

LEVELED BOOK • W

Adventure in Bear Valley



Written by Marlene Perez
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"Going to California sure sounded like a grand idea when Ma and Pa were alive," Emily said in a low voice, the hush of the dark woods sending shivers down her spine.

Emily's brother Jess glanced warily at her as he picked up branches of firewood. "When Ma and Pa died, we didn't have any choice but to continue heading west."

Like many pioneers, their parents had died on the **perilous** trail to California, and the Hutchinsons, a young pioneering couple, had taken them in. The four of them had traveled for days through the grandest, greenest mountains they had ever seen. They finally set up camp somewhere on the western slopes in California just as the sun's rays faded from the horizon of the late September sky.

“The Hutchinsons seem plenty nice enough,” Emily said, reflecting on friendly Mrs. Hutchinson, a **timid** woman who spent most of her time in the wagon.

“We’re not their family,” Jess said shortly. “Don’t **tie to** them just yet.”

Their wagon train had left the plains of Missouri in April on the promise of hitting pay dirt in Sierra Nevada gold country by October. A couple weeks ago their wagon and a few others had split from the main group on a route that would lead them to **kin** who had already settled in California.

Being **between hay and grass**, Jess had signed on to be Mr. Hutchinson’s **apprentice** after Ma and Pa passed. Mr. Hutchison, a rather **bully** blacksmith, planned to sell tools he made to miners. And where Jess went, Emily dutifully followed, helping Mrs. Hutchinson cook and do chores.

As they gathered more firewood, Emily heard twigs snap. A low growl came from a clump of trees to the left.



"Did you hear that?" Emily whispered urgently to Jess. "Let's head back. I don't like it out here," pleaded Emily as the shadows grew long and the forest turned dark as midnight.

"Afraid of some ol' boogeyman?" Jess teased gently. "Well, I think we've got plenty of firewood anyway. Let's get outta here."

Walking back to camp, Emily couldn't help glancing over her shoulder every few steps.

"Just in time," Mr. Hutchinson said with a smile as they returned to camp. "I think the fire was about to **peter out**."

Jess scowled. It was just a harmless remark, but lately Jess was like a bear with a sore head around Mr. Hutchinson.

"Emily," Mrs. Hutchinson's voice interrupted her thoughts, "would you help me bake some biscuits?"





"I'd be glad to," Emily said. She walked over to the covered wagon—it stored everything they owned beneath its rounded canvas cover. Emily fetched the heavy iron skillet Mrs. Hutchinson used to make their meals.

"Campfire biscuits again?" Jess said. "I'd give anything for a heapin' plate of Ma's biscuits."

Emily knew what he meant was that he'd give anything to have Ma back again.

Emily looked at Mr. and Mrs. Hutchinson. They'd both winced when Jess mentioned the biscuits. She hoped they didn't think Jess was criticizing Mrs. Hutchinson's cooking.

"Emily, when we get to Bear Valley," Mrs. Hutchinson said, "could you show me how to make your Ma's recipe for biscuits? I'm sure mine don't hold a candle to hers."

Before Emily could answer, Mr. Hutchinson said, "I have good news for you, dear. We just entered Bear Valley. We should be at your brother's homestead in a couple of days."





"Why do they call it Bear Valley?" Emily asked.

Mrs. Hutchinson gave her husband a look that said don't answer that, but he ignored it. "The children need to know the dangers in this wilderness, Elizabeth," he said to his wife.

He explained: "There are bears in these woods, big black bears, bigger grizzly bears, and even mountain lions. You need to be careful, and don't wander into the woods alone."

That night, Emily fell asleep quickly, **dragged out** by traveling and chores. She tossed and turned throughout the night as she dreamed of strange forest creatures.

The next morning, Emily awoke early to find a light frost had blanketed the ground. “I’ll make flapjacks,” she said to herself, wanting to surprise Jess and the Hutchinsons.

Emily rebraided her hair as the sun peeked over the mountains, burning off the frost. Emily was dying to change into a clean, pressed dress like her mother laid out for her on Sundays, but she’d have to wait until they reached the homestead.

