The cafetorium was loud and chaotic. As if it had any other setting.

From end to end, three long rows of wooden tables crammed the center of the room, every inch packed with kids gnashing their teeth around bites of food while murmuring voices collided in air. Conversations carried on about first-day excitements, the stench that was wafting from Mr. Robinson, and whether or not someone’s crush was looking their way.

If this were a movie (which it wasn’t), paper airplanes would be gliding over heads and gum wads would be lobbed like grenades (which they weren’t).

At the crown of the room, the stage sat empty where band chairs would eventually squeak, and talent shows would humiliate. Along the far wall, the lunch line stretched with aching bellies and plastic trays, kids inching forward toward their cheesy pizza and apple slices.

After fumbling to pay with the dollar bills and exact change Emma’s dad had given her for lunch, the girl with plain brown hair, a simple white dress, and round framed glasses stood with her tray in hand, staring out into the sea of her classmates.

Tables were filled from seat to seat, and while Emma *knew* plenty of the faces, there wasn’t many—or rather *any*—that she really called… friend.

This was Emma’s second year at this school, the longest she had stayed in one place. Faces changed and names may have changed, but the gnawing dread of walking through the rows looking for somewhere—*anywhere*—to sit never did.

Cliques snapped together fast, and once they did, seats at the lunch tables became unspoken territory for the rest of the year. Which meant Emma had to find her place now or risk floating seatless for months—There! By the volleyball girls.

They were nice enough, if memory served. One of them—what was her name? Lucy? Gabby? No… Gracie! Yes, Gracie—had been her lab partner in science last year. They hadn’t talked much, but Gracie was always cordial, if not friendly.

Emma smoothed out the wrinkles of her dress—now wishing she hadn’t decided to wear white on pizza day—and sucked in a breath. She tried to summon a confidence she didn’t feel, and stepped toward the empty spot like she belonged there.

The volleyball girls were long-limbed for their age, all but Gracie that was. They sat with knees knocking and ponytails bobbing from the backs of their heads.

Emma stood just a foot from the open seat, trying not to let the tray tremble in her hands. She cleared her throat.

Nothing.

None of the girls looked her way.

She’d try again. “Excuse me? Do—do you mind if I sit here?” Emma asked softly.

But still, nothing.

The cafeteria swallowed her voice whole. She may as well have been talking to the wall.

Anxiety crippled her muscles as she stood frozen the floor, not knowing what to do next.

Should she just sit down? Would they even care?

Probably not… but what if they did? Then she’d have to get up and leave and that would be even more embarrassing then… well, then just standing there in place not doing anything at all.

Emma’s feet stayed rooted to the floor, but her head swiveled as she scanned the room for another open spot. There had to be another somewhere—

“Did you hear they reopened that creepy library on Mill Street?” one of the volleyball girls said, her voice slicing through the cafeteria noise with ease.

Emma’s attention snapped back to the table like a dog about to be fed. She knew that library—had walked past it countless times her first year here.

“The one that looks like an old haunted mansion?”

“Yep, that’s the one.”

“Ew. Why?”

*Ew why?* Emma thought. *Why not!*

Warm excitement bubbled up in her chest. She had wanted to go there since the day her dad moved her to this town. Had considered on multiple occasions about prying a board loose from one of the windows just to peek inside.

Sometimes she’d taken the long way home just to pass by it, imagining what the inside looked like. What books might have been waiting in there, begging to be read. The thrill of curling into a gothic chair, steaming cocoa in hand, the crisp scent of old paper filling her nose as she turned the pages of some forgotten story…

“Uh, hello?”

Emma blinked. All the volleyball girls were staring at her. Oh no.

“Do you… need something?” the tallest and loudest asked, eyes narrowing.

How long had she been blankly standing there?

Gracie turned to her seat, offered a pleasant smile with a creased brow.

“Uh—” Heat flooded Emma’s cheeks. “No. Sorry. Thanks.” She dropped her gaze to her feet and hurried away.