

Chapter Twenty

a little girl whose father died suddenly, leaving them and their mother all alone in the world.

Go begin with, their mother was very upset and cried day and night but, as time went by, eventually she was able to smile when she thought about the wonderful

times they had shared as a family.

(Dore time passed, and their mother decided it was time to get married again. One day, while she was gathering firewood in the forest, she met a little old man wearing extremely fashionable purple clothes, and shortly after she decided to marry him.

Lana saw the little old man pause as he put another log on the fire. She smiled to herself, knowing that everyone loves a story where they can see themselves as one of the characters.

A year after they were married, the couple had a baby daughter.

'Don't worry,' the little old man reassured his wife. 'Just because we have our own child, I won't forget about my stepchildren. I'll treat all our children just the same.

But he didn't. Instead, he spoiled his own daughter and was often mean to the little boy and girl. Whenever something broke, he made sure they got the blame, getting them into so much trouble that even their mother started to believe his lies.

While his daughter had a feather bed in her very own room, the little boy and girl were forced to live in a cage in the kitchen and given hardly anything to eat. Soon they were so miserable that they decided to run away.

But where will we go?' the little girl asked ber brother.

'The forest,' he answered. 'It's dark and full of dangerous creatures, but even so it has to be better than here.'

That night, they waited until the rest of

the house were asleep and then the little girl slipped her hand through the bars of the cage, undid the bolt and together they crept out of their house and into the forest.

Now, what the two children didn't know was that the little old man had magical powers. And when their mother had met him in the forest, he had cast a spell to make her fall in love with him. Ghe little old man was as ugly on the outside as he was inside, but his spell had made their mother believe him to be kindhearted and handsome.

Lana had to stop herself from grinning as she saw the little old man frown. He had forgotten all about the fire, and was now leaning forward on his stool, listening carefully to her story.

Like many people who understand magic, the little old man could see with his eyes closed, so even though he was asleep he could see the children creeping out of the house.

'ha!' he thought, 'Now I can be rid of my horrible stepchildren once and for all!' And he cast a spell on all the streams of the forest, so that anyone who drank from them would be turned into a deer. And, with the forest full of hunters, the children would never be safe.

Deanwhile, in the depths of the forest, the little boy and girl came across a babbling brook.

'Look!' exclaimed the boy. 'Let's drink! We've been walking for hours and I'm so thirsty!'

But as they both leant down to the river, the little girl heard the water whispering.

Don't drink me!' it said. 'I am enchanted

so that anyone who sips from me will turn into a deer!

The little girl turned quickly to her brother.

The Don't drink the water!

But it was too late. The little boy was gone, and in his place was a startled white fawn!

'Sister, sister, what's happening to me?'

'Mush, little fawn,' said the girl, taking care not to make any sudden moves that might scare the animal away. I'll look after you.'

Lana paused. Much to her delight, the little old man was hanging on her every word.

The girlled the fawn through the forest and soon she began to tire. But she couldn't find anywhere for her and the fawn to safely rest.

Soon her legs were aching so badly she felt as if she couldn't take another step. She was just about to bed down on the forest floor, when the little white fawn gently nudged her arm and led her through the trees towards a clearing, in the middle of which was a house!

It was beautiful! It had a pretty thatched roof and honey-coloured stone walls and a garden full of brightly coloured flowers and neat rows of delicious-looking vegetables.

When the little girl tried the front door, she found it unlocked, and so she led the fawn inside.

'Ḥello!' she called. 'Is anyone home?' But no one answered. 'Come, dear brother,' she said to the fawn. 'Let's look after this house until the owner returns, and hopefully they will be kind enough to let us stay.'

She gathered some tasty treats from the garden, cooked a midnight feast and then, both exhausted, they fell into a blissful sleep.

And they might have lived there happily ever after, if the next morning they hadn't been rudely awoken by a loud hunting horn!

'Harrison, do you know what a hunting horn is?' asked Lana. She gave Harrison a meaningful stare.

'No. What's a hunting horn?' asked Harrison, playing along.

'One of these,' barked the little old man impatiently, holding up the horn he had taken from Lana. 'Now, come on, what happened next?'

'Show him properly,' demanded Lana. 'This may be the last story he ever hears.

Maybe stand it on the stove, so it's much closer?'

The little old man sighed and set the horn down on the cast-iron stove above the fire.

Her plan was working! The stove will dry the horn, thought Lana. And so she carried on . . .

On hearing the hunting horn, the fawn sprang up from his sleep.

'Listen, sister!' cried the fawn. 'Can you hear that sound? It's the hunters! Let them chase me, please!'

'What?' asked the girl. 'Why would you want them to hunt you?'

