



## Chapter Fourteen

**B**riar Rose's party passed in a blur. Luckily, the curse had kept everything fresh, despite it being one hundred years old. A suckling pig arrived, high on the shoulders of four kitchen porters, and was followed by game pie, roast squash and buttered greens. After that came Lana's old friends, the cheeses from the cheese



cupboard, followed by the cream horns, fruit scones and (slightly squashed) jam tarts and, finally, when everyone was fit to burst, out sailed the birthday cake, lit with one hundred and fifteen candles.

No sooner had Briar Rose blown them out, when in sprang a troupe of tumblers, climbing higher and higher on each other's shoulders, climaxing in a human pyramid. Next came a strong man, who lifted eight sacks of flour with a wooden yoke; then, finally, a band of musicians played a merry jig and everyone got up to dance. Lana found herself swept away, like a piece of driftwood, on wave after wave of pure joy.

But it was when she saw the king and queen dancing with Briar Rose that Lana suddenly thought of her own parents. As fun

as it was here, she and Harrison needed to get home, before their mum and dad missed them and started to worry. So she pushed her way through the crowd, until she found her brother, dancing in a circle with Prince Otto and the two knights.

The music was now so loud that Lana had to shout directly into his ear.

'I think we need to go back!' she shouted.

'Sorry,' said Harrison.

'I SAID I THINK WE NEED TO GO BACK!'

'I know,' smiled Harrison. 'And I was saying sorry. For not believing you about the portal.'

'Oh,' said Lana. 'That's okay.'

'And I'm sorry for being so serious about everything recently,' said Harrison. 'I've



been so worried about school and studying that I forgot that sometimes it's important just to have fun.'

Lana smiled. She had her brother back.

'Can we come here again some time?' asked Harrison.

Lana felt a warm, happy feeling inside.

'Any time you like,' she replied, beaming.



After they had bowed to the king, and curtsied to the queen, and wished Briar Rose one last 'happy birthday', and hugged both her and the prince, and then hugged them again, and then promised to come back very soon, and then hugged them both one more time for luck, Harrison and Lana

crept out of the giant castle door, through the tunnel of sweet-smelling red roses, and into the night.

The grass in the meadow was wet with dew, and by the time they reached the woods their shoes and socks were soaked. Luckily, the moon was still high enough to light their way, and they soon found the tree with the hollow in it. The first part of the chute was always the trickiest, so Lana let Harrison climb up ahead of her, in case he got stuck.

'I keep slipping!' squeaked Harrison, from inside the chute.

'Press on the sides,' she shouted, 'and work your way up. The higher you go, the easier it gets.'

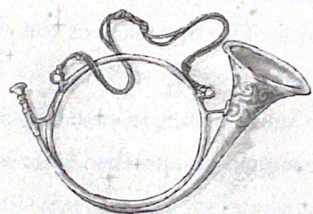
'Oh, Lana of Azupermarket?'

Lana ducked back out of the hollow.



Prince Otto was standing in the clearing, half shadowed by the moonlight.

'As soon as you'd gone, I remembered that there is something I want you to have.' He held out a hunting horn. 'Even the wildest of sprites need help sometimes. If you ever need me, call on this.'



And with that, he melted back into the shadows.

Then he came back for one more hug.

Then he melted back again.



The next thing Lana knew, a trowel was prodding at her forehead. It was Harrison.

'Ow!' she yelped, as she struggled out of the tub. 'What was that for?'

'Sorry. Just I thought it would be nice to get some jelly tots as a souvenir. We've got our pocket money, so we might as well spend it.'

Of course, once they had each collected some jelly tots, it seemed wrong not to add a few dolly mixtures and sherbet lemons, to remind Lana of her previous two visits. And then they added some chocolate drops, refreshers, fizzy snakes, and fried eggs for good measure.

The problem was, of course, that the sweets were so tempting, and the queue at the checkout so long, that by the time they'd



reached the till the bags they had filled up were now, well . . . a little bit empty.

'Hmm,' said the little old man, as he put their nearly-empty bags on the weighing scales (he was now, unsurprisingly, back on the till in his waistcoat and pillbox hat). 'Are you sure this is everything?'

Harrison and Lana nodded guiltily.

