



Chapter Nine

Carefully and quietly, Lana pushed herself to her feet. Off beyond the furthest trees a light was flickering. Taking a deep breath, she crept towards it. A young man in a white fur cape was standing by a campfire in a clearing. Beyond him, towering like a cliff face, was a giant wall of thorns.

He must be a prince! Surely he would help rescue Briar Rose? This must be the next part of the story . . .

Lana suddenly realised that it didn't matter that her mother had taken away the book. Not when she could come through the pick 'n' mix portal and visit any fairytale she liked! Imagine all the exciting adventures she was going to have!

Delighted, Lana crept closer. She could see now that the prince was accompanied by two elderly courtiers, one with a long nose, and one with big ears. They were discussing what might be behind the wall of thorns.

'I have heard,' the long-nosed courtier was saying, 'that beyond is a castle, and in that castle lives a dragon who breathes real fire.'

Lana frowned. That wasn't true at all!

'Why has no one ever seen it, then?' asked the prince.

'He only flies at night,' replied the long-nosed courtier wisely.

'It's night now,' countered the prince.

'The *dead* of night,' said the long-nosed courtier, correcting himself. 'And, anyway, there's a full moon. Dragons never fly on a full moon.'

'Nonsense,' interrupted the big-eared courtier. 'There's a castle, true enough, but no dragon. An ogre lives there, with his eight wives.'

'Eight wives?' asked the prince.

'And twenty-seven baby ogres,' added the big-eared courtier.

Lana frowned again. That wasn't true either. Didn't they know Briar Rose was in there?

'That's a great many ogres,' mused the prince. 'What do they all eat?'

'Sheep,' said the big-eared courtier, without a moment's hesitation.

Lana shook her head. If she didn't do something, Briar Rose might never get rescued.

'You're both wrong,' she said in a loud, clear voice, stepping out of the shadows.

'Who goes there?!' called the big-eared courtier, as he and several others scrambled to their feet.

'Lana.'

'And what manner of creature are you, Lana? A flower-fairy? A shape-shifter?'

'Well . . . I'm a girl.'

'A *girl*?' echoed the prince, as if he had never heard the word before in his life. 'And

how, pray tell, do you know what's inside the wall of thorns?'

'I've been in there,' said Lana.

'Really? By what means?'

This didn't feel like the moment to say, 'Through the pick 'n' mix section of my local supermarket', so instead Lana crossed her fingers behind her back and said in a loud, clear voice, 'Magic.'

The courtiers looked at one another.

'Well, do tell us what's inside?' said the prince, smirking at his courtiers, clearly not believing at all that a small girl like Lana could possibly know more than him.

'It's true that there's a castle,' said Lana, stepping forward. 'But there's no dragon, and there's no ogre. There's a sleeping princess. In fact the castle is full of sleeping people.'

'What's the name of the princess?' probed the prince.

'Briar Rose,' replied Lana. 'She pricked her finger on her fifteenth birthday and fell into a deep sleep for a hundred years because of an angry fairy's curse. But there must be a way to rescue her, and her family.'

The big-eared courtier gave a sarcastic laugh. 'Sounds like a very tall tale to me, sire,' he said, smugly.

'On the contrary,' said the prince. 'A curse explains the thorns. Presumably another, kinder fairy put them there as protection?'

'Yes,' said Lana.

'Yes, *sire*,' corrected the long-nosed courtier.

'And this princess . . .' said the prince, looking right into Lana's eyes. 'What's she like?'

'Kind and clever and courageous,' said Lana. 'And lots of other wonderful things. Every one of the twelve fairies gave her a gift—'

'Woah woah woah woah,' said the prince. 'The twelve fairies? Her family invited the twelve fairies, and they came? Fairies only eat from gold plates, so these parents must be very wealthy?'

'I don't know.' Lana shrugged. 'He's a king, so—'

'Trust me,' interrupted the prince, leaning in so that only Lana could hear. 'That means nothing. I'm heir to the throne of Dreitsmark and I'm penniless.' He turned away from her. 'Sir Ulrich!'

The big-eared courtier stepped forward.

'Message the first fairy and ask if she has heard of a princess called Briar Rose.'

The big-eared courtier took a quill, inscribed a short note, fastened it to the leg of a carrier pigeon, then threw the bird high into the air. The startled pigeon circled their heads once, twice, then took off over the forest.

There was a long awkward moment while they all waited for the reply. Lana felt an uneasiness creep over her. The prince seemed interested in Briar Rose because of her money, rather than because she was a good person. That couldn't be right, surely?

'Takes a while,' said the prince to Lana. 'The bird has to fly there, catch the attention of the first fairy, then she needs to reply . . .'

They waited some more.

'Would you like a drink?' offered the prince.

'No, thank you,' said Lana.

The prince made an elaborate performance of scanning the sky. 'It's usually quicker than this.'

Suddenly, there was a flutter of feathers, and the pigeon landed on the big-eared courtier's wrist. The man unravelled a small note and paused for effect, his face unreadable. Then in a loud clear voice he declared, 'The first fairy has indeed heard of Briar Rose. She was a guest at her birth ceremony and gave her the gift of beauty!'

'Then it is true!' exclaimed the prince. 'There is a cursed princess in there who needs rescuing by a gallant prince, who would no doubt be rightfully rewarded by the king and queen!'

