



### Chapter Three

‘Will you read to me?’ Lana asked that evening, as her mother was tucking her into bed. ‘From my new book of fairytales?’ ‘Of course,’ said her mother, after she finished sneezing. ‘Let’s take a look at what we have . . . There’s *Hansel and Gretel*. That’s about a little boy and a little girl who get lost

in the forest and find a house made of sweets.’

‘That’s so lucky!’ said Lana. ‘I’d love to find a house like that!’

‘Ah, well, that’s what Hansel and Gretel thought, only it was a trap.’

‘A trap?’ Lana’s eyes widened.

‘The house belongs to a witch, and when the children try to eat the sweets she captures them and they discover to their horror that, erm . . .’ Lana’s mother’s voice trailed away.

‘That what?’ asked Lana.

‘That she wants to eat them,’ replied her mother briskly. ‘It’s a little bit of a scary story, so maybe let’s not read *Hansel and Gretel*. How about this one, *Rumpelstiltskin*?’

‘Rumpel-what?’ asked Lana.

‘*Rumpelstiltskin*. Here, there’s a picture of him.’



Lana's mother turned the book round so Lana could take a look. There on the page was an old-fashioned picture of a familiar figure.

'That's the man from the supermarket!'

Lana's mother smiled. 'Hmmm, I suppose it does look a bit like him, doesn't it?'

'It's not *like* him,' pressed Lana. 'It *is* him.'

'Of course, dear,' said her mother dismissively. 'Anyway, here he is, spinning straw into gold.'

'Who's the girl?' asked Lana.

'The miller's daughter,' said her mother.

'From what I remember of the story, her father told the king that she could spin straw into gold, which was a lie. He was just showing off. So, the king locks the miller's daughter in a room full of straw and says if she hasn't spun it

all into gold by the morning, then he'll, erm . . .'  
her mother's voice trailed away again.

'What will he do?' asked Lana.

'Er . . . kill her,' said her mother.

'Kill her!'

'Yes.' Her mother was beginning to wonder if the man at the till had been right, and the stories weren't suitable for Lana after all. 'Look, maybe we should find a different book to read tonight? Something a bit nicer?'

'But what happened to the miller's daughter?' asked Lana.

'Well,' said her mother reluctantly, 'after the king has gone, Rumpelstiltskin appears and offers to spin all the straw into gold for the girl, if she gives him her necklace. So, she agrees, and he spins all the straw into gold. But the next morning the king is so



impressed to see all the gold that, instead of letting the girl go, he locks her in a bigger room, with even more straw in it, and tells her to do it again.'

'Does the little old man come back?'

'Yes, he does, and he helps again, this time in return for a . . . ring. Yes, that's right, a ring.'

'And then does the king let her go?'

'Um, no actually,' her mother started to look a bit uncomfortable again. 'He locks her in an even bigger room, with an absolutely massive amount of straw, and tells her to do it again. This time she has nothing to give the little old man, so he asks for her . . . first born child in return,' said her mother, flicking through the pages. 'This isn't the nicest of stories either. Are you sure you don't

want another book?'

'No! These all sound much more exciting than the things we usually read. What about this story?' asked Lana, pointing at a picture of a beautiful girl, asleep on a bed, with roses growing all around her.

'That's *Sleeping Beauty*,' said her mother. 'You must know that one?'

Lana shook her head, because she didn't.

'That was one of my favourites when I was little. I don't think it's scary . . . not that I can remember, anyway.'

'It sounds lovely! Please can we read it?' asked Lana.

'All right,' said her mother. 'I suppose we can read a little and see if it's suitable.'

And this . . . well, this is pretty much what she read:



Once there was a king and queen who very much hoped for a baby. But hope as they might, no baby came.

Soon they began to lose heart, and busied themselves with hobbies instead. The king organised archery competitions, while the queen took up wild swimming.

One day, when the queen was swimming in the castle moat, a strange red-eyed frog hopped out of the water and onto the bank.

'Great news!' chirruped the frog. 'Before the year is out, you and the king will have a child. Her name will be Briar Rose, and she will be everything your hearts desire.'

The frog, it seemed, was right, because several months later, the royal couple had a most beautiful baby girl.

The king and queen were so happy that they

decided to hold a feast to show Briar Rose off to the world.

They invited only the most important people in the kingdom, including the thirteen fairies.

Now, as everybody knows, fairies only eat off gold plates. But, as they were writing the invitations, the king realised they only had twelve gold plates and no time to get another, so instead of inviting all thirteen fairies, he only invited twelve.

Soon, the day of the party came, and after dinner each of the fairies came forward to give Briar Rose a gift.

'Darling, Briar Rose,' said the first fairy, 'I shall give you . . . beauty.'

'Briar Rose already has beauty,' said the second fairy, 'so I shall give her . . . wit.'



Once there was a king and queen who very much hoped for a baby. But hope as they might, no baby came.

Soon they began to lose heart, and busied themselves with hobbies instead. The king organised archery competitions, while the queen took up wild swimming.