'One moment, please.' He picked up a telephone from beside the till and dialled. 'Hello, it's Till Four here. Could I speak to security?'

'We might have eaten one or two fizzy snakes while we were in the queue,' offered Harrison.

'I think I had a chocolate drop,' added Lana.

'Okay, I'll find him myself,' said the little old man into the phone. 'Wait here, please,' he said to Harrison and Lana, lifting

the barrier to the till, and heading off into the store.

'Sorry,' said Harrison to everyone behind them in the queue.

No sooner had the little old man disappeared from sight, when he reappeared as a security guard, complete with ginger beard and wig.

'I've got eyes on them now,' he said into a walkie-talkie. 'I do apologise for the inconvenience, ladies and gentlemen,' he said to the rest of the queue. 'Normal service will be resumed as soon as demonly – I mean *humanly* – possible.' Then he took hold of Harrison's and Lana's upper arms and frogmarched them into a room at the back of the store and closed the door behind them.

Lana looked around, taking in the small,



dark room. One wall was completely covered in screens that showed different sections of the shop floor. The little old man picked up a remote and pointed to the screen that showed the toy aisle, specifically the pick 'n' mix section.

Suddenly Lana remembered the hunting horn the prince had given her. Now, when the little old man wasn't looking, seemed a good time to hide it.

The little old man pressed rewind on the remote control and the image on the screen whirled backwards in time, until eventually black-and-white versions of Harrison and Lana appeared, clearly filling their bags to the brim with sweets. He pressed pause.

'How old are you, Harrison?'

'Twelve.'

'Twelve,' repeated the little old man.

'That makes you the responsible partner in this little debacle.' He tapped on the pick 'n' mix screen with a bony knuckle. 'This one's, what, eight?'

'Nine,' Lana reminded him.

'Right. Nine, so I think a judge would look favourably. But you—' he pointed to Harrison—'you should know better.'

'I'm sorry,' said Harrison. 'We both are, aren't we, Lana?'

Lana nodded. 'We won't do it again, we promise,' she said, using her most innocent-looking face.

There was a long pause, as if the little old man was weighing up several extremely attractive options.

'I hope you both enjoyed Briar Rose's party? It's a fun portal that one. Just a shame



that things don't really work out that well in that story.' He tutted sadly.

'What do you mean?' Lana said. 'That's the end of the story, isn't it? The happy-ever-after?'

The little old man shook his head and tutted again. 'Oh, the innocence of babes.'

He took a deep breath through his nostrils, and grinned.

'Look, why don't I forget all about the stealing?' he offered. 'And in return, Harrison, you can promise to read your sister the rest of the story when you get home. Find out what happens at the end of *Sleeping Beauty*, eh? Although, I warn you that it's probably much too scary.'

'I can read, you know,' said Lana, annoyed that yet again she was being told that the story was too scary for her. 'And I'm not afraid of

a fairytale.'

'I'm sure you *can* read,' smiled the little old man. 'But I want Harrison to hear it too. Because you're a team now, aren't you? Am I right, Harrison?'

Even though he thought the little old man was really weird, Harrison nodded.

'Good boy. Yes, you finish that story, and it'll be like this never happened.' He opened the door, inviting them to leave. 'Well, run along, children, and don't ever let me catch you stealing sweets from this store again.'

As soon as the children had gone, the little old man grinned. He had to hand it to himself: everything was going exactly to plan.





## Chapter Fifteen

That night, for the longest time, Lana lay wide awake in the darkness, unable to sleep. It had been a long day and Harrison said he was too tired to read the rest of the story, promising that they'd read it in the morning. She turned over and stared at the hunting horn on her bedside table, thinking about the weird and

wonderful events of the past few days. The little old man couldn't have been right, could he? Surely Briar Rose was safe now that the thirteenth fairy's curse was broken?

She closed her eyes, willing herself to go to sleep. Of course everything was fine. The little old man had been mean to her from the moment they met, and now he was just trying to frighten her. Nothing more.

Feeling calmer, Lana closed her eyes and began to drift off, but as she did an image formed in her mind. Briar Rose and Prince Otto were standing under a rose arch in the palace garden. Both of them were older; the sun was shining, Briar Rose wore a beautiful white wedding dress and, as the pair kissed, all the guests leapt to their feet, applauding wildly. The king and



queen beamed happily at one another.

