

Spring Hill

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Becca was taking too long.

Emma huddled against the iron fencepost and hugged her knees. The chilly breeze had dried her tears, but her nose was still running. She wiped it with the back of her hand, even though her mom had told her a million times not to. As she watched the sullen autumn sun sink toward the faraway trees lining the bank of the Grand River, she shivered. If Becca didn't hurry, they'd both get grounded. They wouldn't get to go apple picking at the Amish orchard that weekend. It wasn't fair.

"Life's not fair, girl. You can count on that."

Emma jolted upright and hit her head on the ice-cold iron of the fence. She and Becca weren't supposed to be here, but Emma couldn't run away and leave her little sister behind.

She scowled up at the intruder, trying to look like she had every right to be here. One of the Amish women from over in Jamesport stood looking down at Emma, a half smile on her face.

"What are you doing here?" Emma asked.

"Same as you. Wishing I were in there." The woman sat down next to Emma on the tired grass. Her dress was a little fancier than the Amish usually wore: dark brown calico instead of black or gray wool. Her hair, too. She sort of looked like Princess Leia, if Leia were a grandma. She had a basket on her arm filled with apples. She set it between them, and the fruit's rich, spicy smell made Emma's mouth water.

She scooted away a little, though. She figured she was safe with the Amish, but why was the lady here?

The woman offered her an apple, but Emma shook her head. “I’m not hungry.”

But of course just then her stomach growled. The woman laughed. “Suit yourself.”

Emma craned her neck to look through the fence, trying to see the place where Becca had gone through. Nothing. Over the past year or so, they’d worn down the grass by going under the fence, but that’s not where Becca had disappeared. The place they’d always crossed into Narnia was a few feet *past* the iron fence, just on the other side of a big spice bush. She turned back to find the old woman looking at her with pity in her eyes.

“I’ll hazard you just had a birthday.”

Now Emma stood up. How did this stranger know so much? What did she want? Emma looked out at the road both ways, but didn’t see any horse-drawn buggy with reflectors nailed to the sides. Jamesport was miles away. How had the woman even gotten here?

When the guards’ golf cart came up the rise, Emma ducked down again, ready to bolt if necessary and come back for Becca later. She double-checked to make sure their bikes were well-hidden in their usual spot.

The guards traveled the perimeter of the property at all hours, sometimes taking a break out near Koala Road. They worked for the Latter-day Saints—the same people who owned that ugly brick church in Gallatin. Emma figured they must know what they were guarding here on Spring Hill; it was obvious to her why the Saints had put a fence around it.

She couldn’t tell for sure, though; the guards had never given her a chance to ask any questions. They just chased her and her sister off, wanting to keep all the magic for themselves. Except Emma had never actually seen them—or anyone else—inside the fence. Some day when she was older, she was going to march into that church in Gallatin and see what other magic powers those Saints had.

The guards were still a ways off. They wouldn’t see Emma if she stayed low, but Becca *had* to hurry. Emma looked in at the spice bush again.

“When was the last time you were inside?”

Emma narrowed her eyes at the woman. Maybe she wasn't Amish at all. Was she a Saint? "Inside the fence?"

"No. *Inside*." She gave the word extra emphasis.

"In Narnia?" Emma blurted out, then immediately regretted it.

The woman laughed again. "What kind of outlandish name is that? Why do you call it that?"

Emma looked down at her feet. "S'from a book." Their dad had read them the whole series last summer when they'd visited him, and both girls had loved it—though their Narnia was very different from the one in the books.

In their Narnia, it was always sort of both Indian summer and spring, with flowers and ripe fruit on the trees at the same time. The animals didn't talk, but they did let you pet them and feed them. And there weren't any people at all—unless you counted Obi-Wan.

That wasn't his real name. Emma and Becca couldn't pronounce *that*, so they'd given him a new name, which had seemed to please him. He didn't talk much, his robes glowed so brightly that he was hard to look at straight on, and he never put down his light saber. But somehow, he wasn't scary.

"Narnia," the woman repeated to herself. "I suppose it's no worse than Diahman."

Emma looked at the old woman. She definitely knew stuff. "When was the last time *you* were inside?" she asked.

The woman's wrinkles sagged. "Oh, it's been a very long time."

"Were you a kid, like me?"

"No, I was grown and married, with babes of my own. I only went in once, but I've never forgotten it." Her eyes gleamed. "My husband . . . had a key."

Emma mulled this over. "We've never needed a key to get in."

"When was your birthday?"

"Yesterday."

"Eight years old, now, are you?"

Emma nodded.

"Too old. Accountable. You'll never get in without a key now."

Emma bit her lip to keep her chin from trembling. She plopped her rear back down on the ground and put her forehead down on her bent knees.

