



The stuffed panther, so old and dusty and looking a bit sorry for itself. Carefully, Emma put her hand in its snarling mouth and found what she was looking for. She pulled out the key and held it out to Aunt Stella, who clasped her hand to her brow.



“Of course! *That’s* where I put it. I never dreamt I would forget! How could you possibly know?”

Emma shrugged.

“Just a lucky guess.”

They set to work going up into the loft, and this time Emma just managed to spot the tip of a mouse’s tail by the big chest. Her father helped her to open it, and they carried all Aunt Stella’s boxes of Christmas decorations back downstairs. There were festive garlands with ribbons to hang around the fireplace and doors. There were decorations and Christmas napkins and tablecloths, as well as decorations for the tree: sparkling snowflakes from the USA, fabric hearts with floral patterns from Hungary, glass baubles from Poland, tin birds from Mexico and wooden figurines from Russia. There were also clay bells, stars woven from straw, gilded walnuts, lights and much, much more. Emma and Carl had never tried decorating a Christmas tree, but this was their chance. Together with Mother and Father, they produced the most beautiful Christmas tree they had ever seen. It was so tall that Father had to use a ladder to put the star on the top.

While they carried on decorating, the fragrant smell of Christmas food began to waft through the house. The grown-ups all joined in with the preparations in the kitchen.

“But we’ll certainly find time for a snowball fight,” Mother said.

“Yeah!” Carl and Emma yelled in chorus.



Aunt Stella found an anorak from Greenland for herself and sealskin mittens for them all, and they went to war. Mother and Aunt Stella sought refuge behind a woodpile and defended it against attacks, but

Emma, Carl and Father managed to capture it in the end, even though they put up stiff resistance. Emma laughed so much that her tummy hurt!

Finally, exhausted, they stomped back indoors with red cheeks and cold fingers.

Just before it was time to eat, Emma found Carl in a basket chair in the conservatory, sitting with one hand under his chin and looking out. She sat down next to him.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked.

“About the badgers under the oak tree. I hope they’re sleeping well beneath all that snow.”

“I’m sure they are.”

“Mmm.”

Emma took a very deep breath.

“Carl, do you remember what happened last night?”

He straightened up abruptly.

“Wasn’t that a dream?”

“I thought it might be, but then I looked at your brow. You’ve got four little claw marks.”

Now Carl got up and went over to her.

Gently, he brushed her hair slightly to one side.

“So have you, Emma.”