But then something strange happened. Briar Rose was trying to speak, but no words were coming out. Her hair began to float, as if she was underwater, and she reached out, her eyes widening in fright, as if she was struggling to breathe. 'Help me, Lana,' she mouthed. 'Help!'

Lana opened her eyes. What did that vision mean? Was Briar Rose in danger?

She had to find out what happened next in the story . . .

Her brother was all twisted up in his bedclothes and snoring softly.

'Harrison,' she whispered, shaking him gently by the shoulder. 'Wake up.'

Harrison opened his eyes, then shut them again.

'I had a really weird dream. I think Briar Rose is in trouble.'

'Go to sleep, Lana.'

'Wake up!' insisted Lana, shaking her brother and accidentally nudging his Soldier Force display, which began to cascade down the shelves beside his bed, making a horrendous racket.

'Lana!' hissed Harrison in irritation, doing his best to stem the flow of plastic soldiers. 'Ssshh!'

'We need to find the book!'

'It'll be in Mum's sock drawer. It's where she puts everything she doesn't want us to find.'

'Okay,' said Lana, and padded off across the landing.

There was a long pause while Harrison



battled with his thoughts. One part of him wanted nothing more than to go back to sleep and forget about fairytales and Lana. But another, slightly bigger part of him was curious to know what happened to Briar Rose. Besides, if it really was as scary as the little old man said, Lana would need some company.

So, when Lana came quietly out of their parents' room with the book, heading for her bedroom, he hissed for her to join him.

'Put my light on,' he said. Then he opened the book of fairytales, turning the pages until he found the part of the story where Briar Rose and the prince got married, and began to read out loud.

And this . . .

Well, this is pretty much what he read . . .

**A**fter some time, Briar Rose and the prince fell in love, and got married. The prince came to love the king and queen as he would his own parents, and they all lived happily together in the castle as one family. The king and the prince spent their afternoons practising archery, while Briar Rose and her mother enjoyed wild swimming together in the newly restored castle moat.

More time passed, and Briar Rose gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl. The king and queen were delighted with the new arrivals to the palace and suggested a grand party, but Briar Rose and the prince politely declined, with thoughts of the thirteenth fairy and Briar Rose's curse in their minds. Instead, they gave their two children the simple names of Hansel and Gretel, and had



a small gathering for a few close friends.

As more time passed, Briar Rose and the prince grew tired of the pomp and ceremony of the palace, and decided to step away from their royal duties. They moved out of the castle into a simple house on the edge of the village and sent Hansel and Gretel to the village school. Briar Rose made and designed her own range of swimwear, which was extremely popular, and the prince set up a hunting shop that made premium bows and arrows, much to the joy of the king, who became his best customer.

But their problems were far from over. Unbeknown to them, the thirteenth fairy was now living in a cottage in the middle of an enormous forest. By now her years of wicked spells had made her an outcast with the other fairies, and she had taken on her truer form

as a witch. Her magic had become stronger than ever and the little brown bird that had once been her companion had now become her familiar.

A familiar, as you probably know, is an animal that acts as a witch's eyes and ears, and helps her work her magic. One day, as the witch was tending her garden, the bird alighted on a nearby tree and began to sing.

*'Era la la and a tra la lee. She has beauty for all to see!'* sang the bird.

'Who does?' enquired the witch, but the little bird flew away without giving her an answer.

The following day, as the witch was sowing lettuce, the little bird reappeared. *'Era la lee and a tra la la. The prince he came from a country far.'*



'What prince?' demanded the witch, but once again the bird just flew away.

On the third day, the witch decided to trick the bird. When it started to sing, she pretended she couldn't hear and just went on tending her garden.

*'Gra la loo and a tra la liss. The prince he woke her with a kiss,'* sang the bird. But the witch ignored it.

*'Gra la lee and a tra la loy, she bore two children, a girl and a boy,'* sang the bird, hopping a little closer. Still the witch said nothing.

*'Gra la lee and a tra la loon, two children fair as the Sun and Moon,'* the bird sang, hopping right onto the handle of the hoe the witch was using.