'Please! I need to run!'

'Very well,' said the little girl. 'But when you come back, you must knock three times and say: "Open the door, sister dear, for

your brother fawn is here!" Then I will know it is you.'

The little girl opened the window, and the white fawn sprang out, over the garden fence, and after the huntsmen. All day long he taunted them, staying just out of range of their arrows. Then, as night fell, he trotted back to the cottage.

Just as the girl had told him, he knocked three times with his hoof and called out: 'Open the door, sister dear, for your brother fawn is here!'

The little girl flung open the door and threw her arms round his neck.

Thank goodness you're safe! she cried. Then she led him inside, gave him his supper and they curled up to sleep, she in her feather bed, and he on his pile of hay beside her.

But the next morning, they were once again woken by the sound of a hunting horn.

'A what?' asked Harrison. Even in the darkness of the cage, Lana could see a twinkle in his eye.

'I already told you,' said Lana, pretending to be annoyed. 'A hunting horn.'

'Of course,' said Harrison, 'Like the one on the stove.'

'Sssh!' said the little old man. 'Stop interrupting.'

'Please let me go with the hunters again!' exclaimed the fawn.

'Absolutely not!' said his sister. 'You were lucky last time. But it's too dangerous.'

'Please!' begged the fawn.

The girl felt she had no choice but to let him go, and once again he went bounding off through the forest to join the hunt.

But this time he wasn't so lucky. The head huntsman shot an arrow in his leg, and though the fawn still managed to limp back to the house, the huntsman tracked him and then watched from the bushes as the little fawn knocked three times and called out, 'Open the door, sister dear, for your your brother fawn is here!'

The girl opened the door and ushered the fawn inside.

Minim... thought the huntsman. So that's where he lives! A snow-white fawn! Very unusual. What a prize his head would make, stuffed and mounted on the palace wall! I'm going to tell the king about this.

And he snuck away without being seen.

When the girl saw that her brother was wounded, she was overcome with worry. 'Ghat's your last hunt,' she said as she bandaged his leg, wrapping it with herbs from the garden. It is too dangerous!

But you don't understand! pleaded her brother. Every drop of my blood yearns to run!

That night the little girl was so worried she hardly slept.

Sure enough, as dawn broke, they heard the horn again.

'Have you ever heard a hunting horn?' Lana asked Harrison, giving him another pointed look.

'Oh, will you both stop interrupting!' said

the little old man crossly.

'Well, I'm sorry, but we're just trying to get into the story,' said Harrison. 'I've never heard a hunting horn before.'

Unable to contain his annoyance, the little old man snatched the prince's horn from the stove and blew. Much to the children's delight, a rich and deep tone echoed out of the cottage and across the forest. 'It sounds like that! All right? Satisfied? Now, Lana, tell us what happened to the fawn?'

Harrison and Lana looked at one another. Lana's plan had worked, the little old man had blown the horn! Now they just had to hope the prince had heard it and came in

'Well?' demanded the little old man.

'Sorry,' said Lana, expecting the prince to

arrive at any minute. 'Where was I?'

'The huntsman has discovered where the fawn lives.'

'Ah, yes,' said Lana. She glanced towards the door.

'Then get on with it,' snarled the little old man.

Lana cleared her throat and continued with the story.

Sure enough, as dawn broke, the horn sounded again. Ghe fawn's wound had miraculously healed, and once more he bounded off through the forest, eager to join the hunt.

But the king had now been told of the fawn and had other plans. The had ordered the bunters to chase, but not fire. And while the fawn was running through the forest, the king paid a visit to the cottage.

had been instructed by the head huntsman, and then called out: 'Open the door, sister dear, for your brother fawn is here!'

The door opened, and-

Suddenly, the latch of the cottage clicked, and the back door swung open.

Lana and Harrison sat up, beaming, ready to greet the prince!

Then their faces fell.

Because towering in the doorway, wrapped in a purple-and-gold silk cloak, was the witch.



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he witch pulled back the hood of her cloak. Her skin was as smooth as china, her hair like flax, and her eyes sparkled like rubies.

She sniffed the air. 'Rumpolt, has it ever occurred to you why I live in a remote forest?'

The little old man gulped in fear and shook his head. 'House prices?'

'It's because I value my privacy.' She closed the door, as if to emphasise her point. 'You understand what privacy is, don't you?'

The little old man nodded, too scared to

speak.

'Then what, may I ask, was that dreadful noise?'

The little old man looked down at the horn round his neck. His lower lip trembled, as if he was about to cry. Then he thrust out an accusing finger. 'It's their fault.'

Ever so slowly, the witch turned and peered at Harrison and Lana, seeing them for the first time. She smiled, closed her eyes and breathed deeply, as if the air was full of delicious scent.

