



FRIENDS IN TIME

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**For my friend Maureen Hayes
in memory**

ONE



Emma paced the living room, her eye on the phone. If they were going to catch the movie, Kim was sure cutting it close. She passed the mirror on the far wall, caught the flash of her red down jacket—and the scowl on her face. “Hey!” She backed, eyeing herself severely. “Lighten up. You look like a snapping turtle.” She tried for a smile, without much success.

Emma had a bad feeling about that afternoon, and her stomach ached from the stress of it. Kim wasn’t coming, even though they’d made their special, last-Saturday plans in class only the day before, at the final bell. Just after, as Emma rode her bike through the school gates, she’d seen Kim talking with Jessie Fisher by the bus lines. Could have been about anything—but it wasn’t, Emma knew.

Please let me be wrong, she prayed, glancing at the clock. Ten to three: Kim was never late. A minute more and Emma would call, even though she’d vowed to hold out.

The phone rang. Kim, at last! “For heavens’ sakes!” Emma yelled. “We’ll miss the movie!”

“I know,” Kim said. “Emma—I’m not coming.”

“Not coming? You *promised*.”

“Yes, well, it’s just that—”

Emma cut her off. “That what?” Silence.

“It’s Jessie Fisher, isn’t it? You’re going with her.”

“Sorry, Emma.”

Sorry? “Oh, you’ll be sorry all right.”

“Just what do you mean?” Kim’s voice went unusually low.

“Whatever you want.” Emma knew she was losing it, but too bad. “Look, if you don’t come for me right now, I’ll-I’ll . . . “

“You’ll what?”

Emma bit her lip. “I won’t be your friend.”

A small silence. “Okay,” Kim said, and hung up.

Emma stared into the receiver, feeling hollow.

Her mother stood in the doorway. “What’s up, hon? Kim not coming?”

“Oh, Em.” Nancy Gibson advanced into the room. “What happened?”

Emma shrugged, not trusting herself to speak. She dumped me, that’s what, she thought. Because we’re leaving.

“You’ve had a fight?” Her mother caught Emma in a hug and squeezed. “Oh, Em. And she’s your best friend.”

My *only* friend, Emma added silently. “She’s gone with Jessie Fisher. Couldn’t wait until I left.”

“Oh boy,” her mother said, patting Emma’s back.

“It happens. Though I’m surprised at Kim, unless—” Nancy Gibson held Emma at arm’s length, scanning her face. “Emma, hon, you haven’t—”

“Haven’t what?” Emma stiffened, bracing for a lecture.

Her mother sighed. “Now don’t take this wrong, Em, but lately I’ve noticed you getting just a bit . . . grabby with her.”

Emma pulled away and stood off. “*Grabby!*”

“I know she’s the first real friend you’ve had—which is not your fault, with all the moves we’ve made, Em. If I were you, I’d be just as upset at the idea of losing her. And I might get possessive, too.”

Possessive now. Emma was hurt. “You always say I’m too standoffish.”

Her mother nodded. “The two can go together. Remember how shy you were in the beginning? How Kim called the shots? Now you’re leaving, you’re crowding her, and she feels smothered. Hon, loosen up,” Nancy Gibson went on. “Moving away is rough, but it’s not the end of the world. You and Kim can stay pals. You can write each other, and Kim can visit us in Texas.”

“She won’t want to.”

“Oh, yes she will, given the chance. Look, don’t take all this too much to heart. Let matters cool today. Tomorrow, call and patch things up—but don’t push, okay?”

Emma stared at her mother. Whose side was she on? “I’m going to start packing,” she said stiffly, and went upstairs.

But in her room, she ignored the waiting cartons and huddled on her bed, pulling her old striped afghan up around herself. Beside the bed was a framed snapshot of her and Kim riding their bikes along Main. Reaching over, Emma laid the picture face-down, then, sighing, she sat up again, gazing around.

Emma’s mother always said her room was too “cluttered.” But Emma didn’t agree. To Emma’s mind, clutter meant junk. And if her room was rather full, it was with treasures, precious souvenirs of all the places they’d lived.

