



# *The path in the forest*

Story by Cristy Zinn & Illustration by Chloe Kemp



# The Path in the Forest

By Cristy Zinn

Tabitha and her family travelled this wide open road every year, to meet up with other families for the Harvest festival. There would be a fair and presents and big celebrations. But Tabitha couldn't muster up any joy about the whole affair. She'd been grumpy all morning, and she kept getting into trouble for things that weren't her fault. Her hair had stayed a big tangled mess no matter how much she'd brushed it. And she'd already made a small hole in the dress that mother had told her take good care of. Tabitha stuck her finger into the hole and sighed. She just couldn't seem to get anything right.

Up ahead, her cousin Lilly turned around and waved, smiling. Tabitha waved back half-heartedly. She didn't want Lilly coming over to keep her company; *her* dress was smooth, and *her* hair was neatly plaited. And what's more her smile was very kind. But being around kind people only made Tabitha feel rotten. It was better that she trail behind where she could watch butterflies and peek into the forest that lined the wide path. She slowed down a little more, scuffing her shoes on stones. When she was feeling all whirl-windy inside, it was better to be alone.

Lining the path on both sides was a lovely wild forest where the light turned a yellowing green and the trees whispered in the wind like they were telling secrets. Tabitha wondered, as she did every year, why they walked that same road every time. Why did they never go into the forest?

She'd heard stories about the wildness of the forest – there were things inside which could not be tamed and should not be met. There were things that would eat you alive or turn

you into something else. But to be honest, Tabitha was tired of the well-worn path they always walked; it was too loud with conversations and too stark with its full sunlight. In between the forest trees it looked cool and quiet. And even if it might be more tangly and even a little wild, it looked like there might be things in there she hadn't seen yet. Mysteries and such that were still undiscovered. That's why she walked so close to it, peering in. That's why she dawdled far behind – always searching for things, for mysteries that everyone else missed while they marched on, chatting.

And sure enough she had discovered something in the long, overgrown grasses - a strangely glittering ribbon. It looked as though someone had tried to stuff a rainbow into the material and then dusted it with dew. It must have been left behind - by someone beautiful, Tabitha thought. Someone with a pure and noble heart, mysterious. That's what the stories always said. Someone without tangled hair and a holey dress. She wrapped the beginnings of the ribbon around her hand, craning her neck to see how far the ribbon went into the forest. It went so far in she couldn't see where it ended.

There was a moment when she thought about the wild things inside the shadows, the things that might eat or change her. It was a short moment though, as the ribbon fluttered in the breeze and caught her attention again. When she stared back into the forest, all she could see were butterflies dancing between shafts of light that broke through the canopy. There were no growling sounds or ominous howls either – only the twittering of birds. In fact, the forest seemed brimming with life.

Then she noticed the faint trail of a path. It was badly overgrown and twisty but it was definitely a path. Maybe whoever lost the ribbon had travelled this way.

If she rescued this beautiful ribbon, surely she would be a hero? Because if it belonged to someone good, she could return it and maybe then her family would see how clever she was. Maybe.

And of course, if she followed the ribbon she would see what all those stories were about. She would see for herself just how wild the place was.

With that, her decision was made, and she stepped into the forest.

The forest air was cool and sweet and filled with music. It wasn't the kind of music you could hear exactly, but Tabitha felt it, just under her skin, making her heart beat faster. The path was not a smooth one. Already she had climbed over fallen logs, grown over with moss and time, and scrambled between tangly bushes that had torn her dress pocket clean off.

She walked that way for ages until she realised she was utterly lost. She'd become so turned around that she couldn't remember which direction she had come from and the path behind her had mysteriously vanished. She thought it was quite typical that she would get lost. It was just like her. Her hand tightened around the ribbon – without a path this ribbon was the only thing leading her anywhere. She stared into the dim, shifting light of the forest, trying to find the path again, wondering whether coming inside had been a good idea. All the aliveness she'd noticed before seemed crouched at the ready, waiting to swallow her.

Then something scuttled over her foot, making her jump. Tabitha froze.

"I beg your pardon," came a voice from below.

Tabitha looked down and to her surprise she found a fox. He had a clever nose and twitchy ears and a beautiful bushy tail. He sat staring at her, as if he were waiting for her to speak.

"Forgive me, but what are you doing in the forest?" asked the fox politely, tipping his head to one side.

"You can talk," was all Tabitha thought to say.

"Yes," smiled the fox. "As can you."

"Yes, but I'm a girl. I'm supposed to talk. Foxes are not supposed to talk."

"As a matter of fact, we talk all the time – girls simply do not listen."

"And I do?"

"Obviously. You must be very special," said the fox. His ears twitched as he smiled a sharp toothed smile. "Tell me, what are you doing in the forest?"

"I found this ribbon," said Tabitha, holding up the glittery fabric awkwardly. "It was just lying on the path. I thought I would rescue it and return it to its owner." She swallowed. She wasn't sure if that was the answer the fox was looking for but she really hoped it was. She didn't like the look of those little teeth, even pulled into a smile.

