



Chapter Sixteen

Harrison looked up at Lana. Brave Briar Rose was drowning, and poor Hansel and Gretel were in the clutches of the witch!

'I know the story of Hansel and Gretel,' said Lana gravely. 'Mum told me about it.'

'What happens?'

'The witch wants to eat them.'

Harrison nodded slowly. 'And does she?'

'I don't know! But Briar Rose is in danger, and so are Hansel and Gretel.' Lana took a deep breath. 'We have to go back through the portal and save them.'

Without a sound, Lana stole back to her room and began to get dressed, knowing that Harrison was doing the same. Then she picked up the prince's hunting horn and slung it round her neck.

'So, what's our plan?' ventured Harrison, as they stole across the supermarket car park. The air was cold and damp, and up ahead of them, Grimm's was wreathed in mist.

'Simple,' Lana replied, holding up the horn. 'We go back into the story and blow on this. Then the prince will come and save them.'

'Right,' said Harrison, not entirely

convinced. 'What if he doesn't hear it?'

'He'll hear it,' replied Lana confidently. She rattled the glass doors. They were firmly locked.

'But what if he doesn't?'

Suddenly, two giant beams of light sprang from the darkness and swept across the car park. A lorry was approaching.

'Quick!' rasped Lana. 'This way! Let's try the back.'

Crouching low, she raced along the front of the store, and turned the corner. But the back of the store was protected by a high fence, topped with coils of barbed wire.

'Over there!' hissed Harrison. 'Look, a gap.'

Two of the metal fence posts were dented, creating a space that was just wide enough to squeeze through. At least, it was for Lana. When Harrison came to try, however, he

found he wouldn't fit. Ahead of them, the lights of a lorry arced across the loading bay.

'What now?' squeaked Lana.

'The lever principle!' exclaimed Harrison, pointing to a pile of rusting ironwork on Lana's side of the fence. 'Pass me that pole!'

'I can't lift that; it's too heavy!'

'Then drag it!'

As quickly as she could, Lana dragged the pole to the gap in the fence, and Harrison pulled it through. On the other side of the bay, the lorry paused by a security gate.

Summoning all his strength, Harrison lifted the pole like a weight lifter, wedged one end into the gap, and pushed. For a few seconds, nothing happened. Then there was a buckling sound, and the gap widened!

'Give me a lever long enough,' whispered

Harrison, as he joined Lana on the other side.
'And I will move the world.'

Lana looked at him in a way that said: I have no idea what you are talking about.

'Archimedes,' explained Harrison.

Now she remembered. He'd been studying Archimedes when he wouldn't come and play. Lana felt a twinge of guilt. Maybe she had been wrong to feel so upset with Harrison for studying so hard . . .

She was about to tell him just that when the lorry revved its engine and trundled through the open security gate into the compound.

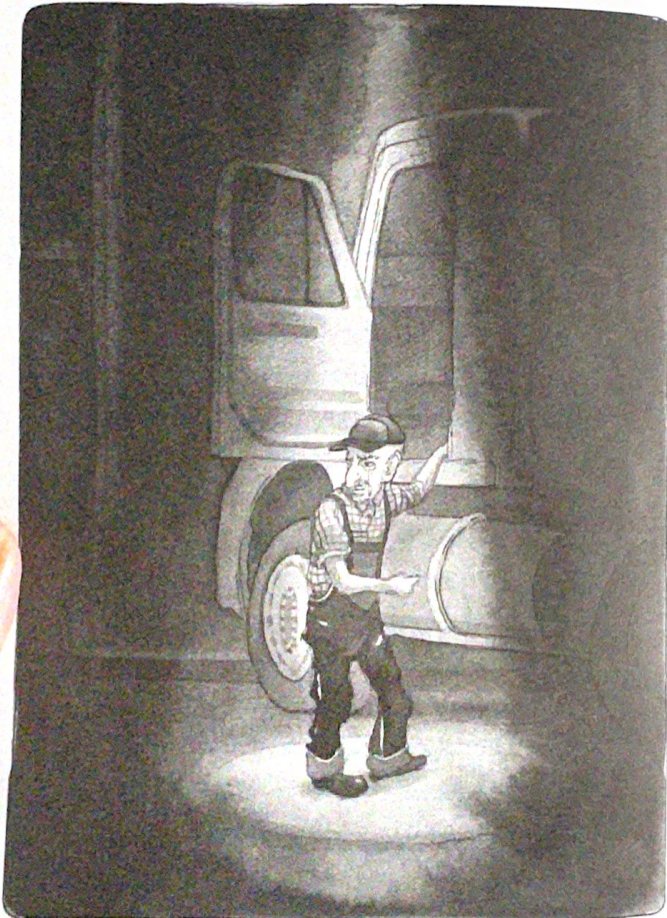
With an impossibly loud hiss of its brakes, the lorry jolted to a halt, and a familiar figure vaulted down from the cabin. The little old man threw open the loading-bay doors and switched on the lights. This time he

