

— CHAPTER —



Startled, Emma and Carl leapt to one side. The man in front of them immediately stopped the saw and pushed up the visor on his hard hat.

“Sorry, I didn’t see you there!” he said. “Where have you two sprung from?”

Emma pointed: “Across from the house.”

She planted one foot firmly in what may have been a paw print.

Carl looked from the chainsaw to the big tree.

“Are you going to cut it down?”

The man shook his head.

“No, a veteran tree like that has to be allowed to stay. But this tree next to it came down in the storm. I’m clearing up to make it safe to walk here.”

Further along the path was another tree with splintery branches.

“It’s a good job the storm didn’t take the oak tree. It’s the oldest tree in the forest.”

Emma stepped up to the big trunk and placed one hand on the rough bark. She could feel the weight of the tree all the way up her arm.

“How old is it?”

“Old. Perhaps close to a thousand years old.”

“What? As old as that?!” exclaimed Carl. “Are trees supposed to get as old as that?”

The man smiled at him.

“It can live for a long time yet, even if it loses a few parts. And can you see up there? Lots of insects and caterpillars live in that dead branch. It’s brilliant for the great tits and the other birds.”

He nodded up towards a branch where a bird was perched, pecking the bark. Then he showed them a hole between the tree’s roots. It was one of the entrances to a badger sett, where the badgers lay hibernating in nests of moss and grass. They also had a quick peek at the woodlice and millipedes that lived on the forest floor beneath the dead leaves. Neither Carl nor Emma had any idea that the gloomy winter woodlands were teeming with so much life.

“But I have to get back to work now,” the man said, gripping his chainsaw once again. “See you around!”



“Oh, all right. Bye for now,” Carl replied.

Emma leant against the old oak and gave it a farewell hug. Then a tiny squeak made her look down. Sitting on one of the thick roots was a mouse with its head raised towards her.

Then the chainsaw started up once again. The blue tit flew away, startled, and the mouse darted away across the forest floor. Emma decided to find out where it was going.