"And do you know who the owner is?" asked the fox.

"No, do you?" asked Tabitha.

"No, but perhaps my friends do. They're just up ahead," said the fox. "I could take you to them."

Tabitha hesitated. She did not know this sharp-tooth, clever-nosed fox. She did not know where he was taking her. But she was lost and the ribbon fluttered impatiently as though it were eager for her to keep moving.

"Could they show me the way out of the forest?" asked Tabitha.

"Of course." The fox smiled again. Tabitha noticed how the corners of his eyes crinkled when he smiled, as though smiling was something that delighted him. And she wondered if he had only seemed scary because she had focused on his teeth. She laughed out loud thinking how people always did that to each other – focusing on the wrong things, the little parts, instead of the whole.

Tabitha followed the fox as he trotted through the forest with an extremely merry gait, picking up more of the ribbon as she went, until they reached a small clearing. And there in the clearing was a badger, an owl, a bear and a boy. They seemed to be deep in conversation.

Tabitha's eyes widened at the sight of the boy. He looked completely at home surrounded by these talking animals. He had skin the colour of syrup and eyes as green as the trees. He wore clothes covered with holes and twigs and patches. He could probably blend into the forest quite well. She wondered how long he had been there and if he had also become lost.

"Why, hello!" cried the boy with a great big smile.

"Hello," said Tabitha, ringing her hands around the ribbon as though it could save her from his attention. The fox trotted up to the boy who knelt down beside it, stroking its fur while it whispered something in his ear. The boy nodded and then he glanced at Tabitha again, smiling wider.

He strode over to Tabitha, and shook her hand vigorously. "Welcome to the forest."

"Thanks," said Tabitha.

"The name's Otto, Son of the Forest. And you are Tabitha, I'm told. How can we help you?" he asked.

"I need to get home," said Tabitha, trying to ignore the fact that he knew her name. "I found this ribbon and started following the path..." She held up the ribbon for him to see.

His eye widened. "Where did you find that?" he asked.

"At the edge of the forest, near the wide path..."

"Oh, he must have left it there," said the boy, rubbing a piece of the silk between his fingers. "Made by the cleverest silk worms in the forest, you know."

"You know this ribbon?" asked Tabitha.

"Of course. It belongs to my father," he said.

"Oh!" said Tabitha, unwinding the ribbon to hand to the boy, hoping he wouldn't be cross that she'd taken it. This boy was obviously one of the wild things of the forest – what if he became angry? Would he turn her into something terrible?

The boy laughed, "Don't worry so much. He probably meant it for you."

"What do you mean? Do I know your father?"

"No, probably not. Not yet, anyway. He leaves things lying about to see who will notice. They're just little clues but people who are paying attention notice these sorts of things."

"Why would he do that?" asked Tabitha, thinking that it was very strange for someone to leave things lying around for other people to find. What if they never noticed? What if it lay there forever, discarded and lonely? Was he a trickster trying to lure people into the forest?

"He does it so that people come into the forest to meet him, that's all," said the boy.

"Meet him?"

The boy nodded. "He says people who notice lost things are often looking for something and he always knows where to find lost things. He knows where to find everything."

Tabitha chewed on her lip as she thought. She was a bit of a lost thing. She wondered if the boy's father could help her find her way. She gave her head a small shake – what was it about this strange forest that made her trust this boy and his father who she'd never met?

The owl, the bear, the badger and the fox were staring at her expectantly. None of them had made any moves to eat her or change her. But they were waiting for something, waiting for her to make up her mind. And they all seemed very eager that she meet this odd man who left things lying about. She couldn't help wonder what was so special about him. She couldn't help wonder how he'd been living in the forest all this time and she'd never seen him through the trees.

"I think I should meet him, your father," she said, her curiosity winning over. "I should give him back his ribbon. And then maybe he could show me the way home? My parents will be worried."

"Of course we'll take you to him – he's probably been waiting for you. And don't worry about your parents - time passes differently here," said the boy.

"Differently how?" asked Tabitha.

"You'll see," he said cryptically.

The fox, the bear, the badger and the boy led Tabitha down the thin, twisty path. The forest began to darken and was lit by the small, flitting lights of glow bugs, and the stars that peeked through the canopy overhead. It looked as though they were trying to find out what was going on inside. The night was strangely more welcoming in the forest, where the shadows evened out and made every tiny light so bright. Even the ribbon seemed to catch light that wasn't there making a faintly glowing trail into the forest. Tabitha saw more owls appear, filling the forest with softer sounds of hooting and tree-whispering. She was sure she heard words among the rustling leaves. It was a very curious forest. But the boy Otto she found most curious of all.

"And you've lived here your whole life?" asked Tabitha as they walked.

"As long as the forest has been here," said the boy.

"But that's impossible! The forest has been here for hundreds of years," said Tabitha.

