

THE WELL

BY EMILY CAMERON

CHAPTER 1

Mathew peered inside the well. With his elbows propped on the crumbling brick edge and his chin resting comfortably on his balled fists, he frowned at the empty, cold blackness. Mathew shivered and yanked his head away from the huge, gaping hole. He didn't like that dark, eerie feeling that swept over him every time he stared inside that old well. It made his whole body feel cold and numb as if he were frozen inside a freezing cold ice cube. Mathew took a deep breath and glanced into the well again. He couldn't see the bottom of the well, just blank blackness. Mathew kicked aside the dust and dirt on the ground, found a pebble, and tossed it into the well. He waited, counting slowly, until he heard a dull, faint *clank* of the pebble hitting the bottom. Mathew ran a dirty, sweaty finger over the edge of the well and down the rotten rope. He threw another stone down the well and heard a different noise, a splash. The stone had landed in a puddle of water. Mathew was surprised. There was still water left in the well? That was interesting. Mathew smiled. He loved this well.

He marveled at the well for hours. Touching it. Running his finger down the old rope. Wondering if he should go inside the well but deciding not to. He listened intently for any sounds inside it. He heard nothing. Mathew didn't know how long he stayed there. He didn't care. This well was so interesting. After what seemed like two minutes but was really two hours, he heard a sassy voice he knew only too well. His twin sister, Anna, was calling him. "Mathew Peterson!" she shouted. Mathew rolled his eyes and ignored her. Anna always acted like she was older than him, as if she were his mother. She could be so annoying sometimes. "Mathew!" she grumbled again, louder than before. "You'd better come here right now or you'll miss dinner!"

Dinner. That was when he realized how hungry he was. He was starving. Famished! He whirled around and began to sprint over to Anna. Mathew glanced at her, expecting her to say, "You're ridiculous. Staring at a *well*." But she didn't say anything. Worry lingered in her eyes, a dull, sad twinkle in the middle of her pupil. She looked scared, and even terrified. She glanced behind her shoulder at the well, as if expecting it to explode any second. She shoved Mathew in front of her and placed her gentle hands securely on his shoulders. "Hey," she muttered to him. "Mathew, I don't want you going near that well. It's dangerous."

Mathew batted his eyelids at Anna. "But it can't be," he protested indignantly. "And even if it was, it's not like I would go inside it or anything." But that was a complete lie, and an obvious one, too. Mathew would go down there, someday, somehow. But he needed somebody to help him lower him down. He would climb into the bucket and the other person would slowly turn the handle. He would descend into that pitch-black darkness, and when he reached the bottom of the well he would switch on his flashlight and have a good look around. After that he would shout to the person, climb into the bucket, and wait as he was slowly, gently pulled back up. Yes, that was what he would do. He could also lower the rope until it reached the bottom and climb down, but he wasn't very good at rope climbing and always found rope burns covering the palms of his hands, so he wasn't going to do that idea. He would go with the first idea. But who would help him? Certainly not Anna, she thought the harmless well was dangerous. Perhaps a friend from school. A smile formed on Mathew's lips.

Anna frowned at him. "Oh, whatever," she shrugged. "Go inside that well and get yourself killed. I don't care." Mathew grinned. He had won. "Hey," Anna said. A broad smile was spread across her lips. "Race you back home." Mathew nodded, silently agreeing. Anna laughed. "You are so going to lose. Ready? One. Two. Three. GO." She took off across the field, heading for the small, broken-down shack perched lazily on the horizon. Mathew laughed. And he raced after his twin sister. Two happy kids running towards their home. Carefree and full of joy. There was not a thing to worry about.

Or was there?

CHAPTER 2

The next day was the first day of fourth grade. Anna and Mathew walked nervously into their classroom. Two identical worried-looking freckled faces, with the same flaming red and orange hair, wearing the same clothes (a plain white T-shirt with a picture of a monkey on it, ripped blue jeans and plain white tennis shoes.), and with the same green backpack. You could hardly tell the difference except that Anna had longer hair. Mathew found a seat next to a tough, mean-looking boy. At math time, the teacher asked them to work together. When they were finished with their worksheet, Mathew gathered up his courage and asked, "Can you help me?"

