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In front of the house, Emma gave her father a final hug.

“See you soon, sweetheart,” he promised, and she let go of him, nodding.

Even so, it was gut-wrenching to watch the car disappear into the fog. She stayed watching until she could no longer hear it.

“Come on, kids,” said Aunt Stella as they went back into the house. “There’s a key I need you to help me find. Until it turns up, Christmas won’t really be Christmas in this house. But I know just where to start looking.”

She took them into a big room opposite the room with the fireplace. It was lined with shelves heaving with books, and there were brown armchairs.

“I might have put it in that bureau.” She gestured towards a piece of furniture with at least fifty drawers. “I simply can’t remember.”

Full of curiosity, Carl pulled out one of the smallest drawers. There was a box of cough sweets, and he was allowed to taste one because, all of a sudden, he got a bit of a sore throat.

Emma opened other drawers containing coloured ribbons, old coins, sea-shells and dried flower petals. Inside the largest drawer were the carapace of a South American armadillo and a narwhal tusk. Then she spotted some photographs in silver frames on top of the bureau. One of them showed a group of men in a jungle. Several of them were carrying guns, and on the ground in front of them were a number of dead animals.



“What’s this?” she wondered.

“That’s my husband, Richard, as a young man. He was on a hunting expedition with his father.”

“No, I’m looking at that one, there.”

Emma pointed to a large black animal at the feet of Aunt Stella’s husband.

“It’s our panther.”

Aunt Stella explained that Uncle Ricky had been a pretty useless hunter and really wasn’t into shooting animals at all. All the stuffed animals on the walls of the living room had been shot by Uncle Ricky’s father, because his father had always loved big game hunting and wanted his son to share his interest. The photo was from their last trip together, when Uncle Ricky had hit the black panther.

“And all the villagers standing around them were so pleased, because they’d always been afraid the panther would take their children,” Aunt Stella explained. “It was the biggest panther any of them had ever seen. And my father-in-law was so proud of Ricky that he had it stuffed.”

“The biggest panther ever,” Carl echoed her, closing a drawer full of mother-of-pearl buttons. “Cool.”

Emma didn’t say a word.