"As impossible as talking creatures and glittering ribbons and secret telling trees?" asked Otto.

Tabitha couldn't argue with that. "And your father? Has he also lived here since the beginning of the forest?"

"Oh no, he's lived here much, much longer than that," said Otto with a wide smile. "Longer than anyone can imagine."

He paused in his walk, his eyes lighting up at something he saw up ahead. Tabitha followed his gaze to see a tall man, with broad shoulders, and a scruffy beard and hair. He wore a long coat of grasses and moss and on his shoulder perched the tawny owl from the clearing. The man smiled when he saw Otto and opened his arms wide, sending the owl fluttering onto a nearby branch. Otto practically catapulted himself into the man's arms, his father's arms. Tabitha glanced down at the ribbon in her hand, wondering how a man who looked so ordinary could make something so exceptional.

When she looked up again, Otto was dragging the man towards her, both of them smiling. And then the man caught sight of the ribbon in Tabitha's hand. She thrust it out towards him, afraid he might think she wanted to keep it.

"Hi. Does this belong to you?" she asked, her heart pounding.

"Why yes, it does," he said. His voice was a rich baritone, warm as his smile and his deep brown skin. "I'm so glad you found it, Tabitha. I was hoping you would."

"You know my name?" she gulped. How strange this forest was? How wonderful!

"We knows everyone's names," Otto said.

Tabitha held out the ribbon for the man. She had folded it very neatly, wanting to show him she had taken good care of it. "You can have it back, if you need it."

"It was a gift, Tabitha," said the man, placing a hand on her shoulder that sent tingles through her, like he was full of electricity. "It suits you perfectly."

It was then that Tabitha burst out crying. She had no idea why. Maybe it was being lost, maybe she was tired, maybe it was the strangeness of the forest but deep down, she thought it might be the kindness of this man. He didn't look at her the way most people did. He seemed to think she was quite worthy of such a beautiful thing.

"But I have holes in my dress and wild, wild hair, and I always say the wrong things," Tabitha sobbed, feeling very silly. "I can't have this ribbon. It's too beautiful and clever for me."

The man knelt down in front of her. "Oh, Tabitha," he whispered. "You are just as beautiful and clever as this ribbon. That's why I made it. *You* inspired this ribbon - it's what came out of my head when I was thinking about you."

"What? But..." Tabitha swallowed another sob and stared into the eyes of the man confused. How could *she* inspire something this beautiful and extraordinary?

But then she saw it – the marvel inside the man. She gasped for inside his eyes she saw distant stars and galaxies - it seemed as though the whole universe was trapped in his eyes. And with that strong gaze on her, she had to believe him. She had to believe that she was as brave and clever and extraordinary as he saw her. Because those did not look like lying eyes.

She clasped the ribbon to her chest and nodded, more tears running down her cheeks.

"Thank you," she said.

"It's my pleasure, Tabitha," said the man. He wrapped his arms around her so that she was enveloped in a giant hug. He smelled of pine cones and Harvest morning and nutmeg. He smelled like home. "Are you ready to go home now?" he asked her.

And though she wasn't quite ready to leave the forest and its beautifully lit night-time, she knew she would have to leave. "Yes. I think so," said Tabitha with a sigh. "Can I come back sometime?"

The man smiled, the galaxies inside his eyes dancing. "Why yes, you can."

Otto had been right about the time in the forest, for when Tabitha emerged onto the wide path again, no time had passed at all. It was still noon and there, just up ahead, were her family. They walked and chattered while the children played. It was as if she had never been gone.

Otto and his father stood in the shade of the forest. Around their feet sat the sharp-toothed fox, the bear and the badger. And on the man's shoulder was the tawny owl. "Have a lovely Harvest festival," said the man.

"Yes! And don't forget, you said you'd visit," said Otto.

Tabitha smiled. "I will," she promised.

"Tabitha!" came her cousin Lily's voice. The girl was running towards her. Tabitha glanced back into the forest but her new friends were gone. She held tight to the ribbon, proof that it wasn't all a dream, and she smiled.

"Mind if I walk with you?" asked Lilly.

Tabitha shook her head shyly.

"You look different," said Lily, reaching up to take something out of Tabitha's hair.

"Is something wrong?" asked Tabitha. Had the forest turned her strange and wild?

"Nothing's wrong. You look lovely," said Lily.

Tabitha wondered if that was what the man meant when he gave her the ribbon - that he'd somehow made her into the right person for it. She reached up to feel her hair. It hadn't become straight and smooth like Lily's, in fact it seemed more tangled than before. And as she looked down she saw her dress had one or two extra holes.

"You look... like you're glowing. You know, happy or something," said Lily.

"I do?" asked Tabitha.

Lily nodded. Then she saw the ribbon in Tabitha's hand. "Where did you get that? It's beautiful!"

Tabitha grinned, holding the ribbon out to the sun where it caught the light and made it dance. "Well, there's this man in the forest you see..."