

The next day, the weather was grey, bleak and cold, and Aunt Stella said they could stay indoors afterwards if they just popped out to get the basket of pine cones. Carl immediately jumped up and said they would certainly do that, and as soon as they were outside, he pulled Emma out of the garden, past the oak tree and down to the little cove to look for the panther. The rowing boat was rocking gently on the water; other than that, nothing happened, even though they waited a long time. At first, Carl amused himself by skimming little stones in the lake. Eventually, he got tired of keeping a lookout, and Emma was able to persuade him to come home.

When they got back in with the basket, Aunt Stella was busy going through all her cupboards of bed linen and towels, in her quest for the key.

“I might have put it between a pair of sheets somewhere,” she thought, but she was wrong.

She hadn’t put it between the preserving jars on the shelves in the utility room either; it wasn’t on the coat pegs, and she had cardamom pods and capsules stored in her biscuit tins, but no key. Finally, they took a break to eat. After her nap, Aunt Stella got out some tape and steel wire and showed them how to tie wreaths using the pine cones, and they all helped to make a really magnificent one to hang on the front door. A gust of cold wind hit them as they stepped out, and their breath hung in the air like white clouds. Aunt Stella shivered and hurried back into the warm.

“The weather’s got colder. I think there’s a storm brewing.”

She was right. As darkness fell, stormy winds picked up. The wind rustled the treetops and made the house creak and give. Together, they went through all the pockets of Aunt Stella’s clothes in all her wardrobes. No key.

The storm picked up while they ate dinner. When Mother phoned to say goodnight, she was worried about whether Father’s flight would be able to land at the airport. Up in their bedroom, the window panes were almost

rattling in their frames as a particularly hard gust of wind struck.

“I don’t like it,” Carl complained, when they were being tucked in. “What if the roof comes off? Or the oak tree topples?”

“Oh, the house and the old oak are like me; they’ll last a while longer yet.”

Aunt Stella stroked his hair.

“But what about the key? Does that mean Christmas isn’t coming after all?”

Carl’s voice trembled.

“The key will turn up. I can sense it.”

Luckily, her words soothed Carl a bit, and to Emma’s joy, Aunt Stella also promised to stay with them until they fell asleep.

In fact, Aunt Stella was the first to fall asleep, in the armchair over by the door. And she snored so loudly that Carl and Emma couldn’t help giggling. Nevertheless, it was a pleasant sound to lie and listen to. Just before she dozed off, Emma put her hand under the pillow and fingered the quetzal feather. If she wished really hard, they should be able to find the key in the morning.

Much later, she awoke. The wind had passed, and a stream of moonlight bathed the room. Carl was over by the window, pulling the curtain slightly to one side. As Emma sat up, he turned round to face her.

“It’s out there now,” he said.

