

— CHAPTER —



Emma and Carl spent the whole morning playing with the things from the huge wardrobe. They went on a trip to Japan and met an emperor and a cowboy and battled pirates. After lunch they went out into the garden while Aunt Stella had a sleep.

“Let’s go and visit the oak tree,” Carl suggested. “Maybe we could climb it.”

“Don’t you think we should stay in the garden?” Emma asked.

“No, come on. It’s boring here.”

Emma ended up giving in. Finding their way through the fog was a little bit easier today. There were no footprints and no mice to be seen anywhere. The path around the old tree had been cleared now, but Emma was pleased that they weren’t going any deeper into the forest. She helped Carl get started climbing and then followed herself. They played at being blue tits building nests and finding shelter from the storm. They climbed up high and hung bravely by their arms from the lowest branch, then let go.

Eventually, they ran back to the house, entering by the kitchen door. Stripy the cat lay on his cushion, snoozing, and Aunt Stella was still asleep too, because her bedroom door was closed.

“Let’s have a look around while we’re waiting,” Emma suggested. “Maybe we can find the key. That would make her so happy.”

Carl nodded.

“Good idea! It’s not very long until Christmas. She really needs our help.”

They began looking in the room opposite their bedroom. The walls were blue, and the bedspread had a wavy blue pattern. On the walls there were lots of black-and-white photos of a boat, with two people waving on the deck – probably Aunt Stella and Uncle Ricky. On the table under the window were some large sea shells, dried starfish and sea urchins and a clay pot that looked as if it had been under water for many years. They listened to the sound of the sea in the sea shells, and Carl gave each of them a shake to make sure the key couldn’t be inside. But they didn’t find it in the blue room.

The next room was at the end of the hallway and looked bigger than the others. It wasn't too easy to see anything at all in there, as heavy curtains blocked out the light. Emma was just able to make out some shapes resembling a table and a couple of armchairs covered in sheets. It was only after her eyes had adjusted to the dim light that she realised there was patterned wallpaper on the walls. Against a green background, a network of branches twisted up towards the ceiling, and each branch was adorned with pretty flowers, colourful birds and flying insects. While Carl investigated what was hidden away under the sheets, Emma went over to one of the walls. The flowers radiated purple, blue, pink and gold, and all the animals looked so lifelike. There was a bird with its red head raised and its beak open, as if in song. A spotted butterfly had unfurled its proboscis to suck nectar from one of the flowers. A dragonfly with sparkly wings sat on a leaf. She kept noticing new things: one of the flowers resembled a lily; another was like a daffodil; one of the birds looked like a dove; another, a parrot.

This green world looked so vibrant, and she felt drawn into it. All of a sudden, it seemed as if one of the butterflies was flapping its wings; that a blackbird tilted its head slightly, while a bee buzzed inside a flower. Emma stared, and now everything shifted, just ever so slightly. The flat wall dissolved; she got the feeling that she would only need to take one step forward and she'd be in the midst of all those flowers and animals, in a magical world. Far away, she thought she could hear birds twittering.

It was so tempting to embark on a journey of discovery in there. Cautiously, she raised her hand to reach out, but then she stopped herself.

Then, all of a sudden, Aunt Stella's bedroom door opened, startling her.

"We're in here," Carl shouted. "We're looking for the key."

Emma blinked a few times. Facing her was just a wall once again, and she took three steps back.

"I don't really think it'll be in here," she said. "There's basically nothing in here."