The campfire sputtered, the flames all but dead. Emily leaned over, intending to shake her brother awake to collect wood. But Jess looked so peaceful she couldn’t bring herself to wake him. She wrapped up in a blanket and headed into the woods.



The morning was strangely silent, and a brisk westerly wind blew through the giant spruce trees. The sun had yet to penetrate the canopy of the evergreens. Emily shivered. She gathered wood, moving quickly. With her arms loaded with damp, dead wood, she turned back to camp. Again, she heard a low growl and her spine stiffened. The sound came closer.

Emily was too terrified to move. Her stomach tightened. She'd never see Jess again.



Just then Jess leaped from behind a giant spruce tree wearing a big grin.

Emily started: “I should feed you bark and dirt for that **bosh**, Jess Edward!”

Jess tried unsuccessfully to stifle his laughter.

“I was going to make you Ma’s recipe for flapjacks,” Emily taunted. “Now I’ve got second thoughts.”

Jess smiled, unapologetic. “Hold your horses. I was just joking. You know I love Ma’s flapjacks.”

Jess took some of the wood from Emily as she pinched his arm. Teasing like this made Jess’s troubled face look almost happy.

When they returned, Mr. Hutchinson smiled and Emily smiled back. Jess flinched. Mr. Hutchinson was feeding the oxen. It was Jess’s job to feed the animals in the morning, and he thought Mr. Hutchinson might have a **blowup**. But Mr. Hutchinson held his tongue if he was angry.

“I’m making flapjacks,” Emily explained.

Mr. Hutchinson grinned. “Elizabeth loves flapjacks,” he said. “And so do I.”

While Emily mixed batter for the flapjacks, Mr. Hutchinson went to wake his wife, but returned wearing a long frown, worry lines creasing his deeply tanned face.

"Elizabeth's got a fever. We'll have to stay here until she's feeling better," he said. "That means we should find more food and water. Our **provisions** won't last too much longer."

"I saw a stream back there," Jess offered. "We can refill our water **canteens** and maybe catch a few fish."

"I don't like to leave Elizabeth when she's feeling so poorly," Mr. Hutchinson said.



"I'll stay here and care for her," Emily volunteered, hoping to give Jess and Mr. Hutchinson much-needed time together.

Mr. Hutchinson reluctantly agreed and gathered the canteens while Jess got the fishing gear.

Emily checked on Mrs. Hutchinson, who was awake and lying under a pile of blankets on a wooden **pallet** in the wagon.

"How are you feeling, Mrs. Hutchinson?" Emily inquired.

Mrs. Hutchinson gave her a weak smile. "Please, call me Elizabeth," she said. "You and Jess are family now."



Emily cautiously smiled back at her, uncertain of what to say.

"Would you like a cup of tea? Or maybe some flapjacks?" Emily said. "I covered them with a towel and kept them by the fire. They should still be warm."

Elizabeth nodded gratefully.

Emily hurried down from the wagon to make tea and get the flapjacks. As she approached the fire, she stopped dead in her tracks. There in the campsite stood a rather small bear gulping down Elizabeth's flapjacks. Emily's mind raced, but she was frozen to the spot. She stared at the bear for a few **agonizingly** slow seconds, trying to remember everything her Pa had taught her about wild animals.

Emily realized the animal must have been attracted to the camp by the smell of food. She tried to remember everything she'd ever been told about bears, but her mind went blank.

The young grizzly hadn't noticed her yet, but Emily knew a cub in camp meant the mother was most likely lurking nearby. She needed to get the cub out of there and fast—but how?





Emily backed away slowly. She needed to get back to the wagon before Elizabeth came out to see what was taking so long. Everything inside her wanted to run, but somehow she knew that was the worst thing to do. The bear would probably think of her as fresh food if she ran. She slowly backed away. She froze when the bear cub suddenly lifted its head and sniffed the air, exposing its sharp, sharp teeth.

Emily didn't move, and the cub went back to foraging for food. Emily had an idea, but she had to get back to the wagon. She forced herself to gingerly walk the last few steps to the wagon and climbed in, breathing hard.