was dressed as a lorry driver, with maroon dungarees, a cap and a purple goatee beard. With the loading-bay doors open he trotted back to the cabin, hauled himself up into the driver's seat and started the engine.

'Come on!' urged Harrison. 'Now's our chance to get inside!'

They began to run as the lorry started reversing with a loud *beep-beep-beep*. Scouting around the vehicle, Harrison and Lana rushed inside, just before the lorry entered.

To begin with, all they could see was a yellow forklift truck and tower after tower of supermarket goods, wrapped in thick plastic and stacked on wooden pallets. They raced behind one of the stacks, just as the lorry hissed to a halt, and the little old man started to climb down from the cabin again.



'A familiar figure vaulted down from the cabin.'

'Over there!' whispered Harrison, spotting a door.

Seconds later, they were on the other side, struggling to catch their breath. They found themselves in a long corridor with purple walls. There were lots of gold doors leading off it. Harrison tried one. A toilet. He tried another. A broom cupboard. Then Lana tried the next. Phew. The shop floor.

They silently ran to the pick 'n' mix section.

'How do we know which tub to go through?' asked Harrison.

'Good point,' said Lana. 'We need a copy of the timetable. Wait here.'

A few moments later, she returned.

'Got it,' she said triumphantly. 'He keeps one at customer service, remember? Right . . . *Sleeping Beauty, Sleeping Beauty, Sleeping Beauty . . .*

“Wedding”, no, “The Witch and the Little Bird”, no . . . got it! “Briar Rose in the River”. let’s see, it’s Friday . . .’

‘Saturday,’ corrected Harrison. ‘At 3.30 am.’

‘Saturday at 3.30 am . . .’ repeated Lana. ‘So we need to travel through the . . .’ She frowned as she scanned the long list of times and sweets. ‘Mint imperials!’

And saying that, she threw back the lid of the mint imperials tub, ready for their next adventure!



Chapter Seventeen

Moments later, Lana was racing head first down the chute, pursued by a half a tub’s worth of mint imperials, closely followed by Harrison. The ride seemed longer than all the others put together, chasing up, down, right, left, then corkscrewing around and around, before finally plunging them into

fast-moving, ice-cold water!

Lana only just had time to catch her breath before she found herself rolling head over heels, water rushing into her ears, with no idea which way was up and which was down. She needed to find the surface, and quickly before she ran out of air! She was starting to panic, but then she saw the sun, shimmering faintly beneath her and, summoning every ounce of strength, lungs bursting, she turned in the water and swam with all her might towards it . . .

Her head broke the surface, and she took in a giant gulp of air.

'Lana! Quick! Hang onto this!' called Harrison. Relieved to hear his voice, she turned just in time to see her brother racing past, his arm outstretched, clinging to a log. Their

hands clasped and suddenly she was rocketing through the rapids alongside him.

The river was unimaginably wide, banked on either side by an immense silver birch forest, stretching in every direction as far as the eye could see. A pale sun was shining through the clouds, and a sharp wind was whipping the slate-grey water into white foam peaks.

'Kick your legs! We need to steer to the shore!' called Harrison. Lana did as she was told, and little by little, the log began to turn towards the bank, like an ocean-liner heading for port. Soon their feet were able to touch the bottom of the river, and they hauled themselves up onto the pebble-strewn shore, struggling to catch their breath.

'Thanks,' said Lana. 'If it hadn't been for

you, I might have drowned.'

But Harrison wasn't listening. 'I don't understand,' he said. 'Where's the boat?'

He was right: the river was empty.

'Harrison, look. Smoke!'

It was true. Way off in the distance, where the forest rose to meet the sky, was a tiny plume of blue smoke.

'Uh-oh,' replied Harrison. 'That must be where the witch lives.'