'Goodness me!' she cooed. 'Children!'
'From the supermarket,' simpered the

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little old man, wringing his hands, his eyes begging for forgiveness. 'I told you that my plan would work. These two are the first of many, mistress, I promise.'

'But what are they doing in there? That's no way to treat guests.'

'I . . . I . . .' stammered the little old man.

'I do apologise,' soothed the witch, unbolting the cage. 'Honestly, Rumpolt, what were you thinking?'

She offered her hand to Lana, who hesitated.

'Come, child. I won't bite, I promise.'

Warily, Lana took the witch's hand, and let herself be led out into the room. But instead of letting her go, the witch pulled her closer.

'And what might your name be?'

'Lana.'

The witch's fingers brushed Lana's cheek. They were ice cold, and Lana felt herself shudder.

'And who's this?' she peered into the cage.

'My brother. Harrison.'

'A boy!' beamed the witch. 'Come, let's take a look at you.' Hesitantly, Harrison climbed out of the cage and stood beside his

'Now, were you offered a drink? Or anything to eat?'

Lana and Harrison shook their heads.

'Rumpolt, some food for our guests!' She threw a meaningful look at the little old man, who nodded and set to work at the stove.

'Here, have a drink,' the witch smiled at the children as she picked up a pewter jug

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and filled two tin cups with steaming, thick hot chocolate.

As delicious as the chocolate smelled, they knew better than to take a drink offered by a witch. They each took a cup and lifted it to their lips, pretending to sip.

'Now, Rumpolt, where are those pancakes? It never does for children to be too thin, I always think. Every child ta—' The witch cut herself off, mid-sentence. 'I'm sorry, looks better, with a little fat on them.'

'At your service, mistress,' said the little old man breathlessly, offering up two deliciouslooking pancakes drenched in syrup.

'Yum!' exclaimed the witch, rubbing her hands with glee. 'Harrison, why don't you take one?'

Harrison looked at Lana and gave her

the tiniest of nods that only a sister could

understand.

Harrison gingerly reached out his hand, hovering over the pancakes, as if he was trying to choose one. But, quick as a flash, he turned and threw his drink into the little old man's face, who shrieked in surprise.

A second later, Lana threw her drink at the witch!

'Eurgghh!' spluttered the witch, stumbling backwards as the thick liquid dripped down her face.

Lana leapt around and pushed the witch into the open cage. Before the little old man had composed himself, Harrison grabbed him tightly by the ear and threw him in the cage, too!

Lana hurriedly bolted the cage, then the

two children raced for the door . . . They froze.

Standing right in front of them was the witch. How had she gotten out so quickly?

'Impressive,' she simpered. 'Most children are too terrified to try to escape. But you two . . .' She licked her thin lips. 'You two are different. Well done. Rumpolt, fetch their reward, please.'

Lana and Harrison turned round to see the little old man standing next to the now-empty cage. Their hearts sank: the witch's magic was too powerful for them to overcome. All they could do was watch helplessly, as the little old man sauntered over to a large glass-fronted cabinet. In it were row after row of tiny glass phials, each one full of coloured powder, and decorated with strange symbols.

'I think the green, don't you?' asked the witch, and the little old man dutifully handed her a little glass phial of powder. Smiling, the witch pulled out the cork stopper, tipped a few grains into the palm of her hand, then sprinkled them over Harrison's and Lana's heads.

Lana glanced across at Harrison and saw to her horror that he had been turned into a wooden statue! She tried to speak, but couldn't move her lips. She couldn't move her head either, or her eyes, or any other part of her body. Suddenly it dawned on her. She was a statue too!

'You're probably wondering why you can't move. You've been turned into wood, to keep you fresh. Rumpolt?'

The little old man edged into view.

'The girl can go outside with the others.

The boy . . .' The witch brushed Harrison's painted wooden cheek with yellow fingers.

'The boy can go in the pot.'

'Yes, mistress.'

'No!' Lana yelled in her mind. 'Let him go!'
But again no words came out. All she could
do was watch in horror as the little old man
dragged Harrison out of her eyeline.

Lana heard the lid of the cauldron being lifted, and the hiss and spit of the boiling water. Every part of her wanted to kick and punch and fight, to do anything she could to help her brother, but she couldn't move a muscle.

The witch walked towards the cauldron and out of Lana's line of sight. Now all Lana could see was an empty corner of the room! 'In he goes!' shouted the little old man.

And then Lana heard huffing and puffing,
as if someone was struggling with a heavy
weight...

Then . . . Zswing!

The sound of an arrow!

Immediately followed by a blood-curdling

scream!