Lana tried to smile, but she was having serious doubts about this prince and his

reasons for wanting to rescue Briar Rose.

'Sire,' counselled the long-nosed courtier.

'I wouldn't be too hasty . . .'

'Silence!' said the prince, taking off his jacket. 'I'm going in. Sir Ulrich, hand me my sword.'

'B-b-but, sire,' stuttered the big-eared courtier, handing over a delicate-looking sword with a silver jewel-encrusted handle. 'You'll wake the ogres!'

But the prince was already marching towards the wall of thorns.

'Or the dragon!' added the long-nosed courtier.

'Nonsense!' bellowed the prince, as he hacked away at the nearest briar with his weedy sword. 'There's only one thing I'm going to wake, and that's this rich

and beautiful princess!' He was making a real mess of slicing through the briar, but eventually, after a lot of huffing and puffing, he just about managed to saw his way through. The severed stump recoiled and a wave of rustling leaves rippled out across the entire wall of thorns, as if a brick had been thrown in the middle of a still pond. Then an extraordinary thing happened. Giant trunks began to twist and turn, and a long tunnel opened up, leading right to the door of the castle.

'Oh,' said the prince, with an air of disappointment. 'I thought it was going to be harder than that.'

'I've got a bad feeling about this,' said Lana.

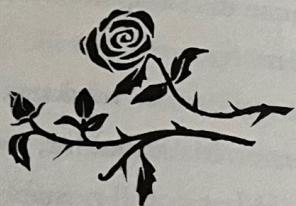
'Please, your highness,' pleaded the long-nosed courtier. 'I don't think this is wise.'

'Are you sure it's safe, sire?' asked the big-eared courtier.

'I'm about to become stinking rich!' called the prince over his shoulder, as he entered the tunnel. 'What could possibly go—'

Suddenly, the wall of thorns rushed towards him.

'WRONG!'



Chapter Ten

No sooner had the thorns closed in on the prince, than the two courtiers turned to look at Lana.

'It's her fault!' spluttered the long-nosed courtier. 'She's the one that told him about the princess!'

'Seize her!' bellowed the big-eared courtier.

This wasn't what Lana had planned at all!

The poor prince. Lana hoped he was just trapped and nothing worse.

She had to get back to the safety of the supermarket!

Lana started to run. She dodged the big-eared courtier with a swift change of direction, then the long-nosed courtier, by ducking between his legs.

Soon she was among the trees, leaping brambles and crashing through bushes, desperately searching for the hollow tree.

'Let's split up!' she heard the long-nosed courtier cry. 'She's in here somewhere!'

Lana searched high and low, but the hollow tree was nowhere to be seen.

Her heart raced. What would the men do if they found her?

'Would Lana, sister of Harrison, please

make her way to the customer service desk immediately?’

It was the little old man’s voice! He was calling her on the supermarket tannoy!

Lana turned on the spot. The sound seemed to be coming from the other side of a large holly bush.

But when she rounded the bush, she saw the long-nosed courtier peering up into the hollow tree. The big-eared courtier joined him, and she stepped back out of sight.

‘She’s vanished,’ said the big-eared courtier, sounding somewhat out of breath.

‘*Sssh!*’ hissed the long-nosed courtier. ‘Didn’t you hear the voice before? It was coming from in here.’

The big-eared courtier shrugged. ‘I didn’t hear anything.’

Lana’s mind whirred. Somehow, she had to get past them and into the tree. But how?

Which was when she had an idea. On the ground beside her was a long stick, long enough to reach right through the holly bush. As quietly as she could, Lana threaded it through the centre branches, so that the end was resting against a sprig of holly on the opposite side. Then she started to jostle it to attract the two courtiers’ attention.

‘Over there!’ hissed the long-nosed courtier. ‘The bush!’

The big-eared courtier turned to look, before gesturing to his friend that they should go and investigate. Then, silently, they both started to creep towards the dancing sprig.

It had worked! As the men crept behind

the bush one way, she crept round it the other way.

'Sssh!' whispered the long-nosed courtier, drawing his sword. 'I think we've got her.' The big-eared courtier grinned and drew his sword too.

With a loud cry, they leapt forward, stabbing at the sprig of holly, and Lana took off towards the tree!

She was almost there when she heard a shout behind her.

'She's getting away!'

But Lana didn't stop to look back. She ducked into the hollow tree and quickly scrambled up inside. For the first few handholds, all she could feel was spongy rotten wood, then, there it was, the smooth plastic of the chute.

'Grab her feet!'

Her fear at being caught gave her a sudden jolt of energy and she clambered upwards, round and round the twists and turns of the chute. Unlike last time, she didn't even stop to catch her breath, she just wanted to be out and safe.

Before long, the chute straightened out, and Lana found that she was able to stand up inside it. She bent her knees and leapt as high as she could!

For the briefest of moments, she found herself suspended in mid-air. Then ever-so-slowly, a mysterious force began to pull her upwards . . .

Little by little, she began to pick up speed, until she was racing headlong down the tube, before the now-familiar spiralling started,

slowing her down and . . . *bump*, her forehead hit something solid, and light streamed into the chute. She pushed up one last time and found herself back in the supermarket, with her head sticking out of a large tub of dolly mixtures.