One day, when the queen was swimming in the castle moat, a strange red-eyed frog hopped out of the water and onto the bank.

'Great news!' chirruped the frog. 'Before the year is out, you and the king will have a child. Her name will be Briar Rose, and she will be everything your hearts desire.'

The frog, it seemed, was right, because several months later, the royal couple had a most beautiful baby girl.

The king and queen were so happy that they

decided to hold a feast to show Briar Rose off to the world.

They invited only the most important people in the kingdom, including the thirteen fairies.

Now, as everybody knows, fairies only eat off gold plates. But, as they were writing the invitations, the king realised they only had twelve gold plates and no time to get another, so instead of inviting all thirteen fairies, he only invited twelve.

Soon, the day of the party came, and after dinner each of the fairies came forward to give Briar Rose a gift.

'Darling, Briar Rose,' said the first fairy, 'I shall give you . . . beauty.'

'Briar Rose already has beauty,' said the second fairy, 'so I shall give her . . . wit.'



There were so many fairies that soon they were running out of gifts.

'Your baby already has beauty, wit, charm, grace, humility, bearing, exceptional leadership skills, excellent hand-eye coordination, an ear for music, a refreshing lack of self-pity and great hair,' said the twelfth fairy, 'so I shall give—'

'Stop right there!' boomed a voice, and everyone turned to see the thirteenth fairy in the doorway, looking very angry indeed.

'A little bird told me you were having a party without me,' she sneered at the king and queen. 'And what do you know? It's true!'

The king tried to explain, but the thirteenth fairy did not wish to hear excuses. Her brow furrowed, her upper lip snarled,

and her eyes glowed as red as burning coals. Her black cloak billowed behind her and she began to rise up, growing taller and taller until she almost reached the ceiling. It really was a terrifying sight.

'Hoping for gifts, are you?!' she roared. 'Well, here's mine. On her fifteenth birthday, Briar Rose will prick her finger on a spindle and die!'

And, before anyone could stop her, she changed into a large red-eyed frog, then leapt out of the window.

For a moment, no one knew quite what to say. Then the queen burst into tears.

'Our darling daughter!' she wailed. 'What will become of you?'

But, luckily, the twelfth fairy had yet to give her gift. She had been going to give a remarkable ability to find lost socks, as that



was pretty much all that was left, but now she saw her chance to do some good.

'I think I can help,' she said. 'The thirteenth fairy's magic is very strong, so I can't remove the curse, but I can soften it a little. On her fifteenth birthday, Briar Rose will indeed prick her finger on a spindle, but she will not die. Instead she will fall asleep for one hundred years—'

'Thank you! Thank you!' interrupted the queen with joy.

'What good is that?' said the king. 'One hundred years! When she wakes, we will all be dead!'

'If you'll let me finish,' said the twelfth fairy. 'When Briar Rose falls asleep, so will everyone else in the palace—'

'What?!' exclaimed the king. 'Everyone?'

'Yes,' said the twelfth fairy. 'Then, when she awakes, you will all wake with her.'

'You think there's going to be anything left of this place after one hundred years?' spluttered the king. 'This tablecloth alone is worth eighty ducats. That wall-hanging is worth five hundred. Everything will be stolen! The place will be overrun with thieves. I'll be lucky to wake up with my breeches on.'

'Ah, I've thought of that too,' said the twelfth fairy (who was, to be fair, getting a little impatient at being constantly interrupted). 'As soon as the castle falls into its slumber, a giant wall of thorns will grow all around it, protecting you all from anyone who tries to enter.'

'Seriously?' asked the king. 'That's the best you can do?'



'I'm sorry,' said the twelfth fairy, tartly. 'If someone's got a better idea, I'm eager to hear it.'

'Let's not anger another fairy, darling,' the queen said to her husband. 'One bad spell is quite enough to be going on with.'

The king harumphed and folded his arms but said nothing more.

'Thank you so much for helping us,' the queen said to the twelfth fairy. 'We gratefully accept your gift.'

'My pleasure,' said the twelfth fairy, still feeling slightly put out.

'Yes, thank you,' muttered the king, begrudgingly. 'But I intend to make sure Briar Rose doesn't prick her finger in the first place. From this moment forth, by royal decree, all spindles are

banned. Each and every one of them must be destroyed!'

'What's a spindle?' asked Lana, looking up from the book.

'It's a pointy stick, basically. For spinning yarn,' said her mother.

'What's yarn?'

'Thread. You know, for making clothes.'

'So, if the king banned spindles . . . does that mean nobody had any clothes?'

'Erm, I'm not sure . . . Anyway, I think that's probably enough reading for one night.'

'But what happened?' protested Lana. 'Did it work? Banning spindles, I mean.'

'Lana, go to sleep. You can hear the rest at bedtime tomorrow.' And with that,



Ben Miller

her mother closed the book, tucked Lana  
under the covers, kissed her on the cheek,  
and turned out the bedside light.