On the dresser by the window was the crinolined lady from Richmond, Virginia (a trinket, pot., really). Beside it was a large pink butterfly hair clip, souvenir of the ponytail she’d had cut off in

Bakersfield, California, last year. Nearby a miniature china owl from Birmingham, Michigan, sat reading *Through the Looking Glass*. Beside that lay a purple brush and mirror still intact from her third-grade stint in Chagrin Falls, Ohio—a three-year survival feat.

She glanced to the daffodil-yellow writing set on her desk, complete with matching blotter: a New York birthday gift from Kim.

Emma turned away to her crowded shelves: to frayed picture books long outgrown but which she'd never throw out, nature books and almanacs; and classics from Mom and Dad. In among all these were dog-eared paperbacks, adventures and fantasies that Emma purchased herself to read in bed.

The room looked so cozy and secure, but it was about to change.

Emma shrank into her afghan. Four days from now the whole shebang would be taken down and shipped off like a traveling sideshow. Or the circus she'd been to once, a magical night of marvels under the big top. The whole vast affair had seemed so settled that Emma was sure it was there to stay. But the next morning, when she went to see, the great tent was gone, leaving an empty, trampled field.

Oh, why, Emma lamented, why did Dad move around so much? "Can't you make him stay put?" she'd pleaded with Mom last month, after Dad announced his work was nearly over, and that they were moving on to Dallas.

"Sorry, Em," her mother had replied. "We can't help it if your dad's a planner. Moving goes with the job."

"It doesn't have to. He could stop planning towns and malls and be a regular architect right here."

Mom shook her head. "Middletown is too small. There's no work."

"But I don't want to go. You don't like moving, either." Mom always grumbled over unpacking and settling in. And she left friends behind, too.

"It's a lot of trouble, and I admit I grouch. However, it goes with the territory. I accepted that when I married your father, hon."

Good for you, Emma thought, resentfully. Mom had made her choice. But what about Emma? Didn't they know how tough it was, starting over each time? New school, new teachers, new work—or the same boring stuff. And the kids! Emma glanced to the down turned snapshot. Making friends was hard for her. "Be more outgoing," Mom and Dad had vided. "Lighten up, don't expect miracles overnight." But did they realize? Overnight was all the time she ever had. They'd never understand, she thought glumly. How could they? They weren't shy; being new wouldn't seem like much to them. They'd never walked into a cafeteria at lunchtime and sat down, all alone at one end of the table, with kids crowding the other shouting *No room! No room!*

with their eyes. Mom and Dad had never gone on eating, anyway, feeling like a pimple on a wart. Last year, in Bakersfield, Emma had felt so conspicuous that she'd ducked the cafeteria altogether. Instead, she'd hidden in the school yard, eating before the other kids swarmed out to play.

Here, though, it had been different. Kim had taken to her right off, and they had quickly become friends. Ever since, life had been great—until Dad dropped the Texas bombshell.

Paul looked in. "Hi, kiddo."

Emma scowled at her eighth-grade brother's cheery face. "I thought you had a soccer match"

"I did. We won, in case you want to know."

That was no news. The school team was county champion. And, normally, Emma would cheer his victory. But today, Paul's evident good spirits were salt in her wounds. "Rah, rah," she said bitterly.

"Hey—" Paul stepped inside, eyeing her face.

"What's up?"

"Nothing." Emma turned away. *I just lost Kim*, she told him silently. *And all because we're leaving, of course.*

Paul sat beside her, quite concerned now. "Hang on, Em. Only four more days to go."

"You don't get it, do you?" Emma burst out. "But you wouldn't—Mr. Popular."

"Hey." Paul sounded hurt. "Some kids don't like me."

"Such as who?"

"The guys who get bumped off teams for me. They pick fights sometimes."

"You poor thing."

Paul stood up. "Boy, you sure are feeling bad," he said slowly.

Emma watched her brother out in tight-lipped silence, but the moment her door closed, she was sorry. How could she act so mean with Paul! Was it his fault that he was so good at games, that he'd never known a lonely day in his life? Feeling guiltier by the minute, Emma resolved to make amends. Help him load the dishwasher, maybe. It was his turn to clear the dinner plates.

