

# **Emma and the Minotaur**

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# 1 The Music in the Forest

This is a story about a girl and a tree, and about how the music that they made together changed the whole world.

There was a time when the forests cloaked the Earth.

Long ago, a sequence of events was begun by the song of a tree. The tree's voice, joined by that of its twin, brought forth a kind of creature that was like none that had existed before it. The creature possessed a special gift that enabled it to control its own destiny and it was because of that gift that the forests of the world were now diminishing.

Glenridge Forest was located at the centre of the City of Saint Martin and it was being consumed by a housing project.

Andrew Milligan's job was to go into newly built house-skeletons and stuff their walls with insulation. He worked with two other men at a construction site run by a company called Paigely Builders. The site was a sprawling mess of machines, building materials, and houses in various stages of completion, ranging from bare foundations to fully built homes awaiting only a layer of paint. During the day, the site bustled with activity as workers went around moving dirt, wood, and concrete from one area to another.

Today, it was late in the afternoon, however, and most of the site employees had already gone home. Andrew and his co-workers had remained behind. They were paid based on the amount of work they completed so putting in a few extra hours now and then meant a little more pay. The summer was nearly at its end and Andrew's son needed a new backpack for the coming school year.

The three men were sitting on the exposed floor of the house that was their current project. They had placed floodlights around the area to illuminate their work and these cast their shadows on the walls. The scene reminded Andrew of sitting around a campfire telling stories.

"What grade is the kid going into?" Bill said.

"He's starting middle school," Andrew said. "He doesn't know anyone here."

"I'm sure he'll be good," Bill said. "Lots of friends in no time."

Joel was the youngest of the three. "I don't know how you guys do it," he said. "I can't even take care of myself."

Bill chuckled. He tipped his cup back, drank the rest of his orange juice, and then threw the empty container at him.

"Alright," he said. "Let's get this done so we can get out of here."

Andrew stood up and pulled his face mask over his nose and mouth. He walked to the back of the house where he had been working before the break. The insulating material came in rectangular pieces that were made to fit into the frames of the walls but often they had to be cut into smaller fragments in order to fill in the nooks and corners.

He went to work, stuffing the walls with the fluffy material or cutting it into pieces with his utility knife.

An hour passed before Andrew finished insulating the back wall. He took off the face mask and leaned on the open frame that would eventually become a window. It looked out into Glenridge Forest. The moon was full and it shone down on the tops of the trees but its rays failed to penetrate the darkness underneath. It was a hot night but a lazy breeze cooled the perspiration on Andrew's face. He stared into the darkness of the woods for a long while and, in time, he heard music, faint and uncertain.

"Ready to go?"

He turned and saw Bill and Joel standing there. He hadn't heard them approach.

“Yeah,” he said. “Hey, do you hear that?”

They joined him at the window and together they stared into the night.

“Crickets?” Bill said.

“No. Really listen. Don’t you hear that music?”

“What are you talking about?” Joel said. “Have you been inhaling this stuff?”

Bill patted Andrew on the back. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s go home and get some rest.”

They picked up their tools, left the house, and walked to the parking area. Their vehicles were the only ones remaining there. Bill and Joel threw their things into the bed of Bill’s truck and then jumped into the cabin. Bill honked the horn as they drove away. Andrew put his tools into his aging sedan’s trunk. He slammed the door down twice before it stayed closed. He walked around the car toward the driver’s door but stopped in mid-step.

He heard music again, more clearly this time. He recognized violins, trumpets, flutes, and drums, among other instruments that he couldn’t name. It was a sweet sound that made him think of honey and silk.

He reached into his car and pulled out a flashlight. He walked toward the source of the music and passed many of the house-skeletons that now hid in darkness.

When he reached the edge of the forest, he shone his light into it. The music was coming from somewhere in there. A hesitant step took him into the woods.

He walked for a while before he reached a part of the forest where the undergrowth was thick and the going was slow. He considered turning around but wavered. The strangeness of the music nagged at him and begged him onward. He breathed in deeply and fumbled with his flashlight.

During that moment of indecision, there came a sound from another part of the forest. It was a great thudding that sounded as though a giant was pounding on the forest floor. There was a rumble like thunder and, no more than twenty paces away from him, a monster appeared. In the darkness, he made out only a mass of muscles, glowing red eyes, and great horns like a devil.

Andrew turned and ran. He felt the earth shake as the creature gave chase. Branches struck his face and arms and pulled at his clothing, but he stumbled forward as quickly as he could. He dropped the flashlight and his flight became a blind sprint.

Before long, Andrew thought that he could feel the creature’s warm breath on his neck. A bestial snarl made his head rattle. He dove forward. His head bounced off a branch and he fell. He landed hard and felt a trickle of blood run down his forehead and into his eye.

He scrambled to his feet and saw that he had come to a clearing. The full moon revealed a tree, enormous and ancient, in the middle of it. The tree was the source of the music that he had been searching for.