"Emily, what's wrong?" Elizabeth said. "Your face is as white as a sheet."

"There's a bear cub outside," Emily said, "and its mom is probably close by."

"What should we do?" Elizabeth said.

"I have an idea," Emily said, as she peeked out of the wagon. What she saw outside made her sick with fear. A second bear had joined the cub, and this one was huge, with frighteningly large claws and teeth.



“Oh, no,” she breathed, but Elizabeth heard her.

“What is it?” she asked anxiously.

“The mama bear is here,” Emily said. “Now I don’t know if my idea will work.”

She knew Mr. Hutchinson and Jess wouldn’t be back at camp for hours, and they had the rifle. Emily had promised Mr. Hutchinson that she would take care of Elizabeth.

Elizabeth got up from her pallet, pale and shaky, but determined. “I’ll help. Tell me what you want me to do.”

Emily said, “We’ll need the pots and pans. Help me take them down.”

They lifted the pots and pans down from where they hung on hooks along the wagon’s frame.

“I’m scared,” Emily admitted.

Elizabeth said, “Me, too. But we can do this together.”

They smiled warily at each other. When Elizabeth reached over and gave her a quick hug, Emily felt a warm glow.

"Now what?" Elizabeth said.

"Now we bang the pots and pans as loudly as we can," Emily said. "My Pa told me once that bears don't like loud noises. On the count of three; one, two, three!"

They beat the pots and pans loudly and yelled until they were **hoarse**. Finally, they stopped, exhausted.



Emily and Elizabeth peeked out of the wagon at the quiet campsite.

"I don't see anything, do you?" Elizabeth asked.

Emily answered, "No, I think they're gone."

The two of them remained in the wagon for a long time after that just to be sure, but there was no sign of the bears.

Finally, Emily said, "Would you like a cup of tea now?"

"Yes, please, but I think I'll skip the flapjacks," Elizabeth said.

They looked at each other and collapsed into gales of laughter, relieved that the danger had passed. They left the protection of the wagon, confident that they had chased the bears away.

"Wait!" Emily said. She ran to the wagon and came back carrying pots and pans.

"Just in case," she said, handing two pans to Elizabeth.

Suddenly, they heard a twig snap and a sound coming toward them.

They screamed as loudly as they could and banged on their pots and pans.



When Mr. Hutchinson and Jess walked into view, they were carrying fishing poles and a line of trout. They also had **perplexed** looks on their faces.

"Elizabeth, what in the world are you doing up?" Mr. Hutchinson asked. "What's going on?"

Jess asked, "Emily, are you all right?"

"We thought you were the bears," Emily explained.

"Oh that's rich, Em!" Jess said, not believing bears had come and he had missed it.

"No, it's true, we had a bit of a fuss with a mother and her cub," Mrs. Hutchinson replied.

"What mother and cub?" Mr. Hutchinson worriedly asked.

Elizabeth and Emily shared the rest of their dreadfully exciting adventure as Jess and Mr. Hutchinson admired their bravery.



Glossary

agonizingly	drawn out, painfully (p. 15)
apprentice	person learning a trade from a skilled worker (p. 4)
between hay and grass	slang for not a boy, but not quite a man, half grown (p. 4)
blowup	slang for fit of anger (p. 12)
bosh	slang for nonsense (p. 12)
bully	exceptionally good, outstanding (p. 4)
canteens	small containers to carry liquids (p. 13)
dragged out	slang for worn out or tired (p. 9)
flapjacks	slang for pancakes (p. 10)
hoarse	having a rough voice (p. 20)
hold a candle	inferior compared to another (p. 8)
homestead	house and the land around it (p. 8)
kin	a person's relatives (p. 4)
pallet	a temporary bed typically made of straw, placed on the floor (p. 14)
perilous	dangerous (p. 3)
peter out	to die out (p. 6)
perplexed	confused (p. 22)
provisions	supplies (p. 13)
tie to	slang for rely on (p. 4)
timid	lacking courage or self-confidence (p. 4)

Adventure in Bear Valley
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