



## Chapter Five

Lana clamped her eyes shut in terror as she whistled head first into the darkness, sure that she was about to smash into the ground at any second. Then, just when it felt as if she could go no faster, the chute began to spiral rapidly, slowing her little by little, until it yawned open, spitting her out onto what felt like an enormous soft cushion.

For a few minutes Lana lay there, flat on her back in the pitch black, her chest heaving, and her nose full of an odd aroma that she decided could only be cheese. She propped herself up onto her elbows. Was she still in one piece? She wiggled her fingers and toes. Nothing broken, so far as she could tell.

'Hello?' she said nervously. Her voice sounded flat and dull, as if she was in some sort of enclosed space. Checking that she was clear of the chute, she pushed herself up into a seated position. Cautiously, she crawled forward. *Thunk!* Her forehead hit something hard, and a door in front of her swung open to reveal a light so bright that she had to shield her eyes.

It was a candelabrum, ablaze with candles!

Lana looked around. It appeared she was



perched in a high cupboard, looking down onto an enormous circular old-fashioned kitchen. What's more, she was completely surrounded by cheeses. And the 'cushion' that had broken her fall was in fact an extremely ripe Camembert.

Where on earth was she?

'Hello?' Lana called. 'Is there anybody there?'

No one answered. A waft of sweet-smelling pastry curled at her nostrils and, looking down, she saw that immediately below her was a large table, laden with tray after tray of mouth-watering jam tarts. *Someone must be nearby, she thought. These look like they are straight out of the oven.*

And the jam tarts were just the beginning. As Lana looked around it seemed the entire

kitchen was bursting with food: roast lamb with rosemary, fresh-baked pies with butter-glazed crusts, mouth-watering jellies seeded with fruit, cream horns with dollops of raspberry jam and a mountain of pillow-soft ham sandwiches.

She dangled one leg over the edge of the shelf. It was a long way down.

'Could someone help me?' she called.

It really was *very* quiet and still. Something wasn't right, she was sure of it. She felt a prickly feeling on her arm and pulled back her sleeve. Goosebumps.

'Hello?' she said again, a little more warily.

There was nothing for it; she would have to get down by herself. She turned, so that she was facing backwards, then lay down on her tummy to lower her legs onto the table.



At least that was what she planned to do. Unfortunately, kick, dangle and swing as she might, the table top was nowhere to be found. So, she lowered herself a bit more, then a bit more, until she realised too late that there was more of her off the shelf than on it, and the next thing she knew she was landing hard on her bottom on a rack of scalding-hot jam tarts.

'Ow! Ooh! Argh!' panted Lana, hopping down from the table, and brushing off the sticky jam tarts as quickly as she could.

Her heart skipped a beat. Now she was on the ground, she could see there was a large alcove in the kitchen wall, and sitting with their backs to her were what could only be a cook and a kitchen boy. Except they weren't moving. All that noise and they hadn't budged an inch.

'Oh, hello,' said Lana politely. 'I didn't see you there.'

Still neither of them moved.

'I fell down the trapdoor,' tried Lana again, edging forward. 'The one in the supermarket.'

But wait. Now she was closer, Lana could see that they were both asleep. The cook was slumped in a chair, and the kitchen boy was snoozing in front of the fire, although the flames appeared to be motionless.

Summoning all her courage, Lana stepped forward, and gently shook the cook by the shoulder.

'Excuse me? Can you help me?'

But the cook showed no sign of waking, so she did the same to the kitchen boy. Both of them were fast asleep.

Lana gulped nervously. Where was she?



Her eye caught the clock on the wall. It had stopped dead.

Suddenly she remembered her father! He was waiting for her at the checkout. Wherever she was, she mustn't stay long because she was already in trouble for loading the trolley with all that sugar . . . But on the other hand, this place was so fascinating she couldn't leave without exploring a little . . .

Lana looked around. The sand in the hourglass on the countertop had stopped mid-pour, and the flames in the oven were frozen stiff, like the petals of a giant flower. Over by the sink, something caught the light, and she took a step closer to investigate. Sure enough, a water drop had fallen from the tap, and was now suspended in mid-air, inches above the plughole.

And, what was that on the floor? She crept closer, and her mouth fell open in astonishment. It was a little brown mouse, lying flat on its back, its eyes clamped shut, and its mouth wide open. It was fast asleep! It was all so strange!

Was she dreaming?

She tiptoed forward into a passageway that led out of the kitchen. The walls were lit by torches, but just like the fire in the oven, their flames were perfectly still. Someone — or something — was sitting on the floor, and as Lana edged closer, she discovered a tall, thin man, his back propped up against the wall, snoring heartily. Wedged between his legs was an enormous chocolate cake, lighting his face with its fifteen unwavering candles.