The boy grunted loudly and jerked his head towards Mathew's worksheet. "No, not with the worksheet," explained Mathew. "With a well." The boy scowled at him. "Okay, when school ends today, do you want to come over to my house and help me? See, there's this well there, and I want to go in. I'll climb into the bucket and you turn that handle to lower me into the well." The boy snorted, shook his head, and glared at Mathew. "I'll give you some money," offered Mathew. He took a wad of dollar bills out of his pocket. "Ten?" he asked. The boy thought for a moment and nodded slowly. Mathew gave him a ten dollar bill. He smiled. At last. He could go inside the well.

That day after school, the two boys hurried over to the well. Anna called after them as they ran past but both boys ignored her. When they reached the well, Mathew carefully climbed inside the bucket. Two wriggling slugs were perched on the edge of the bucket. Brown ooze trickled down the sides. Mathew was so disgusted he nearly climbed back out of the bucket. But the boy raised an eyebrow at him and he miserably sat back down. There was an evil sort of look in the boy's dark, cold eyes. Mathew didn't trust him, but he allowed himself to be lowered into the well. He clutched his flashlight tightly in his hand and switched it on. He shone it all around. The walls were covered in mold, moss, slugs, ooze, and lots of other things that are so terribly disgusting I'd better not mention them. Mathew could feel his lunch churning around inside his stomach, but he forced it to stay where it was and not come out of his mouth.

The bucket hit the bottom of the well with a soft bump. Mathew climbed out and shone the flash light around. He observed the walls closely. He looked for hidden treasure under the mounds of muck. Just like he expected, there was no treasure. When he was walking around, his tennis shoes stepped on something hard. He bent down and scraped away some dried mud with his hands. He saw a dull sparkle. He reached forward and picked up a key. A key for a door. But what door? A door in this well? But where? He stood up and looked around. Suddenly, he noticed something. Something had changed in this room. Something had been there a moment ago but was now gone. Mathew stared at the beam of sunlight shining on the ground. Mathew carefully walked over to the beam of sunlight. Something had been there before. Suddenly, Mathew remembered. The bucket. The cracked blue bucket on the end of the rope.

It was gone.

CHAPTER 3

Panic filled Mathew. He heard a high, cold laugh in the distance. The boy's laugh. The boy had betrayed him. He had pulled the bucket back up so Mathew couldn't get out and left. Mathew was alone, stuck inside a dirty, old well with nobody to help him. He was completely, utterly alone. Mathew started to cry. Why had he even wanted to go inside the well in the first place? He was such a silly boy. He would never see his mother or father or twin sister again. Nobody would help him. He cried harder and louder. The key and the door hardly seemed to matter anymore. All he cared about was getting out of this well. He couldn't climb up the wall. It was too slick with ooze and slime. He would stay here forever until he died. His flesh would rot away and his bones would be found, scattered all over the floor. Mathew cried. He sobbed. He wailed. He howled. He cried all day until night fell and the well was darker than ever. Mathew sat down on the muddy, dirty ground. He curled up into a ball and fell asleep instantly.

The next morning he woke up early. The sun was just rising. Mathew could feel tears pushing against his eyelids. He was still stuck inside this horrible, stinky well. He had left his flashlight on by mistake and it had run out of batteries. It was very dark inside the well without a working flashlight. Mathew felt his way across the well and sat down. It was cooler here, but darker. Mathew fished around inside his right pocket for the key he had discovered yesterday. He found it, took it out, and stared at it intently. Then he began looking for a door. When the sun came out, he could see better. He suddenly noticed something. Mud had been splattered over one wall. He started scraping away the dry mud with his bare hands. He spent hours grabbing handfuls of dried mud and throwing the mud onto the ground. His fingernails cracked and broke, but he kept pulling mud off the walls. At last he was finished. He stepped back and stared at the wall. At first Mathew thought it was just a regular wall, but then he noticed something. A door. He tried the handle, but it was locked. Mathew fitted the key into the lock. The door clicked and swung open. Mathew gasped when he saw what was inside. A bookshelf filled with books, a table for working on, a mirror, and a wooden chest. It was plated with gold. Mathew's jaw dropped. Treasure was inside that chest. Diamonds. Gold. Silver. Mathew smiled. He had an idea.

