

— CHAPTER —

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Father knocked on the door, which had an old-fashioned, green metal knocker. There was music coming from somewhere inside the house. They waited a while, but nothing happened. Carl was allowed to try the door knocker, and even though it was really loud this time, there was still no answer.

Finally, Carl impatiently grasped the big door handle and opened the door.

The first thing they encountered was the music. Something with a trumpet and drums. Father shepherded them into a room with black and white tiles on the floor. High up in the ceiling was a chandelier, and right in front of them, a broad staircase led up to the next floor.

“We’re here!” Father called out. “Stella, where are you?”

It sounded as if someone was singing behind a closed door.

Emma looked around. Very briefly, she caught a glimpse of a little mouse on the curved wooden banister. Its head was slightly tilted, looking at them, and then it spun around and was gone in a trice.

“Stella? Hello?” Father called again.

This time something did happen. The singing stopped, they heard footsteps, and a door opened, making the music much louder – and Aunt Stella appeared.

“Michael, Emma and Carl! Welcome!”

Father went to greet her, but both Carl and Emma remained where they were. Aunt Stella was quite a tall lady with white hair. She was wearing a large floral apron. In one hand, she held a serving spoon, covered in something dark brown.

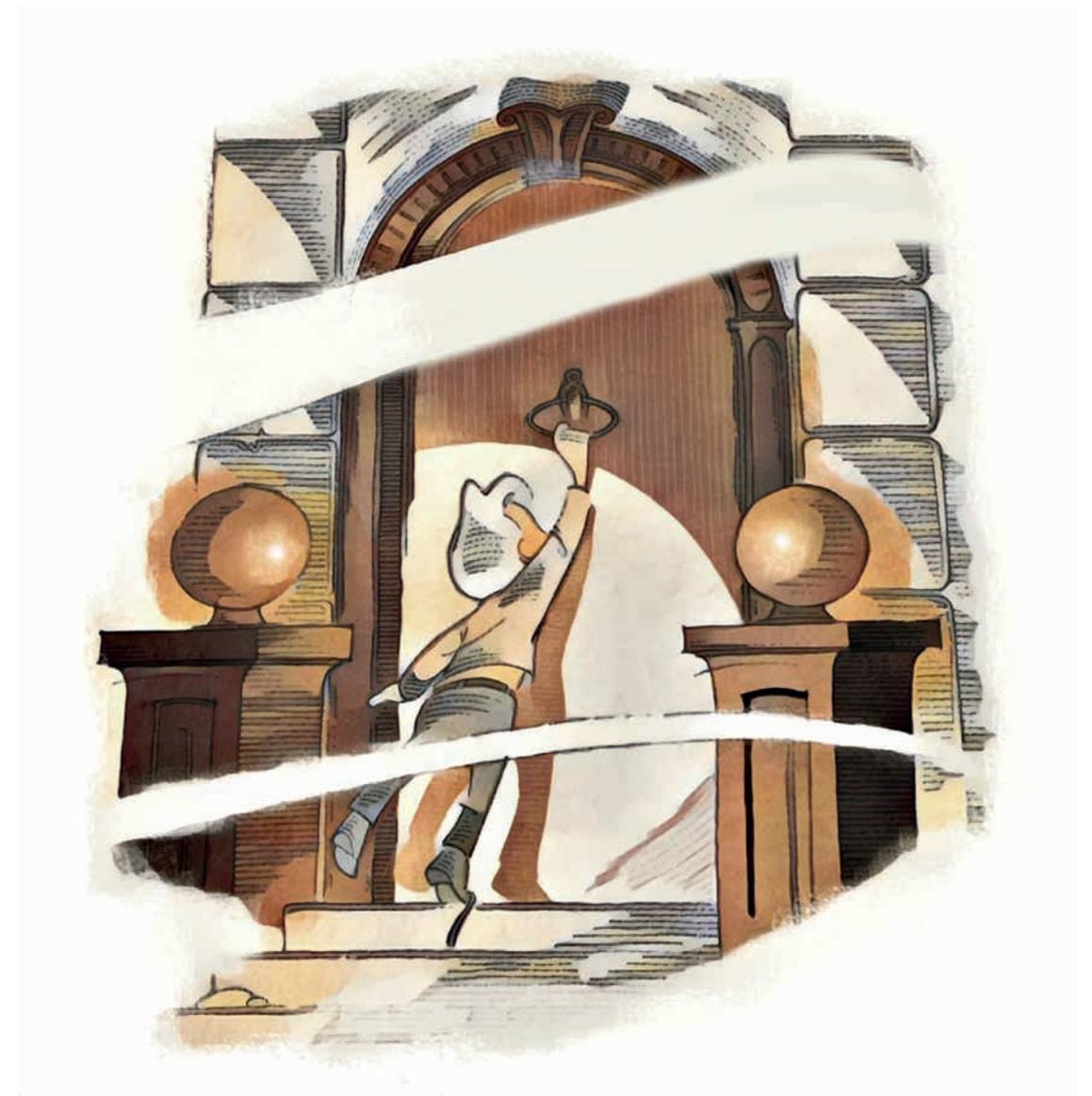
“I’m just baking some chocolate muffins for us,” she said, after Father gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Who wants to lick the spoon?”

“I’ll lick it!” Carl answered immediately.

“This way!”

Carl rushed after Aunt Stella, and Father and Emma followed them into the kitchen. There was a fat, elderly cat on a cushion. Its name was Stripy, Aunt Stella told them. She turned the radio down and put some water on to boil.

Stripy had his own tin of treats, and they were allowed to feed him three each.



“Maybe this is what you saw in the woods, Emma,” suggested Carl, his cheek covered in cake mix.

Emma looked at the ginger tabby purring sleepily as Father scratched it under the chin. It didn’t look as if it could be bothered rising from the cushion.

She shook her head.

“No. It was definitely something else I saw.”