

Finding Poppy:

A Forest Adventure









The afternoon sun sits warm and wide over the meadow behind the house, and the four siblings have each found their favorite corner of it. Nora stands at the top of a mossy stump, arms out for balance, scanning the tree line like a lookout on a ship. Eli sits cross-legged in the grass below her, a compass gadget spread across his knees, tightening a small screw with the focused expression he always gets when a problem is almost solved. Willa kneels a few steps away beside a low shrub, barely breathing, watching a robin settle back onto its nest.

Baby Poppy sits on a patchwork blanket at the edge of the group, her cloth rabbit tucked under one arm. She reaches toward every butterfly that drifts past, fingers opening and closing, and when a yellow leaf spirals down from the oak above her she follows it all the way to the ground with her eyes.

A breeze moves through the grass and carries the cool, sharp smell of pine from somewhere deeper in the trees. Poppy turns her face toward the forest. She stretches both arms out in front of her, palms up, as though she is trying to hold the scent itself.





Nora drops from the stump and challenges Eli to race her around the big oak at the field's edge. Eli tucks his compass into his vest pocket and scrambles up without a second thought. Willa trails after them, wanting to see who wins, and for a moment the blanket is the quietest spot in the whole yard.

When they circle back, laughing and out of breath, the blanket is empty. The cloth rabbit lies on the ground at the very edge of the tree line, one ear bent in the dirt.

Nora picks up the rabbit and the laughter stops. The three siblings look at each other, then at the dark gap between the first row of trees where the shadows begin almost at once. Poppy has toddled into the forest.





Nora squares her shoulders, tucks the cloth rabbit into her pocket, and says they are going in right now, no waiting. Her voice is steady, which helps, because Eli's hands have gone a little stiff around his notebook.

Willa is already moving toward the tree line.

Eli pulls his tracking kit from his vest pocket: a narrow notebook with a stub of pencil wedged in the spine, a magnifying lens on a cord, and a spool of red string wound tight. He checks the spool, nods once, and falls into step behind Nora. The kit had started as a rainy-day project, and none of them had expected to actually need it.

Willa crouches at the tree line and presses her palm flat against the soft soil. Two boot prints point straight into the shadowed trees, each one no longer than her hand. She stands, brushes the dirt from her fingers, and tells the others which direction to go.





Inside the forest the light changes at once, going from gold to green as the canopy closes overhead. Nora pushes through the ferns first, holding back the bigger fronds so Eli and Willa can pass. Eli loops the end of the red string around the first sturdy branch he finds and begins unspooling it as they walk, one marker at a time, leaving a thread that will lead them back out again.

He kneels over the boot prints and holds his magnifying lens above them, studying the spacing. The prints are close together, no more than the width of a book apart, which tells him Poppy was moving slowly and stopping often.

He writes that down in two words: slow, stopping.

Willa spots a cluster of crushed clover a few steps ahead, and then, at the height of Poppy's shoulder, a smear of dark berry juice on a low branch. She touches it carefully and calls Eli over. He adds it to his notebook with a small arrow pointing the direction the smear runs, and the three of them press on.





The trail bends around a stand of birch trees and opens into a mossy glade where mushrooms grow in a wide ring, their caps the color of rust and cream.

At the ring's edge, pressed into a patch of soft mud, is another boot print, deeper at the toe than the heel. Poppy had been leaning forward here, curious about something in the ring.

Eli measures the distance from this print to the last one, muttering the calculation under his breath. He looks up and tells the others that Poppy has been walking for at least ten minutes, possibly more. That means she could be farther in than any of them had hoped.

Before anyone can answer, a blue jay drops onto a branch just above the glade and chatters sharply, three quick bursts. It tilts its head toward the left fork of the path, then chatters again. Willa watches it without moving. The bird repeats the tilt, deliberate as a pointing finger, and she tells Nora and Eli they should go left.





The blue jay's calls follow them a little way down the left fork, growing fainter as the trees thicken. Nora keeps her eyes on the shadows between the trunks, checking each one before she steps past it. Willa walks just behind her, listening to the forest the way she always does, reading the small sounds the way Eli reads numbers.

