



Chapter Eighteen

As wide and wild as it looked from the bank, the river was unimaginably broad and treacherous close up. But Briar Rose was more than equal to the task, powering through the rushing water like a steamboat, her giant wings and elegant neck sheltering the two children from the spray, while her enormous webbed feet pounded

the fast-moving currents beneath.

As they neared the opposite bank, a crooked wooden jetty sprang into view. Bobbing alongside it was the witch's boat.

Before they knew it, the swan was in the shallows, and nudging them off her back with her beak.

'We're here,' urged Briar Rose. 'Behind the jetty is a stream. Follow the stream, and you'll get to the witch's cottage.'

'Aren't you coming with us?' asked Lana.

Briar Rose shook her head. 'I can't leave the water.'

'Why not?' asked Harrison.

'The witch's magic won't let me. I've tried so many times, but the second I step on dry land, I find myself back at the bottom of the river, drowning. Then I swim to the surface, and the

whole thing starts all over again. I'm trapped.'

'But why would the witch cast such a horrible spell?' asked Lana.

Briar Rose shrugged. 'I have no idea. To punish me, I suppose. Now hurry. All that matters is you get to Hansel and Gretel before it's too late.'

'We'll find them,' said Lana, hugging the swan one last time. 'As soon as this horn dries out, we'll blow on it, the prince will come, and you'll all be together again.'

'Promise?' asked Briar Rose.

'Promise,' added Harrison, joining the hug.

Then he and Lana splashed out of the shallows and up the bank, pulling on handfuls of wild grass to help them reach the top. Then they scurried alongside the stream, Lana in front, Harrison behind, as it carved across a

stone-strewn meadow, before plunging into the dappled shade of the silver birch forest.

They ran in silence as the grass at the water's edge gave way to fern, which then gave way to bare earth.

'Sorry,' said Lana, over her shoulder. 'For saying you were boring for working so hard.'

'That's okay.'

'It's good you know about levers and stuff.'

'Thanks,' panted Harrison. The forest floor was steepening, as the little stream weaved its way ahead of them. 'And I'm sorry that I stopped playing with you, and for saying that you were making things up. When we get home, things will be different, I promise.'

He expected Lana to turn and flash a smile. But instead, she stopped running.

'What?' asked Harrison.

'The stream. It's gone.'

A few metres ahead of them, the babbling water sunk between two large grey lichen-covered boulders, then was no more. Which way should they go?

'Maybe we should climb a tree, see if we can see the cottage?' asked Harrison.

'How? There are no low branches.'

It was true. Everywhere they looked, slender white tree trunks towered above them, propping up a shimmering canopy of green leaves. Even if they stood on one another's shoulders, they'd never be able to reach.

'That's weird,' said Harrison.

'What is?'

'Listen. No birds.'

'Wait.' Lana put her finger to her lips. 'I

can hear water!' Then suddenly she was off, bounding up the hillside, giving Harrison no choice but to follow. As he hauled himself up over an outcrop of rock, he was greeted by the sight of Lana standing proudly at the head of a miniature waterfall.

'This way!' she called, and disappeared from view.

Harrison took a deep breath and scrambled up past the waterfall, onto a plateau. Lana was standing at its furthest edge with her back to him, looking out. She gestured for him to be quiet, and he crept up beside her.

Below them was an enormous wooden watermill, its giant wheel turning slowly in the stream. A rickety house next to it was surrounded by playground rides of all shapes and sizes: a carousel of brightly coloured

Ben Miller

horses; a swingboat, rocking back and forth, and a steam-train, circling in a figure of eight, each powered by an eccentric system of pistons, bands and pulleys.

Even stranger, Lana and Harrison could hear voices. Children's voices. And they were laughing.



Chapter Nineteen

'Gretel, stop! STOP!'
'Don't be such a baby, Hansel!' Hansel and Gretel's voices rang out across the dell, then collapsed in a fit of giggles. They seemed to be coming from high up, behind the house.

Lana and Harrison looked at one another. Was this some sort of trick? Where was the witch?

'Look!' whispered Lana. A narrow gangway led from beside the stream all the way up to the front of the house.

Harrison gave her hand a comforting squeeze and together they made their way through the ferns, towards it.

'Faster, Hansel! FASTER!'