CHAPTER 4

Mathew placed one cautious foot in front of him. Nothing happened. All was silent. All was still. Encouraged, Mathew began walking quickly. He rushed inside the room and hurried over to the chest. He was reaching out his hands when he heard a loud snap behind him. He whirled around and gasped. The door had closed by itself. “It must have been the wind,” Mathew muttered. But there wasn't a single breeze. Was the door locked? He stumbled over to the door, and, with crossed fingers, he grabbed the doorknob—except there was no doorknob. He placed his hands against the rough wood and pushed the door. It wouldn't budge. Mathew's eyes widened in panic. Now he was double-stuck. Stuck inside a room inside a well. He choked back a sob, blinked hard to stop the tears, and stepped back. Then with a yell, he threw his whole body against the door. It didn't move. Mathew, who had four large bruises near his chest, a splinter on the back of his hand, and a scraped forehead, shouted out in pain and jogged backward until he bumped into the back wall. He took a deep breath and took off running towards the door. He was gaining speed . . . getting faster and faster . . . BAM! He threw his shoulder against the door, yelled in pain, and fell onto the floor, clutching his right shoulder. A bruise the size of a golf ball had formed there.

Mathew started to cry. He'd never get out. He managed to stop the loud sobs but couldn't stop the flow of tears. They were like two little streams running down his flushed red cheeks. Why had he gone inside the room anyway? He had been so greedy. He had seen that silly chest and wanted to open it and steal all the gold. Greedy child. He was such a greedy child. And now he was locked inside this cold, damp room with nobody to help him. Oh, *why* hadn't he listened to Anna? He should have known she was right. The well *was* dangerous. Incredibly dangerous. Mathew leaned against the wall and slid down. His bottom sat on something hard. He quickly jumped up and screamed. A bone. He had sat on a human bone.

Suddenly, his hands started to squirm wildly. Twisting and turning. They were reaching out for that bone. Mathew gave a shriek and tried to yank his hands back but could not. They kept reaching out for the bone. They wanted to pick it up. Mathew fought and struggled. He tried to pull his hands away. But they kept reaching forward. Mathew's hands wanted that bone.

They reached closer and closer to the rotting old bone. Closer and closer . . . they were only three inches away . . . Mathew shouted . . . one inch . . . a centimeter . . . “ARRGG!” screamed Mathew as his fingers closed around the terrible bone. His wrists gave a happy flip. Suddenly, the hands stopped working themselves. He could control them. He quickly made them drop the bone but they reached forward and picked it up again. He sighed and looked at the bone. It had a hole through it. He pressed his eye against the hole and gasped. The whole room had changed. Cobwebs hung limply from the ceiling. Bones and skulls were scattered all over the floor. The chest had turned into a box made of rough wood and twigs. The books on the bookshelf had turned into old, leather-bound books with curling parchment yellow with age. Mathew removed the bone from his eye. Everything looked like it had been before. Mathew looked through the hole again. Now everything was old and creepy. Mathew gasped. The bone could allow him to see what things really looked like. Somebody had bewitched this room to make it look like somebody's dream. The person would see the chest, run over to it, and find himself locked inside the room. But he wouldn't care. He would open the chest and inside would be . . . what? What was inside the chest? Mathew dropped the bone, ran over to it, and opened it.

When he saw what was inside he screamed. There were no stacks of gold coins. No piles or glittering silver. No sign of treasure. There was nothing precious inside that chest.

But there was something amazing and absolutely terrifying.

Mathew rubbed his eyes and looked again. No. He wouldn't believe it. No. It wasn't true.

But, yes, it was true. Mathew opened his mouth to scream, but he could only utter a low, terrified squeak. He couldn't breathe. This was true. His eyes were not lying to him. Yes, it was perfectly, terribly true.

Lying in the box, with cobwebs stretched from one bone to the other, was a skeleton. But that wasn't all. Its mouth was grinning horribly. Twisted into some sort of painful smile. It made Mathew freeze. Petrified with fear. The smile, the horrible smile, it was so—so scary, but scary is a silly word to use. It was much more than scary. It was . . . it was . . . Mathew didn't know. He wailed a kind of hoarse scream and heard the skeleton laugh, a high, cruel laugh that made horrible memories rush back into Mathew's mind. He didn't want to believe the terrible fact, but he had to. The skeleton was alive.

