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Unfriendly Girl

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Introduction

When someone is labeled "unfriendly," it is rarely by accident. Sometimes it's a mask—a kind of armor constructed from past hurt and present misunderstandings. For others, it is a title forced upon them by observers who choose not to look past the surface, who never pause to ask why the girl sits alone, or what shadows flicker behind her indifferent gaze. This novel begins with that label, and the girl who wears it, sometimes by choice and sometimes by necessity.

Stories have always possessed the subtle power of asking questions far gentler—and sometimes more persistent—than the world itself. Within these pages, you'll meet Emma, a girl wrapped in silence and solitary walks, whose reputation precedes her. Those who know her name often do not know her heart. This story travels with Emma as she navigates the complicated corridors of adolescence, the pressure of family secrets, and the unkind gaze of her peers at Willow Creek High.

"Unfriendly Girl" is not a tale about a villain nor a misunderstood hero. It's about the in-between, the quiet and sometimes messy evolution that takes place when one confronts fear—fear of reaching out, of being seen, of being known. It is about the quiet courage that lives in small acts: a returned smile, a broken silence, a tentative apology. It's about the risks of trust, and the unlikely places where understanding can be found.

This book explores what it means to be both the observer and the observed, to make assumptions and to be the subject of them. Through Emma's journey, we see the ways small misunderstandings snowball, entrenching walls where bridges might have been built instead. In the world that so often rushes to conclusions, perhaps the most radical act is to pause and see each other more clearly.

Above all, "Unfriendly Girl" invites you, dear reader, to step into Emma's shoes—not to excuse her, nor to condemn her, but to understand her. It is an invitation to reflect on the stories we tell about one another, and the possibilities that open when we choose to question them. This is a work of fiction, and yet I hope, within it, you may recognize some truth—about loneliness and connection, about judgment and empathy, about the unfriendly parts within us all, and the capacity for change.

CHAPTER ONE: Shadows in the Lunchroom

The fluorescent lights of the Willow Creek High cafeteria hummed, a persistent, low-grade buzz that seemed to amplify the clatter of trays and the cacophony of teenage chatter. It was a sensory assault, a daily ritual that Emma navigated with the practiced detachment of a seasoned urban explorer charting a hostile landscape. Her worn backpack, usually slung over one shoulder, was now clutched to her chest like a shield as she scanned the sprawling room. Every table was a miniature island of social activity, a swirling vortex of gossip, laughter, and the occasional thrown tater tot.

Emma's gaze slid past the boisterous football players, already halfway through their greasy pizza, and the giggling cluster of cheerleaders dissecting a new TikTok dance. She bypassed the chess club, huddled in serious contemplation over their checkered board, and the art students sketching furiously in their notebooks. None of these groups held any appeal, nor, she suspected, did she hold any appeal for them. This was the unspoken rule of Willow Creek High: you found your tribe, or you became a satellite, forever orbiting the gravitational pull of established cliques.

She wasn't looking for a tribe, not exactly. She was looking for a corner, a space, a sliver of anonymity where she could consume her lukewarm tuna sandwich and apple without attracting undue attention. This daily quest had honed her observational skills to a razor's edge. She knew which tables were likely to be vacated first, which corners offered the best sightlines for spotting an approaching teacher, and which windows provided a glimpse of the outside world, however fleeting.

Today, her target was the far-left wall, beneath a peeling poster advertising the school's annual Winter Dance, an event she intended to avoid at all costs. A single empty seat beckoned at a table occupied by three sophomore boys engrossed in a video game on a cracked phone screen. They were loud but self-contained, a perfect combination for her purposes. Their world rarely intersected with hers, and that suited her just fine.

She moved with an almost imperceptible efficiency, a ghost slipping through the bustling aisles. Her head was down, her dark hair, perpetually in a messy bun, obscuring part of her face. It was a deliberate posture, a signal to the world: *do not approach*. The strategy usually worked. Most students, caught up in their own dramas, barely registered her presence. Those who did, the ones whose eyes might linger for a moment too long, quickly looked away, deterred by the stony set of her jaw and the complete absence of a welcoming smile.

Reaching her destination, she slid into the seat, the metal legs scraping loudly against

the tile floor. The boys barely glanced up, their thumbs flying across the tiny screen. Good. She unzipped her backpack, retrieving her lunch bag. The tuna sandwich, wrapped in wax paper, felt cold and uninspiring. Beside it, a bruised apple and a small bottle of water. This was her lunch, day in and day out, a predictable routine that offered a strange comfort in its monotony.

As she unwrapped her sandwich, she could feel the subtle shift in the air, a faint ripple in the cafeteria's relentless hum. It wasn't directed at her, not yet. But it was there, a change in the background noise that she had learned to recognize. It was the precursor to a disruption, the subtle tightening of the atmosphere before something inevitably went wrong.

She took a bite of her sandwich, chewing slowly, her gaze fixed on a smudged handprint on the table. She didn't look up, but she knew. She could feel the presence. A shadow had fallen over her table, not just from the overhead lights, but from the arrival of an unwelcome guest. Her stomach tightened, a familiar knot of apprehension forming deep within her.