Obi-Wan had hinted at this last Friday—that he might not see her again for a long time. But Emma had hoped that meant maybe he was taking a vacation, or something. She hadn't wanted to face the idea that Narnia might be closed to her already.

Peter Pevensie had visited Narnia until he was fourteen; Emma had assumed she and Becca had years ahead of them. Years of respite from the extremes of Missouri's weather, years of feeling special in a magical land they had all to themselves, with no step-fathers or gross school lunches or any of the ugliness of reality. But today, when she hadn't been able to cross through . . . "Where can I get a key?" Emma asked, lifting her head suddenly. "Would your husband let me borrow his?"

The woman didn't answer for what seemed like a long time. "He's gone away," she finally said, and the thin line of her mouth didn't invite any further questions.

Emma glanced at the spice bush. A few of its leaves had drifted to the ground, making a golden ring around it.

"It won't do you any good, staring at it."

Look who's talking, Emma thought. But that wasn't nice. "I know," she said out loud. And she did know; she felt it in the pit of her stomach. "My little sister's inside."

"She's not a kind sister, to go in and leave you behind," the woman observed.

"No, she just went in to get my coat. I forgot it there on Friday. When I couldn't get through today, I told her I'd wait out here for her. She promised she'd be quick. My mom'll kill me if I don't bring my coat home." Emma shut her mouth, because her words were getting shaky again.

"Ah." The woman put the basket of apples on her other side and moved over closer to Emma. "What's your name, girl?"

"Emma."

The woman looked at her funny. "That's quite a coincidence."

Emma rolled her eyes. "I know. Everybody's named Emma. I don't know why my mom couldn't think of something more original. There are three other Emmas in third grade. My teacher says it's a popular name right now."

“Popular. Is that a fact.” Humor lit up the woman’s eyes. “My husband used to say that life was one eternal round. I suppose that’s true of fashion as well.”

The guards’ cart was close now, but didn’t sound like it was going to slow down. Emma let out a breath. The two big men with stern, foreign-looking faces had always scared the girls—not that they had ever kept them from coming back.

The woman looked up when she heard the electric whine of the golf cart. She waved a hand as if fanning away a fly. “Nalu and Lota won’t bother us. They know me well.”

“Oh. Really? I wish we’d met you a long time ago, then.” Emma thought for a moment. “How come we’ve never seen you before? We’re here a lot.”

The woman chuckled, but didn’t answer. She laughed louder when Emma’s stomach growled again.

“Are you certain you won’t accept an apple? It might quiet your belly’s grumbling until you can get home to your supper.” She held out one again, yellowish-red and fragrant.

Emma gave in, even though her mom would freak out if she knew Emma had taken food from a stranger. She bit into the crisp flesh and sucked in to keep the juice from running down her chin.

“Really good,” she said around the mouthful. The woman gave her a real smile then. She must have been beautiful when she was younger. Emma hoped the lady’s husband would come back soon.

The apple *was* good—almost as good as Narnian fruit. Emma and Becca had stuffed themselves silly when they’d first gone in more than a year ago, when their mom had started letting them ride their bikes to and from school.

They’d learned quickly, though, that they could never bring anything out. Berries, cherries, flowers—they all turned to black mold the minute they came out beside the spice bush.

The sun was down among the trees now. What was keeping Becca?

Finally, the spice bush rustled. Emma scooted around to look as Becca emerged, a few golden leaves getting stuck in her dark, curly hair. “Sorry,” she gasped, crawling under the fence on her

stomach, Emma's coat under her arm. "Obi-Wan asked about you, and I wanted to say goodbye."

"What do you mean?" Emma asked around the lump in her throat. "Did he kick you out?"

Becca looked to the side and pursed her lips the way she always did when she was about to lie. "Yeah."

"C'mon. Tell me the truth."

Becca shook her head and started to cry.

Emma grabbed her sister's upper arm hard, too anxious to be nice. "C'mon," she repeated through gritted teeth.

Becca hiccupped and looked up at her sister, grief in her eyes. "You're too old now," she admitted finally. "I can come back whenever I want until my birthday—but I told him I wouldn't come if you weren't allowed. It's not fair, and besides, it's no fun in there without you." Her lips pursed again.

"Liar," Emma said, but hugged her little sister tightly. She didn't care that Becca's snot was getting all over her shirt, because she was crying a little, too. She lifted her hand to wipe her nose; she still had the old woman's half-eaten apple in her hand. She looked around, wanting to introduce her sister.

But the woman was gone, basket and all. Not a sign of her on the road. Glancing at the horizon, Emma didn't have time to wonder how or why she'd left so quickly. She grabbed Becca's hand and ran down the hill to their bikes.

"Hurry, Beck," she said as they went. "We can still make it home before dark."