flowerbeds. "I'm Lily."

Clara, flustered, nearly dropped her prized quartz crystal. "Oh! Hi, Lily. I'm Clara." She managed a small, wobbly smile. "Welcome to Willow Lane."

Lily's blue eyes widened slightly. "Thanks. It's... a lot." She gestured vaguely at the overflowing moving truck and the general disarray of her new front yard. "We've been driving forever. My dad says this is our 'forever home,' but I don't know. It looks really... brown."

Clara suppressed a giggle. The house was indeed a rather drab shade of beige, a stark contrast to the vibrant greens and blues of Willow Lane in summer. "It's been empty for a while," Clara explained, feeling a little more at ease now that the initial greeting was over. "Mrs. Gable used to live there. She was very nice. She baked excellent snickerdoodles."

Lily's eyebrows shot up. "Snickerdoodles? What are those?"

Clara gasped dramatically. "You've never had a snickerdoodle? Oh, Lily, you have so much to learn!" This unexpected shared moment, a mutual love for hypothetical cookies, seemed to break the ice completely. Lily chuckled, a sound like wind chimes.

"So, what are you doing?" Lily asked, nodding towards Clara's stone collection. She took another step closer, her curiosity clearly outweighing any lingering shyness.

"These are my stones," Clara explained, carefully picking up a smooth, grey river stone. "Each one reminds me of something. This one," she held it up, "is from the day I finally learned to ride my bike without training wheels. It was very bumpy."

Lily crouched down, her red hair falling over her face as she examined the collection. "Wow," she breathed, touching a small, iridescent piece of quartz. "You really remember all that just from rocks?"

Clara nodded, her confidence growing. "Of course! It's like a secret diary, but for my hands. And this one," she pointed to a perfectly round, dark pebble, "is from the day I fell into Miller's Creek trying to catch a frog. It was very cold, and I got mud all over my new sneakers." She shuddered at the memory.

Lily laughed again, a hearty, unrestrained laugh that made Clara feel lighter. "I don't have anything like that," Lily said, gesturing vaguely at her own belongings, still packed away in boxes. "Most of my stuff is just... stuff. We move a lot."

"Oh," Clara said, her brow furrowing. "Why do you move a lot?"

Lily shrugged, a small, almost imperceptible movement. "My dad's job. He's an engineer, and he builds bridges. So we go wherever the bridges need building." She looked down at her headless doll. "This is Betsy. She's been to five states."

Clara looked at Betsy with new respect. A well-traveled doll! "She must have a lot of stories," Clara observed.

"She does," Lily agreed, a hint of sadness in her voice. "But I don't think she likes moving very much. She lost her head in Ohio."

Clara's eyes widened in genuine sympathy. "Oh, poor Betsy! Maybe we can fix her head. My dad's really good with glue. He fixed my antique teacup after my cat, Patches, knocked it off the shelf."

Lily's face brightened considerably. "Really? You think so?" She looked at Clara with a hopeful intensity that made Clara feel a sudden, fierce protectiveness.

"Definitely," Clara declared, puffing out her chest a little. "We'll get her head back on in no time. Maybe we can even give her a new outfit. My grandmother taught me how to sew."

A loud shout from the moving truck interrupted their conversation. "Lily-bug! Need your help with these boxes!"

Lily sighed. "That's my dad." She stood up, dusting off her overalls. "I guess I should go. Thanks for... well, thanks for saying hi, Clara."

"Anytime, Lily," Clara said, smiling broadly. "Welcome to Willow Lane. And don't worry about the brown house. We can plant flowers. Lots and lots of colorful flowers."

Lily grinned, her bright blue eyes sparkling. "That sounds nice." She took a few steps back towards her house, then paused. "Hey, Clara?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think snickerdoodles are better than chocolate chip cookies?"

Clara considered this for a moment, tapping her chin thoughtfully. “That, Lily, is a question we will have to investigate very, very thoroughly. With taste tests, of course.”

Lily’s smile widened, and she gave a quick, almost imperceptible nod. Then, she turned and sprinted back towards the moving truck, her red hair a fiery streak against the summer sky. Clara watched her go, a sense of quiet satisfaction settling over her. The unpredictable variable of new neighbors had introduced itself, and it seemed, rather unexpectedly, that it was a very friendly variable indeed. The headless doll, the snickerdoodles, the shared laughter – it all felt like the promising beginning of something new and good. As she carefully placed her quartz crystal back in its designated spot, Clara realized that her stone collection might soon need a new addition, one to commemorate the arrival of Lily, the girl with the fiery hair and the friendly, if somewhat raspy, voice. Willow Lane, it seemed, was about to get a whole lot more interesting.

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