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 during that first year 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 in her seat, offered a pleasant smile with a creased brow.

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

Emma let her feet lead her to the only spot she knew to go. She passed by the library with desire in her eyes. Food wasn’t allowed in the library—otherwise none of this would have been a problem in the first place. Instead, Emma carried her tray down a quiet hallway she knew from last year, one that wouldn’t hold a class for at least another forty minutes.

There she slid down the wall, the heavy bottom of her backpack thudding against the tile as she sank to the floor, and ate her cheesy pizza in silence.

By the time the digital clock blinked 3:15 in bold red numbers, the dismissal bell chimed, and the school spilled open. Kids streamed from classrooms like ants swarming toward the buses and parent pickup zone.

Amongst the colony, Emma blended into the flow, shadowing a group of walkers just long enough to slip unnoticed down Mill Street. Then, at the corner, she hooked a left.

Mill Street was by no means the quickest way home. It added nearly a mile to the walk and wound past an odd mix of storefronts: a quaint coffee shop with fogged-up windows, a boutique clothing store with mannequins staring blankly from behind the glass, a tired gas station, and the ever-familiar glow of a McDonald’s sign.

None of her classmates ever seemed to come this way. Out here, Emma wasn’t a student lost in the crowd—she was just another anonymous pedestrian moving along the sidewalk.

But even with the steady traffic and the honking cars, the walk down Mill Street dragged. It always did. So, as she often did, Emma made a game of it to keep her mind busy.

She hopped over every crack and crevice that split the old sidewalk—of which there were plenty. Mill Street was one of the oldest in town, and though the city claimed it was preserving “historical charm,” Emma suspected that was their excuse for not fixing anything.

She didn’t mind, however. The uneven slabs of concrete and the flickering streetlights only added to the challenge. Her eyes were sharp, her steps nimble, and she leapt and skipped from square to square as if the sidewalk itself had become an obstacle course.

One square she remembered especially well. Right before the library, there was a section of pavement that jutted up like a miniature volcano, a jagged ramp of rock instead of a neat, flat tile. How it had formed was anyone’s guess, but Emma grinned to herself. That one would be tricky.

She came to the square block and studied it like a puzzle. She could toe-tap on one corner and hop to the next, but the cracks spidered out too wide—too many chances to miss. There was only one real option: leap over the whole thing.

Emma took a step back, bent her knees, and sprang forward, already imagining herself landing like a graceful ballerina.

That was when it hit. A blast of cold air, sharp as ice water, slammed into her face. Goosebumps prickled her arms, her breath caught, and her balance vanished.

Instead of landing neatly, her feet tangled. She stumbled, twisted, and pitched forward—straight into a boy she hadn’t noticed standing there.

“Umph!”

Her head snapped up. The boy she’d barreled into stumbled forward himself, crashing into a knot of others ahead of him. She knew the face of the boy she ran into—Lincoln, from school—just as she knew the boys she made him fall into, Travis and his loser friends. Turns out Emma wasn’t the only one drawn to the old library.

Emma opened her mouth to apologize, but the words stuck in her throat when Lincoln didn’t even look at her. His awkward, too-long limbs hung stiff at his sides, his face pale as paper. He wasn’t staring at her—he was staring up at the boys he’d crashed into.

“What the—Lincoln? Well, well, well, would you look at that guys, it’s little Lincoln.” Travis sneered, his friends flanking him like shadows. “What, still learning to walk on those clown feet I see?”

The boys all laughed as though it was the funniest thing they had ever heard. All but Lincoln of course, who stood there still as a statue, eyes darting for an exit.

“What’s the matter little Lincoln? Cat got your tongue?” Travis stepped closer and gave him a shove.

Emma’s stomach twisted. This was her fault. She’d knocked him straight into this mess.

Travis leaned nose to nose with Lincoln and shoved again. Still, Lincoln didn’t move, didn’t fight back.

Emma’s pulse thundered in her ears. If she didn’t do something now—

“Hey!” she shouted before she could stop herself. Her voice cracked, but it carried. “Leave him alone! It wasn’t his fault.”

At once the boys all turned and looked to Emma as if noticing her for the first time.

Travis cocked his head to the side, seeming to recognize her face, but unable to place from where.

But that heartbeat of hesitation was all Lincoln needed. In a blur, he bolted—straight through the wrought-iron gate and into the looming gothic library beyond.

“Hey!” Travis barked as he and his crew tore after the boy, nearly knocking into a pair of people walking out of the library.

Emma stood motionless, mouth agape, pulse still pounding. What just happened?

The iron gate creaked shut behind the boys on its own, leaving her alone with the towering library in front of her. It wasn’t like the school library, nor any of the others she had frequented in all the towns her dad had dragged her through.

This was more mansion than public building. Stone walls climbed three stories high, their dark, withered purple hue almost bruised against the sky. Each window sagged beneath picture-frame shutters, black and drooping. At the top, spiraling towers jutted upward, roof shingles jagged as crooked teeth.

Emma lingered there, staring so long it felt less like a building and more like a painting—something unreal, a vision. Yet the longer she looked, the more it pulled at her, as if an invisible rope were tugging her toward its heavy oak doors.

But those doors had just swallowed Lincoln and the others. The urge to rush in and undo the trouble she’d caused twisted in her chest, but what could she do? Run circles around the stacks, begging Travis to let Lincoln go? Travis would never stop. Picking on kids like Lincoln was what he did best.

And if Travis was inside—and Lincoln too—who else from school might be here?

The library’s reopening was proving far more alluring than Emma had expected. Her fingers itched, every part of her wanted to step forward, yet her feet stayed rooted to the pavement.

The library would have to wait.