She surveyed her room, unwilling to start taking it apart. Then, with sudden purpose, she threw off her afghan, strode to her shelves, and began yanking books, stacking them methodically into the nearest carton.

Method didn't last long.

Growing more and more angry, Emma seized up bigger and bigger armloads until one pile buckled halfway to the box. Books fell all over. As she bent to gather them up again, a dusty, unfamiliar cover caught her eye.

Emma retrieved the book, blew off the dust, then buffed the covers with her sleeve. The thin volume was bound in fake leather, shiny mud brown, and its title was stamped in gold leaf. Frowning, she read the lettering. *Middletown, New York: 1689 to the Present Day*. Ah! Now she remembered. It was a local publication, put out by the Middletown Historical Society—the people who had hired Dad. The family had moved here so he could salvage Middle County's old, abandoned buildings and assemble them onto one site called Colonial Village. Set at the edge of town, it was a mini-Williamsburg; meant to preserve local history and bring in tourist dollars. Dad said the job made a nice break from planning new towns and shopping centers.

Jack Gibson had given Emma the book when they arrived. Still smarting from their latest move, she had spurned the peace offering, slipping it behind a shelf to lie, unread, while her father worked on, assembling the county's ruined houses on their new location.

Now, a year later, his job was done, except for the old, abandoned Bentley mansion next door. But on Monday, it, too, would be trucked across town to its new home. And the Gibsons would move on to Texas, where her dad was to help build a brand-new development in a booming Dallas suburb.

Emma flipped through pages of text and fuzzy prints. She paused at a picture of a farmhouse surrounded by pasture—downtown Main Street now. She was just about to close the book when some painted portraits caught her eye. *Gallery of Bentleys from the Nineteenth Century*, the caption said. A dozen faces stared up from the page: somber men, mutton chops and walrus mustaches turtling out from high, wing collars; ladies in bonnets and lacy caps and shawls. And an posed woodenly against formal drapes and large-leaved plants in pots, never a casual,

everyday background. Emma stared back, trying to picture them for real: smiling, frowning, talking, yelling and telling silly jokes. She pictured her own family album filled with snapshots taken at the beach, on the porch, in the yard; on bikes, throwing balls and having a tumble of fun all around. Kids looking at *those* in a hundred years' time will know we were real, she thought.

On the opposite page, there were rows of Bentley kids in the same fake set-ups, looking just as stiff and vacant as their elders. Maybe it's the painters, she thought, scanning the rows of faces. Or maybe that was how you were supposed to look in those days. Wouldn't get me to sit for hours like that, Emma told herself. A picture in the third row snagged her attention. A girl, about her own age: oval face, large eyes, dark ringlets caught back in a headband. Emma ran her hand absently through her own short bangs and curls. They must have paid the painter well, she thought. No one could be that good-looking. Abigail Porterhouse Bentley (q.v.), the legend read. The *q.v.* told Emma to check the index at the back of the book if she wanted to know more about the girl. She found the index, found *B* for *Bentley*, and started to look for Abigail's name. All at once, the quarrel with Kim, her mother's lecture, her outburst at Paul, not to mention the sight of her room like this, was too much. Emma snapped the book shut and scrambled to her feet. She felt stifled. If she didn't get out that minute, she'd choke. She grabbed her jacket and ran downstairs. Mom was in the kitchen, wrapping china.

"Need a break," Emma called hurriedly.

"Okay, hon," Mom called back. "Don't go far. Dinner's early tonight. I'll ring my bell if you're not back." Mom's beloved brass handbell, a Mother's Day gift from Emma and Paul so she could call them in for meals without screaming.

Emma made for her bike, thinking to pedal off her turmoil. Then, remembering her mother's warning about early dinner, she turned and strode toward the estate next door—or what was left of it.