He turned back toward the edge of the clearing and saw, in the darkness, a pair of fiery eyes looking back at him.

The creature stepped forward and its massive frame was illuminated by the moon. Andrew backed away, using his hands to feel for the trunk of the tree behind him.

The monster took a step forward and the ground rumbled.

Andrew fell back toward the tree and then he found himself in another world.

Emma Wilkins was eleven years old and she lived on Belle Street.

It was Sunday morning, on the day before the start of the new school year, and Emma was sitting on the window sill in her living room, reading a book, when she saw a man walk up the lawn. The man saw her through the window and waved to her before he reached the front door and rang the doorbell. Emma dog-eared her book and put it down. She went to the door and opened it but her father came up behind her before she could speak.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Good morning. You’re William Wilkins, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. What’s this about?”

“My name is Bill,” the man said. “One of my friends went missing near here and we’re trying to get some people together to go search for him.”

“You’ve called the police, obviously.”

“Yeah,” Bill said. “They’re looking for him but we don’t think they’ve looked hard enough. See, me and my friend work with Andrew and we were with him the night he disappeared. We work at the Paigely site over that way.” He pointed in general direction of Glenridge Forest and Emma’s father nodded.

“So we’re sure he got lost in the forest somehow,” Bill continued, “and they don’t think he could’ve got very far but we know Andrew better. He’s a stubborn son of a gun.”

“Why do you think he went into the forest? Hiking or something like that?”

“Yeah,” Bill said. “Something like that.”

Mr Wilkins took a moment to look out into the street behind Bill. “Okay,” he said eventually. “I’ll be right out.”

“Thanks,” Bill said. “Meet us down the street at the intersection when you’re ready.”

He turned and walked on to the next house. Emma could see now that there was another man across the street doing the same thing that Bill was doing, knocking on doors and talking to people.

She turned back toward the house. “Dad, can I come?”

“You’d better stay here,” he said. “It will be boring for you. We’ll just be walking and looking.”

“But I love the forest, Dad,” she said. “And I like walking and looking too.”

There was a closet next to the front door. Mr Wilkins opened it and took his running shoes out. He sat on the bench next to the closet and put them on. As he tied his shoelaces, he said, “Okay, go get your brother. He can help keep an eye on you.”

“Okay!” Emma said and ran to fetch Will.

Down at one end of Belle Street was Lockhart Road. It was a small road that ran alongside the edge of the forest, segregating it from Emma’s neighbourhood. Toward the west, the road led to The Hill, and toward the east, it terminated at the main entrance of the Paigely Builders construction site. Glenridge Forest straddled it from the north.

It was at this intersection that Emma and her family gathered with half a dozen of their neighbours and a few strangers. Bill stood in front of the crowd with the other man who had been knocking on doors with him.

“Last time we saw Andrew Milligan, it was at the construction site,” Bill said. “We think he’s in the forest because his car was still parked there next morning and he mentioned earlier that he’d heard something out there. I think he probably went to check it out.”

“What did he hear?” someone said. Emma couldn’t see who it was but he sounded familiar. She made her way to the front of the crowd and saw that it was their next door neighbour, Mr Arnold Thornton. He was a biology professor and he worked at the University of Saint Martin like her father did.

“He said he heard music in the forest,” Bill said. “I know, it sounds ridiculous so we didn’t pay it any mind. But it’s possible he went looking for it.”

“So you think he just got lost?” Mr Thornton said.

“I hope so,” said Bill’s companion. He was younger than Bill and he looked very worried. After he spoke, he patted his pockets down looking for something but he didn’t seem to find it.

“Hello,” Emma said to him. “What is your name?”

The man blinked down at her. “I’m Joel,” he said. “What’s yours?”

“Emma.”

She offered her hand and Joel shook it.

Bill drew their attention again and explained his plan. They were going to spread out into the forest in pairs and circle back after two hours.

"I know that four hours is a long time to take away from your Sunday, folks," he said, "and I apologize but Andrew is a decent guy and his wife and son miss him very much. They moved to Saint Martin recently and they were only just getting settled in."

Emma's father spoke up from the back of the group. "Don't forget to call out his name from time to time," he said. "Maybe he's stuck or injured somewhere."

The assembly dispersed and they entered Glenridge Forest.

Emma took the lead and walked on a few steps ahead of Will and her father. She took glances left and right as she went and saw the other searchers moving through the trees. The rustling of their footsteps on the forest floor mingled with the chirping of the birds in the trees. As time wore on, she saw the other groups move farther and farther away from her own until they were completely out of sight, though the calls of "Andrew!" continued to make their way to her for a while longer.

Emma decided to take charge of her group's yelling duties.

"Andrew!" she called out as loudly as she could. She turned and waited for her family to catch up.

"Come on, Will," she said. "If you yell too then we'll be twice as loud."

"It's okay," Mr Wilkins said. "One yeller is enough."

"Maybe just once?" Will said.

Mr Wilkins adjusted his glasses as he considered it. "Okay," he said. "Just once if it'll get it out of your systems."

