

Emma hared off between the pine trees. A gate appeared in front of her, and she prised it open and continued into the forest. Behind her, she could hear Aunt Stella yelling her name several times, but she did not turn back. She just wanted to keep on running and running, away from stupid Carl and the stupid, dank fog and this whole stupid place without Mother and Father. She wanted to go home. Now!

She only slowed down when she got a stitch. Her gasping breaths sounded loud among the silent trees. Somewhere in the fog, to her right, she could make out the outline of the big oak tree, and she left the path and made her way towards it through the undergrowth. Slowly, her pulse returned to normal. The pain in her arm had more or less eased off. She wondered whether something had in fact happened to Carl.

After perhaps 40 or 50 paces, she realised something was wrong. What she had believed to be the oak tree turned out to be two trees next to each other. From a distance, their silhouette looked like one tree, because the fog blurred everything. Emma turned around and around, but she could no longer be sure which direction she had come from.

She just stood there, thinking, for a few seconds that felt like an eternity. She couldn't hear anything other than the sound of some droplets striking the forest floor. A little further away, perhaps a branch breaking.

"Aunt Stella? Carl?" she called.

No one answered.

Emma's rib cage felt tight and heavy, and she could barely breathe. She hurried back to where she thought the path was. But despite her attempts to calculate precisely how far from it she had strayed, she couldn't find it. In the end, she just ran to and fro searching, to no avail. Soon she had changed direction so many times that she had no idea where she was in relation to the house and the lake. There were just wet tree trunks, thicket, crunchy dry leaves



and fog everywhere she looked. And maybe a black shadow? Was she seeing something out of the corner of her eye? No. Or ...

"Carl? Aunt Stella?"

Still no answer.

"Caaaar!!"

Emma clenched her teeth and tried not to cry. She had never been all alone in a forest before, but the house surely couldn't be far away. And no doubt they would come looking for her soon, too. Even though Aunt Stella wasn't too good on her feet and maybe ... Don't worry, she told herself. Keep calm; you'll be fine. But she wasn't really sure if she was right.

