

Emma took a few more paces in a random direction, then stopped again. Help me, help me, help me! she thought, without knowing who she was really addressing her words to. The woods were eerily quiet. It was as if she was alone in the world. She could no longer hold back the tears, even though she fought hard. Annoyed, she wiped them away with the back of her hand.

All of a sudden, she pricked up her ears as some leaves rustled. She looked around, tensely. A few metres away something was stirring in the withered grass. There it was again: the mouse. Or maybe it was just another one like it. It poked its snout out and raised its head a little, as if listening. Now Emma noticed it too: a very soft sound of water gurgling. She sniffed back the tears and straightened up. Maybe the lake was nearby?



The mouse vanished as soon as she moved towards the sound of the water. Her path was tricky; she had to crawl under a large, half-fallen tree, and she got caught on thorny shoots a few times. In the end, though, she reached a babbling brook wending its way between roots and rocks. Even though she did not recognise the place, she felt calmer in herself. Surely this water would run down to the lake. And if she could find the lake, she could find her way back to the house.

Emma followed the brook as best she could through the undergrowth. Eventually, she came to more sloping ground, and she picked up speed in spite of the fog. All of a sudden, she lost her footing and slipped down the slope. She tried to keep her balance by waving her arms, but the very next second she crashed into a tree and fell backwards. She was completely winded, and the treetops above her seemed to lean a long way down before retreating again.

“Ow!!!! Dammit!”

She hauled herself up to a sitting position.

That was when she spotted it. The panther. It was padding through the fog slightly further down along the shores of the lake. She stiffened instinctively. Had it



seen her? Now it passed right in front of her and turned onto the jetty a little farther along to the right. Emma watched it disappear into the greyness, as if it had just walked on across the lake. She remained sitting for a long time, keeping perfectly still, staring at the spot where it had been.