"Count down for us, Dad?" Emma said.

"Ready? Three, two, one, now!"

Together, Emma and Will screamed the missing man's name.

Mr Wilkins covered his ears and grimaced.

They kept going for another hour, with Emma walking in front and doing the shouting, but there was no sign of Andrew Milligan or anyone else. Somewhere along the way they had reached a part of the forest that was unfamiliar to Emma. She thought that if she had been there alone she would have become lost. Even the type of chirping in this area sounded different from what she was used to. She looked up into the trees to see if she could spot one of the birds but she only saw the movement of the leaves in the wind.

"I like that," she said.

"What's that?" Will said as he came up beside her.

"The leaves in the wind."

Will joined her and looked up. After a moment he shook his head. "I don't—"

"Hold on!" Emma said.

"What?"

"Don't you hear that?"

Mr Wilkins caught up with them and stopped to listen. "It's just the wind in the trees," he said.

"No," Emma said. "Don't you hear music?"

"I don't hear anything," he said. "How about you, Will?"

Will shook his head. "Nothing. Just birds."

"Come on," Emma said. "It's over there!"

Emma ran. Around trees and over branches and brambles she ran. The forest became a blur of green and brown. She tripped and tumbled forward but just managed to keep herself from falling. She giggled at the feeling that it gave her. She felt like she did when she went on a roller coaster and her heart became big and jumpy.

A little more running brought her to a clearing. There was a big tree in the middle. It was tall and wide and looked like it was very old. There was a music playing and it sounded like the symphonies that her father listened to. Emma was certain that it was coming from the tree. She walked up to it and stretched out her hand to touch it. Just as she was about to make contact, she heard her father's voice behind her. He sounded agitated.

“Emma,” he said. “What do you think you’re doing running off like that?”

Emma turned in time to see Will and Mr Wilkins emerge from the forest.

“Sorry, dad,” she said. “But the music, it—” she paused to listen and realized that the music was no longer there. “It stopped.”

Mr Wilkins pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “I’m telling you, Emma,” he said. “It’s just the wind in the trees.”

“No,” she said. “It was coming from the tree.”

Emma approached the oak once again and put her hand on it. “You were singing, weren’t you?” she whispered. “You were singing and you’re alive.”

“Of course it’s alive,” Will said. “Learn some biology.”

“Funny,” she said and pushed him as hard as she could but he barely moved. He grabbed her hands and turned her around and restrained her in a tight hug. Emma squirmed and punched and kicked at him.

“Kids,” Mr Wilkins said. “Come on, we have to keep moving.”

Will released her and she gave him another shove.

From under the shadows of a thick coppice on the edge of the clearing, a horned creature watched the scene. Within the boundaries of the forest, the creature could remain unseen whenever he wanted to, and he had remained in hiding as he’d followed the man, the boy, and the girl.

He had heard them call for the one named “Andrew,” the one who was lost, and he had followed them through the forest. It was out of idle interest at first but then the girl had heard the music.

The creature had stood close behind her when the music had called to her in the clearing. He had almost reached out a hand to touch her, but then the others had come, and so the creature had gone back into hiding.

And so he was watching and waiting. The girl was so young and so small and fragile.

He watched the humans leave the clearing, completely unaware of him, and then he walked up to the ancient tree. He looked quizzically at the great oak for a moment.

“So you are sure,” he said at last. “Emma is ready.”

## 2 The Disappearing Boy

Early into the new school year, Emma became obsessed with a boy who disappeared.

It all began on the first day of school during morning recess. Emma was sitting on a swing in the playground swinging her feet and reading the book that she had smuggled out of class. She was keeping half an eye on a few boys who were bouncing a tennis ball off the side of the building. She was wary of them because she had been the victim of a stray ball or two before.

It was during one of her glances up from the book that she noticed the disappearing boy quite by accident. He was a plain-looking boy and he was walking around the playground with his hands in his pockets. There was something about him that made Emma believe she had seen him somewhere. His face looked familiar but she couldn't remember if she had ever met the boy.

She watched him for the remainder of recess and noticed that he was avoiding the other kids. Whenever someone looked at him, he would look down at the ground and walk away.

Emma decided that she would try to become his friend.

The bell signalling the end of recess went off and the teachers who were in charge of supervising the playground herded the children back inside. Emma tried to keep an eye on the boy as she walked toward the school doors but she lost him in the crowd. She stopped to look around for him but then she saw Will approach from the other side of the school, where the basketball courts were located.

"Hey, what are you doing?" he said.

"Nothing," Emma said, still looking through the crowd.

"You better get to class, Emma. Don't want to get in trouble on your first day."

They entered the school together but Will went straight down the hall to his classroom on the first floor. Emma's class was on the second floor. She went to the stairs but stood at the bottom and watched as the remaining children walked or ran past her on their way up. The boy wasn't among them.

"Go to class, please," someone said. Emma turned and saw one of the teachers. He was a tall man with gray hair and a round belly.