"Well, well, if it isn't the Unfriendly Girl."

The voice was high and saccharine, laced with an edge of something sharp and unkind. It belonged to Brenda Hayes, queen of the cheer squad, mistress of the hallway hierarchy, and Emma's most persistent tormentor. Brenda's posse, two equally polished and perpetually smiling girls, flanked her like well-drilled bodyguards. They smelled faintly of bubblegum and expensive hairspray, a stark contrast to the stale air and cafeteria grease.

Emma kept her eyes on the handprint, chewing methodically. She had learned that acknowledgment only fueled Brenda's fire. Silence, she hoped, would starve it.

"Cat got your tongue, Emma?" Brenda's voice sharpened, losing its sugary facade. She leaned closer, her long, manicured nails tapping rhythmically on the table, just inches from Emma's sandwich. The boys at the table finally looked up, their game forgotten, their eyes wide with a mixture of fear and fascination. They knew Brenda's routine. Everyone did.

Emma swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. She picked up her apple, running her thumb over its bruised skin. "I'm eating," she mumbled, her voice barely a whisper. It was the bare minimum, a boundary she hoped would be understood.

Brenda scoffed, a theatrical sound that drew the attention of nearby tables. "Eating? Oh, I see. Always alone, aren't you? Doesn't it get lonely, Emma? Sitting by yourself every single day?" Her tone was a blend of mock concern and genuine cruelty.

One of Brenda's companions, a girl named Tiffany with a perfectly sculpted ponytail, giggled. "Maybe she likes it. She's unfriendly, after all."

The label hung in the air, a heavy cloak she had worn for what felt like forever. *Unfriendly Girl*. It was a simple phrase, yet it carried the weight of countless averted gazes, whispered comments, and doors that remained stubbornly closed. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy, a brand that ensured she would remain exactly what they called her.

Emma finally lifted her head, her eyes meeting Brenda's. There was no anger in them, just a flat, weary resignation. "What do you want, Brenda?" she asked, her voice low and even, devoid of emotion.

Brenda's smile widened, a predatory gleam in her eyes. "Oh, nothing much. Just checking in on our resident mystery. You know, making sure you're not planning to, like, spontaneously combust from all the loneliness. It's a real concern, Emma. We care about you." The sarcasm dripped from every word.

A couple of jocks at a nearby table snickered. The chess club continued their game, pretending not to hear. The art students hunched lower over their sketchbooks. The cafeteria was a stage, and Emma was, unwillingly, the star of Brenda's cruel performance.

"I'm fine," Emma said, turning back to her sandwich. She took another bite, forcing herself to chew, to appear unaffected. Every fiber of her being screamed at her to flee, to lash out, to do *something*. But experience had taught her that any reaction, any display of emotion, only served to embolden Brenda.

Brenda's eyes narrowed. She didn't like being ignored. "You know, some people think you're actually mute. Or maybe you just don't like talking to *us*." She emphasized the "us" with a flourish of her hand, gesturing to her perfectly coiffed friends. "Too good for us, Emma?"

The silence that followed was thick, punctuated only by the distant clatter of a dropped tray. Emma felt a hot flush creep up her neck. She could feel the stares, the curiosity, the quiet judgment of dozens of teenagers. It was a familiar sensation, one she had grown accustomed to, but it never lost its sting.

She wanted to scream, to tell Brenda to leave her alone, to disappear. But the words wouldn't come. They were trapped somewhere deep inside, tangled with years of unspoken frustrations and unaddressed pain. So she remained silent, a statue of defiance in the face of relentless mockery.

Brenda finally sighed, an exasperated sound. "Fine. Be unfriendly. See if I care." She pushed off the table, her chair scraping. "But don't come crying to us when you're still alone in your senior year, Emma. Some people actually *like* having friends."

With a final, derisive glance, Brenda and her entourage swept away, their laughter echoing as they rejoined their own table, their mission of disruption accomplished. The air around Emma slowly began to clear, the tension easing its grip. The boys at her table quickly returned to their phone game, pretending the interaction had never happened.

Emma took a deep, shuddering breath, the tuna sandwich suddenly tasteless in her mouth. She wrapped it back in its wax paper, her appetite gone. She picked up her apple again, turning it over and over in her hand. The bruise was prominent, a dark spot on otherwise healthy skin.

She stayed in her seat for the remainder of the lunch period, eyes fixed on the outside world visible through the window. The sky was a pale, indifferent blue, and a lone sparrow hopped on the asphalt, pecking at unseen crumbs. It seemed oblivious to the drama unfolding inside the cafeteria, to the labels and the taunts, to the shadows that clung to one particular girl in the corner. Emma wished, for a fleeting moment, that she could be that sparrow, free from the confines of Willow Creek High and the relentless buzz of judgment. But she was not. She was Emma, the Unfriendly Girl, and the bell was about to ring.

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