

15

Emma and Carl lay on one of the rugs in the living room beside the stuffed panther, each reading a book. It had been drizzling since they got up, and neither of them felt like going outside, but they were interrupted by Aunt Stella, carrying a big basket on her arm.

“Let’s go and look for pine cones!”

Carl and Emma roused themselves reluctantly.

“Bye-bye, Panther,” said Carl, patting the black animal’s head.

“What do you need pine cones for?” Emma asked as they put their outdoor jackets on.

“I thought we could make some Christmas decorations. Christmas is nearly here, so we need to start getting ready.”

Emma nodded. The house could certainly do with a few decorations.

Fortunately, the rain had stopped, but it was still foggy. Emma shuddered and pulled her jacket up at the neck. She was so fed up of that fog. Wherever she looked, there was only withered green and withered yellow and brown and grey, grey, grey. They walked past Aunt Stella’s greenhouse, with plants hanging limply from their supports. Everything was so dull and dead, with not a hint of Christmas cheer.

Emma carried the basket because Aunt Stella needed to keep one hand free for her walking stick. She walked slowly. Carl ran ahead and came back three times before they came to the part of the garden at the top of the slope behind the house. There was an evergreen woodland here.

“Pick up the biggest pine cones you can find on the ground,” Aunt Stella told them.

Emma got busy collecting the finest pine cones she could spot. Carl just took some at random and threw them into the basket at Aunt Stella’s feet. As he moved farther away, he hit all sorts of other targets when he threw. Including Emma, for example.

“Watch out!” she snapped as a third pine cone hit her on the head.

Carl was tired of the cones. Instead, he found a thick stick and pretended it was a sword. He whacked it against the tree trunks and branches, jumped back and forth, whirled around, and swung it in a circle. Then it smashed down on Emma’s arm just as she was getting up.

First, the pain took all words away. She couldn’t even breathe; it felt as if everything was exploding inside her. Without even thinking, she shoved Carl hard.

“Watch out, you idiot!”

He fell backwards and screamed, and she knew immediately he had hurt himself.

“What’s all this?” Aunt Stella shouted.

Emma turned and ran.

