**Missing Charm**

When Ella awoke that morning, she knew something was wrong. The comforting weight of her silver pendant, the charm she had worn every day since her grandmother had given it to her, no longer rested against her neck. She leapt from bed, pulling open drawers, shaking her quilt, and even crouching to peer beneath the frame. The pendant was nowhere to be found. A hollow chill spread through her chest, for the charm had always been more than decoration; it was her talisman of courage, a small circle engraved with a star, a reminder that she was never truly alone.

She hurried outside, checking out the garden where she had sat the night before. The grass glittered with dew, but no trace of silver caught the light. A rustling in the hedge startled her, and a magpie darted out, carrying a glint in its beak. Ella gasped and ran after it. She was sure that it was the pendant. Her slippers slapped against the stone path as she chased the bird beyond the gate and into the woods. Brambles tugged at her sleeves and thorns scratched her hands, yet she pressed forward, eyes locked on the bird’s dark silhouette as it vanished deeper into the trees.

The forest grew darker, the very air heavy with damp earth and shadows. Strange sounds – creaks and whispers echoed between the trunks, making Ella’s heart hammer. At one point, she slipped into a freezing stream, the water soaking her clothes. For a moment she considered turning back, but the thought of losing the pendant pushed her on. Then, through a clearing, she spotted the magpie perched on a branch above a hollow log. As Ella crept closer, the bird tilted its head, released the charm, and it tumbled into the darkness of the log.

She dropped to her knees and reached inside. Her fingertips brushed smooth metal, but something scuttled over her hand. A hiss rose from within, and her stomach tightened like the snake within. Summoning all her courage, she thrust her arm back into the log and pulled. The startled creature slid out, cursed angrily then coiled swiftly into the undergrowth. In her other hand, gleaming faintly in the dim light, was the pendant. Relief washed over her in a wave so strong it nearly brought her to tears.

With the charm once again secured around her neck, Ella retraced her steps home. The forest no longer seemed menacing; birds sang above and the path appeared brighter, as though the trees themselves approved of her bravery. By the time she reached her gate, the morning sun had broken fully through the clouds. She touched the star-engraved circle and smiled. The pendant had not simply been lost and found; it had tested her courage, and in overcoming the challenge, Ella felt she had earned its blessing all over again.