"Sorry," Emma said. "I was just looking for someone." She fled up the stairs.

When she reached her classroom, Emma saw that the boy she had been looking for was sitting at the desk nearest the door.

"You're in my class? How did you get here?" she said.

Everyone in the class turned to look at her, including the teacher.

"Emma," she said. "Please sit down. And try not to be late next time."

Emma turned pink. "Yes, Miss Robins," she said and took her seat.

Emma tried to catch the boy again during lunch time.

She entered the busy cafeteria and sat down with Will and his friends, Kevin and Joey. The room was filled to capacity. Laughter erupted now and then from one table or another.

"So full in here this year," Kevin said. "It's all the stupid grade sixes."

"Yeah, so many new ones," Joey said. He motioned toward Emma with a tilt of his head.

"Sorry, Emma," Kevin said. "You're not actually that stupid."

When she finished eating, Emma scanned her surroundings as she sipped out of a box of apple juice. There were too many kids and she couldn't see very far because she wasn't tall enough. With a sigh, she climbed on top of her chair.

A carrot stick flew by her head while she looked. From her vantage point, she estimated that she could see maybe two thirds of the students in the cafeteria but that she would miss the boy if he was somewhere on the periphery. If the boy didn't have any friends, and wanted to avoid company, then he was certain to be somewhere along the edge of the room. She needed to go higher.



Without thinking, she climbed on top of the table.

“Emma, what are you doing?” Will said.

“Looking for someone,” she said absently. A pizza crust sailed past her.

“Mr Clarence is coming,” Joey said.

“Who?” She spun around in time to see the arrival of the elderly man from before, the one she had run into at the bottom of the stairs.

“Oh. Hello,” she said.

“Emma, he’s the principal,” Will said.

“Oh. Hello, sir.”

“What is your name, young lady?” Mr Clarence said.

“Emma, Mr Clarence.”

“Please get down from there, Emma.”

“Yes, Mr Clarence.”

Emma looked for the boy again during the afternoon’s recess period. She climbed up the slide in the playground and stood at the top like a sentry.

Over by the basketball courts, Will and his friends were bouncing a ball around. Emma waved to him but he didn’t wave back. On the soccer field, there was a gathering of eighth graders. They were hanging around the goal posts. The playground was filled with younger children. They were running about and playing.

Emma scanned the school in this way for a few minutes. From school building to basketball courts, over to the soccer field, and then to the playground. She saw no sign of the boy. It was like he was invisible.

When she finally spotted him, it was where Will and his friends were shooting the basketball around. He was standing on the grass beyond the court, leaning under the shade of a tree.

Emma went down the slide and ran through the playground. She took her eyes off the boy for only a moment but when she reached the basketball courts he was nowhere in sight.

Will saw her and stopped in mid-dribble.

“Emma?” he said.

“Hey, Will.”

“What are you doing?”

“Just looking for someone,” she said.

During dinner that evening, Emma didn’t say much. She was lost in thought trying to figure out how to corner the disappearing boy. She imagined a giant box and a stick with a string tied to it, but she couldn’t think of anything that she could use as bait.

“Who were you looking for today, Emma?” Will said, interrupting her imaginings.

“A boy,” she said.

“A boy?”

Mr Wilkins arched an eyebrow. He was at his normal place at the head of the table. Will was to his right while Emma was sitting at the other end of it.

She snapped to attention. “Not like that!” she said. “There is a boy in my class and I think he has powers.”

“Powers?”

Emma nodded. “One, at least. I’ve been trying to become his friend and he keeps disappearing.”

“I don’t blame him,” Will said.

“I’m serious!”

She was about to explain her failed attempts to catch the boy when a peculiar idea occurred to her.

“Dad, what if Andrew Milligan disappeared on purpose,” she said, “just like this boy does? What if they both have powers?”

“Like maybe they’re wizards?” Will said.

“Yeah!” Emma said. “Maybe that’s it. Maybe they’re both wizards.”

“Now,” Mr Wilkins said, “while that’s entirely possible, maybe there’s another, more reasonable explanation. Do you know the boy’s name?”

“No,” she said. “How can I find out his name if I can’t even talk to him?”

“Don’t they take attendance at Briardale?”

“Brilliant, Dad!” Emma said.

The next morning during attendance, Emma kept her eyes fixed on the suspected wizard. He was plain and hard to notice. The boy was slunked down on his seat but not so much that it would draw attention from the teacher. His hair was neat and his clothes were clean, if a bit faded. As Miss Robins called out the names of the students, the boy sat perfectly still and avoided looking at the teacher.

“Collins, Suzanne,” Miss Robins said, and the girl who sat behind him raised her hand.

“Close!” whispered Emma, but then she realized that was silly.

The teacher went on down the D’s and the E’s and so on.

“Grieger, Eric.”

Another boy raised his hand. There was also “Johns, Jeff” and “Laurier, Molly” and other names that were familiar to Emma from previous years. Even when Miss Robins got to her name, way down the list, Emma didn’t stop looking at the boy. She raised her hand and barked a swift, “Present!”