Quick as lightning, the witch snatched the little bird by its wing. 'Tell me who you are

speaking of,' she threatened as it fluttered helplessly. 'or I'll pull your feathers out one by one.'

'Don't hurt me, mistress, please,' begged the little bird. 'I'll tell you everything I know.'

'I'm listening,' said the witch.

'Briar Rose, the princess you put a spell on, has woken up. She's married Prince Otto, the son of King Otto the Sixth of Dreitsmark, and she plans to live happily ever after.'

The witch burst into laughter, as if it was the funniest thing she had ever heard. 'Does she indeed?' she chuckled.

'Please, please, let me go,' begged the bird. 'And I'll never tease you again.'

'Very well,' said the witch. 'But first, I've got a job for you.'

Soon after, the prince's father, King Otto



the Sixth, was admiring himself in his bedroom mirror when the same little bird tapped on the window glass.

'Please, please, come quickly,' it chirped. 'Someone's being robbed in the woods.'

Now, the king was a good man and so wasted no time in coming to the rescue. He arrived in the wood to find robbers trying to steal from a beautiful damsel. So he saw off the thieves, lifted the lady up onto his horse, and carried her back to his castle. There he gave her cool water to drink, and fed her bread and honey from a golden plate.

'At last,' said the damsel with satisfaction. 'A king who knows how to treat a lady.'

Of course the king fell in love with her immediately, and they were married the very next day.

But the damsel was really the witch in disguise, and while the king was greeting the wedding guests, the new queen stole upstairs to his bedchamber. She took up the king's pen and wrote a note, copying his handwriting exactly:

*Beloved daughter-in-law,  
I should very much like to meet you and  
my grandchildren and for you all to meet  
my new bride. Please come and see me at  
your earliest convenience.*

*Yours faithfully,  
King Otto the Sixth of Dreitsmark*

The queen stamped the letter with the royal seal, to make sure it appeared the king had written it himself. Then she sent the



note to Briar Rose by messenger.

It so happened that when the note arrived the prince was away on a hunting trip but, excited by the invitation, Briar Rose decided to make the journey alone with the children, leaving a letter for her husband so he could join them on his return.

It was a long and difficult journey, and when Briar Rose and the two children arrived at the castle, she was surprised to find it empty of everyone except the new queen.

'Briar Rose,' said the queen warmly, 'thank you so much for coming.'

'Do I know you?' asked Briar Rose, feeling a flicker of recognition.

'We met twice, very briefly,' replied the queen. 'When you were younger. Once at your birth ceremony, and once at one of

your birthday parties. I was a friend of your father's. And now I am your mother-in-law.'

Briar Rose frowned slightly. Something didn't seem quite right, but she wasn't sure what...

'Where is the king?'

'He has gone to prepare our house in the country, and I am to bring you to him.'

'That sounds wonderful!' said Briar Rose. 'When do we leave?'

'Now,' said the queen.

'Really?' asked Briar Rose in concern. 'But the children and I are very tired from the journey.'

'I'm afraid so,' replied the queen. 'That way we can be there by nightfall.'

And so without delay, the queen and Briar Rose set off along the forest path, with Hansel



and Gretel following behind. Eventually, after many hours' riding, they came to a wide river.

'Come,' said the queen. 'The river is very fast, so we must cross by boat.' She helped them in and took the oars. 'See how fast the river runs?' she called, as they reached the middle, where the current ran quickest. 'They say if you look into the water, you can glimpse your future.'

'I can see fire,' said Hansel, looking overboard, and seeing the reflection of the sun.

'I can see earth,' said Gretel, peering into the depths, and glimpsing the bottom of the river.

'All I can see is water,' said Briar Rose, leaning towards the river. And then, quick as a flash, the queen pushed her in!

Of course, Briar Rose was a strong swimmer

with lots of experience in wild water, and though the current was fast, she fought bravely against it.

'Help me,' spluttered Briar Rose. 'I'm drowning!'

'Stupid girl!' taunted the queen. 'It's me, the thirteenth fairy, now the most powerful witch in all the kingdoms.' As she spoke, her hair turned white and her eyes clouded red.

'Help us, Mother!' called Hansel and Gretel.

'Goody-goody Briar Rose can't help you now!' crowed the witch, amidst gales of cruel laughter. 'No one can!'