'That means . . .' Lana hesitated, not wanting to say it out loud.

'Briar Rose has drowned, and the witch has got Hansel and Gretel,' finished Harrison.

'Right,' said Lana, reaching for the horn round her neck, grateful it hadn't gotten lost in the rapids. 'I'm going to call the prince!'

With a flourish, she put the horn to her

lips, took a deep breath and blew!

But all that came out was a strange bubbling sound.

'Maybe it's wet?' suggested Harrison.

Lana frowned. She tipped the horn upside down, and sure enough, out trickled a stream of river water.

'Give it a shake.'

Lana did as Harrison suggested, then blew again. Still nothing.

'Let me have a go,' said Harrison. But he couldn't get it to work either. 'It's the bend,' he announced, putting the wide end of the horn to his eye, like a telescope. 'It's full of water.' He handed the horn back to Lana. 'We need it to dry out.'

Lana nodded. 'But how?'

Harrison shrugged. 'I don't know, but we

don't have time to think about that right now. We need to get to the witch's house and save Hansel and Gretel.'

'But how do we get across the river?' The water was as wide as a motorway, and its rapids were racing past like cars in the fast lane.

'Maybe there's a bridge?'

'Maybe,' said Harrison. 'But this place looks pretty deserted.' It was true. There were no signs of human life anywhere, just the reeds rustling at the top of the bank, the giant grey sky, and the immense silent forest.

Then Harrison wiped his wet hair from his face and smiled a broad smile. 'Oxbow lakes.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Remember, I was studying them for geography? We need to go upstream because

the further we go, the narrower the river will be. If we go far enough, we'll be able to get across.' Lana nodded. The lever principle, swimming practice, oxbow lakes . . . All the work, study, and training her brother did was definitely coming in handy. 'But we need to hurry if what you said about the witch eating the children in the story is true.'

Lana gulped. She really hoped it wasn't.

As fast as they could, Lana and Harrison began to run along the bank, picking their way among the boulders at the water's edge. Of course, on a normal day, if Lana had fallen into an ice-cold river wearing nothing more than jeans, her favourite unicorn sweatshirt, and pink All-Stars, she'd have needed a hot bath, ten episodes of something, and a change of clothes before she would even

slightly calm down. But right now, nothing was further from her mind. All that mattered was getting to that plume of smoke in time to save Hansel and Gretel.

'Wait,' panted Harrison, pulling her to a halt. 'What's that?'

'Where?'

'Up ahead, in the water.'

Lana looked to where he was pointing, but all she could see were waves, whipped up by the wind. Then, suddenly, in the middle of the river, something flashed white.

'A rock?' suggested Lana.

'It's moving.'

He was right. Something was crossing the river. And fast. As it reached the shallows, it reared up on two jet-black legs, raised its wings, arched its neck and began to sprint

through the water towards them.

'A swan! And it's charging at us!' cried Harrison. 'RUN!'

They turned on their heels, ready to run back the way they had just come, but then something extraordinary happened. The swan called out to them!

'Lana! Harrison!'

They both halted mid-stride. It's one thing to read about talking animals in a fairytale, but quite another to have one yell at you in broad daylight. Thinking that maybe they hadn't heard, the swan rose to its full height and began to beat its wings on the water, sending arcs of spray high into the air.

'Don't be scared! It's me, Briar Rose!' said the huge swan. Now that it was closer, Lana could see that the bird was taller than

a grown-up, with a wingspan to match.

'Hi,' called Lana, slightly freaked out. She was delighted her friend was safe, but she wasn't sure whether or not it was polite to point out she was now a swan, or to ask how that had come about.

'Nice to see you again,' called Harrison, unable to hide the puzzled look on his face.

'You too, but hurry!' hollered the swan, beckoning with the crook of her wing. 'I'll carry you across the river!'

'What if it's a trick?' Harrison said quietly. 'What if it's the witch in disguise?'

But the swan had now come close enough that Lana could see into her eyes. 'It's not the witch,' she said confidently. 'It's Briar Rose.' Then she splashed forward and threw her arms around the swan's neck. Briar Rose

closed her eyes and laid her head on top of Lana's. For a moment, they stood there, child and swan together.

'Darling Lana,' said Briar Rose. 'I knew I could depend on you.' She nodded at Harrison. 'Both of you. Now climb on my back, quick sticks. There's no time to lose.'