“Good,” Miss Robins said. “Everyone’s here.” She walked back to her desk and put her clipboard down.

“What!” Emma yelled.

“Emma, is there a problem?”

Everyone was looking at her. She hadn’t meant to shout. Even the wizard boy was watching her. She hadn’t taken her eyes off him during all of attendance. She was sure that his name simply hadn’t been called.

“Do you people even see him?” Emma said, still more loudly than she intended. “Is he invisible too?”

“Emma, settle down,” said Miss Robins. “Who are you talking about?”

“Him!” she said and stood up and pointed at the boy. Her hand hit her notebook and it flipped up and hit the boy in front of her in the back of the head. Jeff Johns turned to glare at her as he rubbed his neck.

“Emma Wilkins!” Miss Robins said. “Sit down right this minute. That’s one strike for disturbing the class!”

Over on the side of the room, on the wall, there was a poster board with the word “STRIKES” written at the top of it. The rest of it was blank but Miss Robins took a permanent marker and wrote on it:

EMMA WILKENS: X

Emma was mortified in equal amounts by being the first one on the Strike Board and by the misspelling of her last name. She tried to protest but the teacher hushed her down and threatened to give her another strike immediately if she didn’t stop talking.

She pressed her lips together into a thin line to keep herself from speaking. She reasoned that at least now she knew that the boy was, in fact, a wizard and there was a strong indication that she was the only one who could see him. She was more determined than ever to find out his secrets and question him about the disappearance of Andrew Milligan.

The chase went on that same way for the next day. Emma didn’t give up trying to catch the boy but he always got away from her somehow. He was always in the classroom before she got there and he always rushed out before she could catch up to him. He wasn’t in the cafeteria during lunch time.

On Thursday morning, the boy didn’t show up at school at all and his desk stood empty. Emma

raised her hand.

“Yes?”

“May I go to the bathroom?”

Miss Robins nodded and continued her lesson. Emma stood up. On her way out, she paused in front of the boy’s desk. Suzie Collins gave her a quizzical look.

“Are you here?” Emma whispered at the empty chair. She waited a moment but when there was no answer, she waved her hand through the air above it. “Oh, alright,” she said and looked up to see a look of puzzlement on Suzie’s face.

“Emma,” said Miss Robins. “Are you going to the bathroom or are you just going to stand there all day?”

Emma ran out of the room.

The worst time of the day at the Wilkins household, as Emma saw it, was right after dinner because it was time for violin practice. Mr Wilkins, being a physicist, idolized Albert Einstein. Because Einstein had played the violin, he was trying to learn to play it as well.

Emma was sitting in the living room trying to do her math homework on the coffee table but the screeching from her father’s office was making it difficult. She put her pencil down, went to his door, and knocked on it.

The screeching continued uninterrupted.

“Dad!” she screeched back and knocked again.

The door opened and she let herself into the room. Early on, Emma had figured out a trick that cut down on practice time. Mr Wilkins always set a countdown on his computer for exactly one hour. If someone interrupted him, he never remembered to pause the timer.

Her father’s office was messy. There were bookshelves full of physics textbooks mixed with fiction hardcovers. On the floor, there were boxes overflowing with scientific papers. His desk was really a long table in the shape of an L that fit into the corner of the room. On top of the table sat his monitor and his computer. The screen showed a paused instructional video and an unpaused timer applet.

Emma sat down on a great, big book that was lying on the floor. It was called “The Handbook of Physics.” This edition was from 1989 and it had close to two thousand pages. Emma knew this because she had tried to read it once before but it was made up of mostly number tables and funny math symbols.

“Hey, Dad,” she said.

“Hey, Emma, I was just practising,” he said and sat down on his chair.

“I know, Dad,” she said. “I could hear you. I just wanted to talk to you.”

He put the violin down so that it leaned against a box on the floor. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing much,” Emma said. “Have you heard anything about Mr Milligan?”

“No, not really. He’s still missing, and there have been rumours going around the school about more people disappearing, but they’re just rumours, I’m sure. No one can name any one specifically and that usually means that it’s just a rumour.”

“I still think he’s a wizard,” Emma said.

“That’s possible, of course, but very unlikely,” he said, smiling. “Have you caught the wizard you were chasing yet?”

“Nah,” she said. “No luck. I think he can turn invisible too.”

“He must be very powerful.” He spun his chair sideways a short distance like he always did when he was thinking. “You know, Emma,” he said, “if he isn’t actually a wizard then maybe he’s going somewhere outside of the school when he disappears, don’t you think?”

“Maybe. But we’re not allowed to leave the school during lunch.”

“I know,” he said, “but just suppose he did. That would explain a lot, wouldn’t it?”

“Well, yeah, I guess so.”

“And if he’s leaving the school, then he probably leaves the same way every time. How many exits are there at Briardale?”

“Uh, three or four, I think. Why?”