Near a stream bank where the clay is damp and pale, Eli stops and crouches. Pressed into the clay is a handprint, berry-stained, the fingers spread wide. It is exactly the size of Poppy's hand. He sketches it quickly in his notebook, a careful outline, and marks an arrow for the direction her fingers point.

The stream runs alongside the path now, cool and chattering over its stones. Eli reaches the end of the first spool of string and ties on a second one without breaking stride, looping the knot twice around a branch so it holds even if the wind picks up. The red thread continues, and so do they.





As the stream curves, the berry smears on the low branches grow brighter and fresher, the juice still dark instead of dried to brown. Willa tells the others that Poppy came through here recently, maybe only minutes ahead of them, and Nora's pace quickens without being asked.

Then, on a breath of wind, comes a sound: soft giggling, ahead and to the right. All three of them move toward it at once, ducking under branches, but when they reach the spot there is only a hollow log lying in a bed of ferns. No Poppy.

Eli examines the hollow log and finds a row of pebbles arranged along its flat top, sorted from pale to dark, smallest to largest. At home, Poppy spends whole afternoons sorting pebbles by color on the kitchen step.

He does not write this one in the notebook. He just looks at it for a moment, then stands up.





Willa circles the hollow log slowly, reading the ground. Around it, pressing deep into the soft earth, are the cloven prints of a deer, spaced as though the animal had stood in one place for a long time, circling once or twice, then settled. Something had been worth watching over here.

A doe steps out from behind a curtain of ferns. She is unhurried, her dark eyes moving across the three children one at a time. She does not startle. She simply looks at them, then turns and steps onto a narrow path between the trees, pausing after three steps to glance back.

Nora, Eli, and Willa look at each other. No one says anything. They follow the doe.





The doe leads them through a stand of young maples and the trees fall back all at once into a clearing full of afternoon sun and wildflowers growing knee-high. In the center of the clearing, sitting cross-legged in the flowers as though she has been there all afternoon, is Poppy. A red squirrel perches on the ground beside her. Two rabbits sit at the edge of the flowers, ears up, watching. The doe's spotted fawn stands just behind Poppy, close enough to touch.

Poppy sees her siblings and claps both hands together. The squirrel flicks its tail and chatters back at her, the sound rising and falling in a way that matches her babbling closely enough that Eli goes very still and listens with his head tilted.

Willa understands what the animals have been doing here. She crouches at the edge of the clearing and speaks quietly to the squirrel, then to the rabbits, then to the fawn, a few soft words for each. It is the same tone she uses with the robin at home, and the animals hold their ground, calm, before the squirrel chatters once more and the fawn steps back to its mother.





Nora crosses the clearing in four long strides and scoops Poppy up, holding her close. Poppy grabs a fistful of Nora's collar and squirms happily, unbothered, as though she had simply been waiting for everyone to catch up. The cloth rabbit is still in Nora's pocket, and she can feel its shape pressing against her ribs.

Poppy leans back in Nora's arms and pats her cheek twice, then points back at the animals with one finger and says her favorite word: more. It comes out clear and certain, the way she always says it when she wants something to keep going.

Eli opens his notebook to a fresh page and begins sketching the clearing: the ring of flowers, the positions of the animals, the pebble trail from the hollow log that he is already connecting in his mind to this place. He works fast, wanting to get it down before anything shifts. Some things, he knows, only happen once.





The squirrel is the first to notice. It stops mid-chatter, flicks its tail in three sharp arcs, and darts in a tight circle around the base of the nearest tree. Willa straightens up and looks at the treetops. The leaves on the far side of the clearing are already turning their pale undersides to the sky.

The clouds come in fast, rolling over the canopy in a dark grey sheet. A raindrop hits Eli's open notebook and spreads across his last sketch, blurring the doe's outline into a grey smear. He closes the notebook and tucks it under his arm.

Nora shifts Poppy higher on her hip and calls the other two over. The red string is their way home, but the path will turn slippery fast once the rain settles in, and they need to move now. She does not say it loudly. She does not need to.