Once through the tilting gateposts, Emma jammed her hands into her jeans pockets and gazed around, her breath steaming in the chill spring air. The place was deserted. Dad was across town with the work crews, checking the mansion's new foundations. She advanced gingerly over churned-up mud tracks to the cluster of flatbed trucks in the middle. Emma wandered around the semis, gazing up at their plastic-shrouded cargo: sections of house, whole rooms slit open to the sky like a giant doll house.

Abigail Porterhouse Bentley had lived in that mansion. She had walked the floors, climbed those fancy stairs. In her shiny ringlets and long fancy dresses, Abigail had sat in that very parlor, which at this moment reared above Emma on the nearest rig. What would it have been like?

Grasping the edge of the rig, Emma pulled herself on tiptoe, peering through the plastic. The parlor within looked dark and shabby, like the worn carpets and faded drapes that the workcrews had packed away in crates. Of course, in Abigail's time those furnishings would have been rich and new, and the shabby woodwork, waxed and shiny. Lucky Abigail, Emma thought wistfully. Living in those days might not have been much fun, but at least she'd grown up in the one place, instead of moving every year, making do in rental houses or apartments. Abigail had *belonged*, with lifelong friends and childhood memories solid as that huge old house on its foundations. She had grown up among the family heirlooms, never having to part with good stuff just because it wouldn't fit the final carton.

Emma sighed.

That house was wrenched-up now, though; torn apart by twentieth-century machines. Only the main chimney stack remained in place, rising out of the earth: a tall, stark, pillar stripped of tile,

its stones neatly numbered. When the rigs were gone, the stack would be dismantled, then rebuilt stone by stone onto the house after it was reassembled on its new foundation. Emma gazed around, at the loaded rigs, and the chimney rearing from the mud. It all looked so sad. Desolate, like a folded circus.

Still. Abigail never knew.

Emma glanced at her wristwatch. By now, she and Kim would have been coming out of the movie and heading for a milk shake. Instead Kim was in the mall with her old crowd, Emma Gibson quite forgotten.

Emma sighed. This time next week she'd be helping her mother check out a new neighborhood, the stores and post office—not for *her*, though. She wouldn't be getting any mail. Two days after that she'd head through into a new classroom, watched by curious eyes. *And alone, without Kim at her side.* Emma turned her face skyward. "If I could have just one real friend," she called to no one in particular.

All at once, Emma shivered. The air had certainly gone colder. Turning up her collar, she made to leave, but as she stepped away, a large black bird started up from the chimney top, making her jump Emma watched it fly off, her heart thudding. A blackbird? No. Too big. More likely a crow. Something had disturbed it. Not her, surely. For weeks the crews had been tearing up the place with big loud machines. Emma eyed the chimney thoughtfully. Could there be a nest inside? If so, Dad had better warn the crews to leave it be.

Emma strode to the chimney base, and braced her head against the stone. Leaning in, she looked upward, the reek of ancient soot catching her nose.

Way above, a patch of gray sky showed; nothing blocked the view.

Reassured, she was about to move away, when a tremor passed through the chimney stones, under her palm. As she started back, light flashed. Startled, Emma squeezed up her eyes, then reopened them.

She caught her breath. Instead of stone, a shiny, green-tiled hearth, and in the hearth—a fire. Before she could blink, it was gone, and there she stood once more under the cold spring sky.

Another flash.

The hearth reappeared, and this time the parlor all around it, bright and fully furnished—the very parlor that was up on the rig behind Emma; a dark and shabby shell, faded relic of this former glory.

For an instant, the parlor was all around her, and firelight struck warm on her face. Then it vanished and Emma stood once more under gray sky. She clutched her head and shut her eyes. When she looked again, she was back in that firelit parlor—but not alone this time. By the hearth was a girl about Emma's own age and size. Her hair, a mass of dark ringlets, was caught back in a headband. Her blue satin dress was long, with puff sleeves, and shiny black pumps poked out from under her skirts. Oblivious of Emma, she was standing in front of the fire, holding something to the flames.

"Good grief!" Emma exclaimed, recognizing who she was.

The girl leapt back, the object falling from her hands. As it hit the tiles, the fire, the parlor vanished.

But the girl remained, staring with horror into Emma's face.