He smiled. “I’ll leave the rest as an exercise to the student,” he said.

“Dad!” she said, but she knew that it was pointless to argue. Her father did this sort of thing all the time.

Emma stood up.

“Thanks,” she said and gave him a hug. She went back to the living room to work on her homework and mull over her new puzzle.

It didn’t take long for Emma to figure out what her father had meant and implement it into a plan. She found out from Will that there were four ways in and out of Briardale Middle School. There were the main doors at the front of the building, the big doors leading to the playground in the back, and two smaller side doors. If the boy was leaving the school during lunch time, then he had to go through one of those exits, and if he always left through the same exit, then all Emma had to do was to wait for him at the right one. If she waited at a different door each day, then it would take her four days to catch him at the longest.

But Emma narrowed her options down even further. She didn’t think that the boy would leave through the main doors because they were the main doors and not good for sneaking. The back doors were also out of the question because one or two teachers were always near them during lunch as they watched the playground. The only possibilities that remained were the two side doors. This meant that Emma had a fifty percent chance of catching the boy on her first try.

There was a small problem that she had to overcome. The boy, because he sat closer to the door, always ran out of the room before she could. He seemed to be always prepared for a quick exit. Emma needed to think of a way to leave the classroom before the boy did.

She came up with a solution and decided to try it out on Thursday. She would probably only have one shot at it and she thought that Miss Robins would perhaps be in a good mood because of the approaching weekend. Friday would be better but Emma didn’t think that she could wait that long.

It was twenty minutes before lunch time when she raised her hand and put her plan into action.

“Emma?” said Miss Robins.

“May I go to the bathroom please, Miss Robins?”

She had decided that if she waited too long to ask, then Miss Robins would make her wait until the end of class. Twenty minutes before lunch seemed about right.

“Can’t you wait until lunch?”

“Sorry, Miss Robins,” she said. “I really can’t.”

“Okay, go ahead,” the teacher said. She didn’t seem all that happy about it but Emma got up and left the classroom.

It wasn’t until fifteen minutes later, as Emma crouched outside right around the wall from one of the side doors, that it occurred to her that her father would never suggest that she leave class early. Only then did it occur to her that if the boy left the school during lunch time, he also had to come back at some point.

“Dang it!” she said. “Too late now.”

A moment later, the door opened and out came the boy. He stuck his face out and peeked around like a mouse looking out for cats. He almost spotted Emma but she hid behind the wall just in time.

She thought that she could catch him right then, but she was also curious about where it was that he went when he left the school. She decided to follow him.

Emma kept her distance as she walked behind him down the street, past the school’s soccer field, and into the surrounding neighbourhood. Disapproving houses looked down on them from either side.

They walked for five minutes until they came to a park. It was a rolling expanse of grass with a trail running through it. In the near distance, Emma could see the tops of a few trees that peeked above the

grass beyond where the field sloped down.

The boy went into the park and onto the trail. She followed him and they went on down the slope. Emma saw that the trees that had been peeking over the rise were only the tallest among many others.

To one side of the path there was a creek that wound its way through the woods. The boy walked up to the creek and then stopped to look around. Emma hid behind a tree so that he wouldn't see her. When the boy was satisfied that no one was near, he went across the creek by walking on a log that lay across it. On the other side of the creek, there was a steep hill and the boy climbed it and disappeared over it.

Emma followed. The climb gave her difficulty because of her small size and so it was something of a scramble. When she finally reached the top, she stood up and looked down on the disappearing boy.

He was sitting cross-legged on top of a big rock. There was a small waterfall behind him that fed the creek, which then wound its slow way around the hill. Across the creek the woods were thick. The boy was occupying the space where woods, waterfall, hill, and creek intersected. It was his own secret hiding place. His backpack was there next to him and there was a brown lunch bag in front of him. He was eating a sandwich and drinking from a can of soda.

"Hey, boy!" Emma called down to him. "Are you a wizard?"

The boy almost fell off the rock. "A wizard?" he said, looking up. He put his sandwich down and stood up, knocking his soda over in process. He wiped his hands on his pants.

"I'm just Jake," he said.

"Jake? What Jake? Jake who?"

"Jake Milligan," he said.

Emma went down the slope. This side of the hill was easier to manage than the climbing side had been.

She stood next to Jake's rock and looked up at the boy. She thought that, with the sun shining behind his head like it was, he did look sort of wizardly.

"Hey, Jake," she said. "I'm Emma Wilkins."

"I know," Jake said. He crouched down and packed his things into his old backpack. It was too small for him and there was a hole at the top of it that had already been mended, but now the mending was coming apart.

"Why do you come here?" Emma said. "You know we're not allowed to leave the school."

Jake shrugged. He kicked the now-empty can of grape soda and it flew into the water. He jumped off the rock and started for the hill.

"Where are you going?"

"Back to school," he said. He didn't look at her.

"But why? I've been trying to catch you for ages!"

"I know," he said, not slowing down. "I've seen you."