Rain begins to fall through the leaves in fat, scattered drops that quickly find a rhythm. Eli takes the lead along the red string, calling out each branch marker as he passes it so Nora and Willa can follow his exact line without having to search. Poppy reaches out from Nora's arms and tries to catch the drops on her palm.

Near the stream the path gets harder to read. A branch has come down across the string and the rising water has pulled one section loose, leaving a gap where the thread disappears into the current. In every direction the trees look the same: grey bark, wet ferns, no clear way forward.

Willa moves to the nearest oak and runs her hand along the bark, feeling for the side where the moss grows thickest. Moss grows heaviest on the north-facing side, and north is the direction they need to stay away from, which means home is the other way. She tells Eli, and he adjusts their angle without argument.





A few minutes later Eli spots a knot tied around a birch tree and lets out a short, sharp cheer. It is the knot where the second spool began, which means the string from here runs intact all the way to the forest's edge. He follows it with his eyes as far as he can see through the rain, and it holds.

Poppy, still settled on Nora's hip, reaches out and grabs a fistful of Willa's sleeve. She opens her free hand to the rain and laughs at the drops hitting her palm, the same laugh she had in the clearing, unbothered and bright. Willa reaches over and steadies her without breaking stride.

Nora hears that laugh and grins. She has been keeping her worry packed down tight since the moment she found the empty blanket, and now, with the string leading clearly ahead and Poppy safe and laughing, she lets herself walk a little faster. The relief comes out as speed.





The trees begin to thin. The green light overhead gives way to a paler grey, and through the branches ahead the open sky is visible, low and cloud-covered but unmistakably there. The forest is letting them go.

A rumble of thunder rolls across the sky, distant enough that it is more sound than warning, but Eli notes it anyway and picks up his pace. The red string runs straight and unbroken from the last birch all the way to a branch at the very edge of the tree line, just where he had tied it at the start.

As they walk the final stretch Eli winds the string back onto its spool, loop by loop, already turning over improvements in his mind. A whistle would be useful, something to signal position if the group ever splits. A longer spool, too. He adds both to a list in his head, which is where his best ideas always start.





They step out of the trees and onto the soft grass beside the blanket. All three of them are breathing hard. Nora sets Poppy down gently in the center of the blanket and pulls the cloth rabbit from her pocket, tucking it back into Poppy's arms. Poppy hugs it for exactly one second, then holds it out toward Nora with both hands, offering it back.

Nora takes it, looks at it, and then sets it back in Poppy's lap. The rain has softened to a drizzle that barely makes a sound on the grass. The three siblings sit down around their sister, shoulders almost touching, the run and the worry and the relief all settling at once.

Willa looks at Nora, then at Eli. She says quietly that none of them could have found Poppy alone. Nora and Eli nod. Nobody needs to add anything to that.





Evening gold breaks through the thinning clouds and spreads across the grass.

Nora holds Poppy in her lap. Eli opens his notebook to a dry page near the front and begins sketching the doe from memory, her calm eyes and the way she paused on the path to look back. Willa has a handful of wildflowers she carried out of the clearing without quite deciding to, and she braids them into a crown, fingers moving from habit.

Willa leans over and sets the flower crown on Poppy's head. Poppy goes very still for a moment, feeling the weight of it, and then looks at each sibling in turn, her gaze moving from Willa to Eli to Nora and back again.

Nora looks at Eli and Willa over Poppy's flower-crowned head and says that next time they explore the forest, all four of them go together from the start. Eli closes his notebook. Willa says yes. The last clouds drift apart above them, and the four siblings stay where they are on the blanket as the light goes gold and then soft, none of them quite ready to go inside.



The end



Every page turned is a step into a bigger world



When baby Poppy toddles into the forest alone, her three older siblings must work together to bring her home. Nora leads the way with steady courage, Eli follows clues with his homemade tracking kit, and Willa reads the forest's quiet signals to guide them true. Through berry trails, a helpful doe, and a sun-bright clearing full of watchful animals, the siblings discover that each of their strengths matters most when they are woven together.