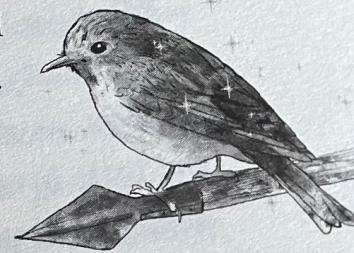
Was everyone in this place asleep?



The corridor wound left, then right, then led out into an enormous brightly lit hall. A gargantuan banquet table stretched the entire length of the room, crowded with unmoving guests. Each and every one was out for the count: some with their heads on the table, some leaning on the shoulder of the guest next to them; others curled up on the floor. And there, just in front of the giant castle doors, slumped back to back, were the king and queen, surrounded by an entourage of sleeping courtiers.

Lana had never seen a real king or queen before, and for a moment she too froze as still as a statue. Plucking up her courage, she crept towards them. The queen's throat glittered with jewels and her hair was wet, as if she had been swimming. The king was wearing

a golden crown, and in his hand was a loaded wooden crossbow. To Lana's astonishment, a little brown bird fluttered out of nowhere and settled on the tip of the arrow, making her jump. It turned its head and stared at her with a beady brown eye.



It was so strange to see something alive and moving among the stillness that, for a moment, Lana couldn't quite take it in. Then, almost as soon as it had landed, the bird took off across the hall. Deep in the shadows was a door, open just wide enough to show a flight of stone steps spiralling upwards, and the little brown bird began to flutter back and forth in the archway, chirruping loudly.

Was it talking to her?



What could it want?

Cautiously, Lana crossed the hall. Sure enough, as she neared the half-open door, the little brown bird fluttered up the flight of steps and out of sight.

Lana had an uneasy feeling about all of this: the frozen cook and kitchen boy; the uneaten food; the motionless king and queen. This was a very odd place indeed. But what if the bird really was trying to show her something important?

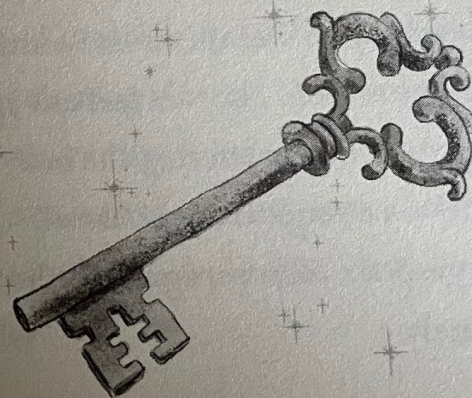
She stepped through the archway. The little brown bird was perched on one of the upper steps. As soon as it saw Lana it took off again, flying further up the tower.

So up the spiral staircase Lana went, round and round. Now and then she glimpsed the little brown bird ahead of her. But every time

she got close, it took off again, leading her higher and higher into the tower.

Up and up she climbed, and soon her legs began to tire. Determined not to give up, she plodded on, her feet like lead. Then, finally, just when she felt her lungs were about to burst, she turned a corner to find the little brown bird perched on the handle of a tiny oak door.

The door was open, but there was rusty key in its lock.





Lana took a step closer, and the little brown bird fluttered through the doorway.

What could be inside?

Breathing heavily from the climb, and with her heart racing, Lana mounted the final step, crawled through the doorway, and found herself in a dusty room, lit by one small skylight.

In the middle of the room was a bed, and the little brown bird hovered above it, as if this was the thing it had been trying to show her.

There, lying on white linen sheets, shrouded in light, was the most beautiful girl Lana had ever seen. She was fast asleep, with one arm stretched out across the bed; on her fingertip was a single drop of blood.

Lana gasped. She recognised the scene immediately.

There was only one person this could be.  
Briar Rose!  
She *had* pricked her finger! But where was the spindle?

It was only then that Lana noticed a strange noise – a rolling and rattling, repeating over and over.

At the far side of the room, half hidden in the darkness, there was a woman sitting with her back to Lana. In front of her was a wheel, on which she was spinning thread. She was dressed in a black hooded shawl. At her feet was a jumble of silk and in her left hand was a spindle, turning slowly. That was where the noise was coming from!

As Lana watched, the little brown bird fluttered over, and perched on the woman's shoulder.



'Who's there?' The voice was thin and airy, like wind in dry reeds.

All Lana's thoughts and feelings were suddenly drowned by a crashing wave of fear. She felt her heart racing. She moved her lips to answer, but she was so scared that no words came out.

Gradually, the woman turned. Her hair was white, but her skin was smooth like a baby's. Her eyes were closed and her nostrils were twitching, as if she were trying to smell Lana, rather than see her. She reached out and placed something in Lana's hands. The spindle. Then, slowly, the woman opened her eyes.

They were bright red.