"I only want to be your friend," she said.

"I don't want any friends," he said and walked on up the hill.

Emma followed and tried to talk to him but he ignored her.

When they were outside of the park, Jake started to walk faster and Emma couldn't keep up unless she ran. She wasn't about to run after a boy so she ended up trailing behind him all the way to the school.

They reached Briardale before the lunch period was over. Jake ran through the basketball courts and into the playground.

Will was playing basketball, as usual, and he saw Emma approach.

"Was that your boyfriend?" he said.

"That was Jake," Emma said. "I finally caught him."

"Doesn't look like you did. It looked like he was running away."

Before Emma could respond, Miss Robins came storming toward them. "Emma Wilkins!" she said.

The teacher looked furious. She stopped in front of her and crossed her arms, towering over the girl. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

Emma opened her mouth to speak but Miss Robins didn't let her answer.

“What do you think you're doing disappearing like that? You've been gone since before lunch! I was worried sick and I thought I had lost a student. Come with me right now,” she said. “You're in serious trouble.”

Back in the classroom, Miss Robins gave Emma a long speech with lots of yelling, and she marked strike number two beside her name on the Strike Board. She also wrote a note for Emma to take to her father regarding her bad behaviour.

“Now go to your seat and just wait there quietly for the rest of lunch,” she said in the end.

### 3 Wizard Falls

On Thursday nights, Emma's father taught a night class from seven to ten. Normally, he would come home at four in the afternoon and wait until after dinner before returning to the school but today he had called the house shortly after Emma and Will had arrived. He'd said that he had a lot of work to do and that he would be staying at the university until the late class was over.

Will had filled a plate with yesterday's ham and asparagus and he'd taken it to his room.

Emma hadn't felt much like eating or doing anything at all.

It had started to rain just after they'd arrived at their house. It was now six o'clock and the rain hadn't relented. The clouds only looked angrier as darkness and night approached.

Emma was sitting on her window sill watching the falling raindrops as they splashed into potholes. Now and then, there was lightning, and it illuminated the street and cast flitting shadows across the faces of the houses across the road.

Emma was holding the note from Miss Robins in her hand as she watched the rain. During the best times, the rain made her sad. All that had happened that day only made things worse. She wanted to talk to her father because he was always comforting when one of Emma's moods snuck up on her but she didn't want to give him the note from Miss Robins or tell him about her two strikes.

Emma checked the clock on the wall and made a decision. She went to the closet beside the front door and put on a yellow raincoat and a pair of red boots. There was a flashlight hanging on the wall and she grabbed it and put it into one of the coat's oversized pockets.

She opened the front door and went out on the street in the rain. For a moment, she stood there and looked up to the sky and felt the cool raindrops as they fell on her face. She decided that being in the rain was nowhere near as bad as sitting inside watching it.

There were many puddles and potholes on Belle Street and Emma jumped into most of them as she made her way down the street and onto Lockhart Road.

To get to the University of Saint Martin, Emma could walk down Lockhart to Glendale Avenue and then turn right, straight up The Hill, but the journey would be shorter if she cut through the forest. She wasn't allowed in the woods after dark but she figured that having the flashlight with her meant that it wouldn't be all that dark in there. Not really.

When she reached the edge of the forest, she took the flashlight out of her pocket, pushed the switch, and peered into the darkness of the trees. She stood for a moment and listened to the whisper of the wind among the leaves and the dripping of the rain.

When she was satisfied that it was perfectly safe, Emma went in under the trees. The wet leaves underneath her feet made squishing noises as she walked.

Emma found that she wasn't getting nearly as wet in there as she had been on the road. A clear indication that taking the shortcut through the forest had been a good idea.

Some moments later, her flashlight started to fail.

The flashlight blinked off and on twice before its light became dim. Without knowing why they did it, Emma tapped the back end of it with her palm like she had seen grown-ups do. It didn't work. She didn't want to be stuck in the forest if the light went out, so she tried to judge if it would be faster to go on or to turn around and go back.

Before Emma could make up her mind, there was movement ahead that gave her pause. It had only been a shadowy blur among the trees but it had startled her.

"Deer?" she said and shone her light toward where the motion had been, but she saw nothing. She took another step forward and the shadow moved again. It didn't look like a deer.

"Mr Milligan?" she said and backed away. There was no response. She kept her eye on the shadow

and continued to back away slowly, now and then turning her head to look behind.

Lightning flashed and she saw a man with horns.

Emma turned and ran as thunder struck.

She was afraid to look back in case the horned man was chasing her. She ran into a branch and its leaves slapped at her face. There was a rotten tree trunk in her way that she saw at the last moment. She managed to jump over it, though she almost slipped and fell when she landed on the other side of it.

Emma's mad dash soon brought her out of the forest. She saw the light of a street lamp as she slipped on wet leaves and tumbled forward. Her momentum carried her out onto the road where she landed hard on hands and knees. The flashlight broke into three pieces and the batteries flew away.