CHAPTER 5

Mathew stumbled back and tripped on his untied shoelace. He crashed onto the floor. His back hurt badly, but terror made him strong. It made him sort of indestructible, and he couldn't feel the pain. He jumped to his feet and screamed. He saw bony fingers placing themselves on the edge of the chest. The skull appeared, laughing hideously. Slowly, carefully the skeleton managed to stand up in the chest. It lifted up its bony leg and stepped out of the chest. It began to walk towards him. Laughing its horrible laugh. As the monster came closer and closer to Mathew, he began to feel weak. The skeleton had some sort of power to make people lose all their strength. Mathew's legs felt like jelly. They wobbled and shook violently. The monster came closer. Mathew let out a moan. He was trying hard to keep standing, but he was losing the battle. With each step the monster took towards him, Mathew's legs shook more. Finally, when the monster was only four feet away from him, Mathew crumpled onto the floor in a heap. "Oh-h-h," he moaned in agony. His body went limp. He didn't have the strength to lift his head up to see the monster. He was too weak. He could barely blink.

The monster smiled. It reached forward and grabbed the collar of Mathew's white shirt. The skeleton lifted him up as if he were as light as a feather and held one arm out in front of him. "Aim . . . FIRE!" he roared, and threw Mathew against the wall. Mathew screamed in pain. He fell to the floor, wailing and crying for help. The skeleton laughed. "Nobody can hear you," cackled the skeleton. He picked up the limp Mathew again, backed up, and threw him against the wall again. Mathew screamed at the top of his lungs. "Ow-w-w . . ." he groaned. The skeleton laughed. "Ready for one more?" he asked. He grabbed Mathew and threw him with all his might against the door. Mathew's nose was broken. Blood ran down his lips and dripped onto his shirt. The skeleton picked him up again. "This will surely kill him off . . ." muttered the skeleton. He aimed Mathew at the wall . . . he was just about to throw . . .

Just then there was a familiar creak. The sound of the cracked blue bucket on the rope slowly being lowered. Both Mathew and the skeleton froze. Somebody was coming. There was the sound of feet shuffling around. The sound of a worried voice muttering. Then, the sound of the door opening.

It only opened one tiny crack. For a moment, there was a thoughtful silence from the person, and the door closed. “No!” moaned Mathew, as loud as he could. His voice came out in a tiny whisper. There was no way he could have been heard. The skeleton slapped a boney hand over Mathew's bleeding, bloody lips and mouth. “Hush, child,” muttered the skeleton softly. “It looks like we've got a new friend, but I'll finish him off later.” He grinned his twisted smile at Mathew. “Now, instead of throwing, I've got a quicker way to finish you off. You won't die, sadly, but you will be unconscious for a long time. Long enough for me to find a knife and slice your head off. You will not feel the pain, child. But you will never wake up after that.” He gave an evil laugh. The sound rang in Mathew's ears and echoed around the room. “And I'll take your head and add it to my collection.” The skeleton laughed again, harder this time. He snatched the bone from Mathew's pocket and pressed it against Mathew's eye. The whole room changed. “And here is what's going to happen,” chuckled the skeleton. He rippled his fingers, and Mathew saw a skull appear, dangling from the roof. The skeleton laughed, tossed the bone away carelessly, and grinned at Mathew. “Now . . .” He laughed louder than ever. “. . . time to kill.”

He removed his hand from Mathew's mouth, revealing a smile plastered on Mathew's bleeding lips. “Thank you,” he muttered. “Thanks a lot for making noise.” The skeleton looked quite puzzled. Suddenly, the door burst open and a girl appeared in the doorway. A girl with flaming red hair. A girl with freckles sprayed across her face. A girl with an incredibly confident smile and a T-shirt with a picture of a monkey on it. Mathew smiled. His sister had come to rescue him. She whipped a pistol from her pocket and pointed it at the skeleton. “Drop him,” she scowled. The skeleton grinned.

“Oh, my!” he snorted sarcastically. “It's Mathew's *girlfriend*, coming to rescue him. So, you want to end up like *this*, now do you?” He shoved Mathew's face in front of Anna, and the confident smile slowly faded from her face. Her mouth opened, and she reached out to stroke Mathew's face with the back of her hand, but the skeleton yanked Mathew away. “We can't have any of this lovey-dovey moment around here, now can we? Anyway.” He grinned evilly at Mathew. “TIME TO KILL.” The last thing Mathew remembered was watching the skeleton empty eye sockets glow, seeing a huge blast of blinding green light, and Anna screaming, “No!” before his whole world went black.