"Okay," Emma said, "that was dumb. It probably was a stupid deer."

She crawled to the side of the road and sat down. Her jeans were torn. Her hands and knees were bleeding. On top of how she was already feeling, she now felt silly. The bright side of it was, she thought, that if she showed up to see her father looking like that then he might take it easy on her.

She stood up and turned down the road toward The Hill. The wind and the rain beat at her face and pulled at her coat. She walked along the forest for a couple of minutes until it gave way to houses. Emma thought it was interesting that the people who lived in those houses had Glenridge Forest right in their backyard.

She arrived at Glendale Avenue and, to her right, there rose The Hill, the steep incline over which the road had been built.

The way up The Hill was a walk of fifteen minutes, but in the bad weather it took Emma twenty-five. There weren't many cars on the road but some still passed her in both directions. Next to each sidewalk, on either side of the road, there were railings that separated them from the clumps of trees that grew beyond.

At the top of The Hill, the ground levelled off, and the property that belonged to the University of Saint Martin began. The buildings that made up the school stood on the right side of the street. Across, to the left, there was a residence building for students, as well as a plaza full of fast food restaurants.

Emma turned into the school grounds and entered the mathematics building. She left a trail of water as she made her way to the second floor and into the physics department. When she reached the office of Dr William Wilkins, she found that his door was closed. She tried to open it but it was locked. She knocked and there was no answer.

Around the corner there was a clock on the wall and it showed that the time was close to seven.

"Class time," Emma said. She leaned back against the wall and slid down to the floor, sitting in her own puddle.

Two hours later, Emma woke up when she felt someone pick her up off the floor. She opened her eyes, blinked at her father, and then she put her arms around him. He carried her into his office where he sat down on his chair and held her there for a long while.

"Dad," Emma said eventually.

"Yes, dear?" he said.

"I caught the wizard boy."

"Oh? And what happened?"

"He didn't want to be my friend," she said.

"I'm sorry, Emma."

"No, it's okay," she said. "I know why. I realized something."

"What's that?"

"The boy's name is Jake Milligan," she said. "Same last name as Andrew Milligan."

Her father nodded. "I see," he said.

When they were ready to leave, he locked his office and they walked out of the school together.

The rain had stopped and, as they walked down The Hill, Emma told him all about the day's events, including how she had left class early and how she had waited for Jake outside the school. She told him



about how she had tried to get to the university by taking the shortcut through the forest and the fright that she had received, along with some scrapes and bruises.

When she showed him the teacher's note, he shook his head.

"I guess you already paid enough for it," he said. "But we'll still have to have a chat on another day."

They were almost home when he asked her what she planned to do about the boy. "Are you going to leave him alone?" he said. "What did you call that place where he goes?"

"Wizard Falls," Emma said. "Because he's a wizard and there are waterfalls there. I think I know how I'm going to become his friend, Dad."

"Oh? How's that?"

"I'm going to buy his friendship."

The following day, Emma stayed home from school.

She woke up after Will and her father had already left. The bandages that had been on her knees during the night had fallen off and her sheets had little stains of blood on them.

She showered and put on new bandages before she got dressed and went into the kitchen to make herself toast with peanut butter. There was a note on the table and it had one word on it.

"Rest!" said the note. Emma took it and put it in her pocket.

After her small breakfast, she went back to her room and pulled out an old yellow lunchbox from under her bed. The paint was chipped and the metal was rusty in places. It had belonged to her father. Inside, among other odds and ends, there was a small fortune in bills and coins. She took some of the money and put it in her empty pocket.

Emma left the house and she was greeted by birds that were singing their morning songs. It was a cheery, sunny day.

She walked to the end of the street and then to the bus stop on the other side of Glendale Avenue. There was a girl standing inside the bus shelter. She looked older than Emma and she was wearing pink headphones on her head.

Emma went inside the shelter and sat down on the bench. The older girl watched her from the moment she arrived until she sat down. Emma waved.

The girl lowered the headphones to her neck. "Hey, don't I know you?"

"I don't think so."

"Are you sure? My name is Lucy. What's yours?"

"Emma," Emma said.

"Emma," the girl said. "You really do seem familiar, Emma. Emma what?"

"Emma who," said Emma.

"What?"

"Never mind. My name is Emma Wilkins."

"You're Professor Wilkins's daughter. That's where I've seen you. Must've been at his office."

"Yeah, that's my dad."

"I'm in his physics class," Lucy said. "Nice to meet you, Emma."

Emma stood up and walked over to the girl. "Nice to meet you, Lucy," she said and stuck her hand out toward her. Lucy shook it and Emma winced. When she took her hand back, the older girl noticed her scrapes.

"What happened to your hand?" she said.

"I was attacked by a deer."

Emma's bus arrived and she got on it. Lucy followed and they sat down together. They continued to talk and Emma found out that Lucy was seventeen years old and that she was in her first year studying biology. It turned out that she was also going to the mall.

"Hey, aren't you supposed to be in school?"

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