CHAPTER 6

“Mathew,” a voice worriedly whispered in Mathew's ear. “Oh, Mathew, please don't be dead.” Mathew could not answer. He felt dazed. He could hardly even speak or hear anything. He was so weak he could not wiggle his fingers or twist his wrist. His eyelids fluttered open, but it was as if they were squinted, with his long eyelashes blocking his view. Mathew coughed. He could faintly hear the strange voice gasp. “Mathew,” she whispered. “If you are still alive, if you are listening to me right now, you just coughed smoke.” Mathew could barely hear her words, but he managed to. Perhaps he had heard wrong, or the owner of the voice had gone insane, but that strange person had just told him he had coughed smoke. He closed his eyes for a second, and opened them. He could see a bit better now. Lingering in the air was a puff of smoke. He coughed again. A silvery wisp of smoke flew out of his open mouth. “Mathew,” said the voice. “Do you remember me? Do you know who I am?”

Mathew blinked again. He could now see quite clearly. A young girl was squatting down next to him. She had red hair and a spray of freckles across her nose. Anna. Mathew nodded slowly. He could not make a sound. His throat was dry and it hurt. His ears felt as if they had been stuffed with cotton. He let out a long, mournful groan, gazed sadly at Anna, and closed his eyes again. He was so sleepy, so tired, he'd just sleep for another minute . . .

“Mathew!” wailed Anna. “We don't have much time! We have to get out of here, and *now*. The skeleton is reforming. He cannot be killed.” She sighed as Mathew stared at her curiously. “Don't you remember? The skeleton. Like, then I came and you passed out. I shot him, then I pulled apart his body - I grabbed each bone and threw it on the ground, and stomped on his skull. But he's reforming quickly. His body has already reformed. He's working on his left arm. After that, all he needs to do is to reform his right arm and two legs, and fix up his head. He reforms very quickly. You've been asleep for an hour, and his whole body has already reformed! We've only got a few minutes to figure out how we are going to get out of here. What are we going to do? We can't smash the door open. I can't find a key. Get up, Mathew, and *help*.” Mathew groaned. His eyes traveled over to the skeleton body lying on the floor, then to the half-arm. A tiny bone twirled around and fitted perfectly

into place. Mathew gulped and looked helplessly up at his sister.

“I can't speak,” he gasped. “Well, I can, but it's really hard.” Anna helped him to his feet and shrugged. He felt as if the world was spinning. He stumbled, and Anna lunged forward and caught him before he fell. He rubbed his ears and patted his Adam's apple. “That's better,” he smiled, in a smoother voice. “So . . . how are we going to get out of here, you said? I don't really—wait a minute! I know!” He wobbled over to the bone with the hole in it and snatched it up. He pressed his eye against the hole, rushed over to the chest, and peeked inside. “Yes,” he whispered. He grinned at Anna. “Exactly what I was looking for. . . .” He reached forward. His fingers clasped around the shining gold key at the bottom of the chest. Then, the bone held to his eye, he glanced at the door. “Excellent,” he whispered softly. “Just perfect.” Looking through the hole in the bone, the door was slightly different. It had a doorknob.

He rushed over to the door. Anna stared at him. “What are you doing Mathew? Why are you holding air in your hand?”

“It's not air,” Mathew explained quickly. “It's a key. Look, see this bone with a hole in it? If you look through the hole, it lets you see what the room *really* looks like. You can't see this key without the bone. You can't see the doorknob without it.” He fitted the key into the lock, turned it, and the door swung open.

Just then, there was the sound of a scuttle behind them. They whirled around and saw the skeleton's hand crawling around. It hurried over to Anna and attacked her shoe. She let out a terrified scream and easily crunched it with her other foot. “RUN!” she screamed, and the two fled out the door.

Anna slammed the door shut. “Oh, geez,” she breathed. “That was the most terrifying adventure ever.” They both laughed nervously. “Alright,” Anna said. “I'll climb up this rope.” She pointed to the rotten rope with the cracked blue bucket on the end. “Then you get in and I'll pull you up, alright?” Mathew nodded and watched as she easily clambered up the rope. He hopped inside the bucket and waited impatiently as Anna slowly turned the handle to pull him up. When he got to the top, he jumped out as quick as he could. Anna smiled at him. “Race you home,” she laughed. “You are so going to lose. Ready? One. Two. Three. GO!” And together they ran toward the little cottage perched on the sunlit horizon. Nothing to worry about.

Nope. Nothing at all.