'I can't! My legs are hurting!'

Softly and silently, Lana climbed, with Harrison close behind her, pausing every few seconds, looking for any sign of the witch. But the house appeared to be empty. They could see now that the decking around the house was crowded with plant pots. Lana turned and nodded at Harrison, and the two of them noiselessly mounted the last few steps. No sooner had they done so than they heard more laughter, coming

from somewhere behind the house.

'Gretel, watch!'

'I can't, I've got my eyes closed!'

As fast as they could, Lana and Harrison made a crouched run to the porch of the cabin, then ran along its front wall, ducking beneath an open window, in case the witch was inside. Then they raced along the side wall to the back of the house and peered into the garden.

It was magical. There were planters overflowing with sweet-smelling rosemary and lavender, neat rows of mouth-watering lettuce, and bright-green vines dripping with cherry tomatoes and broad beans. And in the centre of a small circle of green lawn, surrounded by apple trees, two children were playing on a see-saw.

'Higher! Higher!' shouted Gretel.

'I'm trying!' bellowed Hansel.

Lana couldn't help grinning. Briar Rose's children were safe! She glanced up at the house. The windows showed no signs of life, and the side door was closed. She nudged Harrison, and the two of them wove their way across the deck towards the apple trees, then ducked down behind a barrel.

'Hansel! Gretel!' called Lana, in as loud a voice as she dared.

But Hansel and Gretel were far too busy with their game to take any notice.

'Come on, you weakling!' hooted Gretel.

'I'm not a weakling!' barked Hansel.

'PSSST!' hissed Lana. But on the other side of the apple trees, the see-saw kept swinging.

'Are so!' taunted Gretel.

'Am not!'

After one last wary glance back at the house, Lana led Harrison under the bows of the nearest apple tree, and onto the lawn.

As soon as they were out in the open, it was clear that something wasn't right. Now that Hansel and Gretel were not half hidden by leaves, Lana could see that they weren't Briar Rose's children at all . . . They were painted wooden statues!

Lana felt a stabbing pain as sharp fingers gripped her left earlobe!

'Got you!' sneered a familiar voice, and as she twisted and turned to free herself, Lana realised her captor was the little old man! He was back in his maroon supermarket boiler suit, and with his other hand he had hold of

Harrison's earlobe too!

'Ow!' winced Lana. 'Let me go! You're hurting me!'

'You're hurting me!' mimicked the little old man, copying Hansel's voice exactly. 'Don't be such a baby!' he said, in a perfect imitation of Gretel. Then he burst into gales of laughter, somehow managing to sound like both children at the same time.

'Let go!' growled Harrison, trying to twist out of his grip, but the little old man's strength was far greater than his small frame suggested.

'Trust me,' he leered, 'this is nothing compared to what my mistress has planned. You wait till she gets home.' Then he marched them across the deck, kicked open the back door and dragged them into the

darkness of the cabin!

A domed cage made of birch twigs was just visible by the light of the fire. Its door was open and the little old man threw Harrison inside. Then he took the hunting horn from Lana's neck.

'I'll take this,' he grinned. Then he flung Lana in too, slammed the door and bolted it shut.

'That's mine!' demanded Lana. 'Give it back!'

'Pretty little thing, isn't it?' said the little old man, as he examined the hunting horn. 'Where did you get it, I wonder?'

'Where are Hansel and Gretel?' asked Harrison.

The little old man smiled a sickly smile. 'You just saw them.'

'Those were statues,' said Lana. 'The witch has taken them prisoner, hasn't she?'

'Taken them?' echoed the little old man. 'Not yet. But I'm sure she will soon. With parsley sauce, I expect.'

As he spoke, there was a rattling sound, and a cloud of steam belched out of the lid of a large cauldron that was heating over the fire.

'My mistress loves children, you see. And thanks to me, she now has a constant supply.'

He put some more wood on the fire, then picked up the empty log basket and headed for the door.

'What do you mean?' asked Lana.

The little old man paused. 'Seriously? Surely you've worked it out by now?'

Lana shook her head.

'You see, here in the world of fairytales we

are running out of children. Too many hungry witches, and too few of the little snitches to go around. But in your world there's children galore! So I – if I say so myself – had a rather ingenious idea—'

'The supermarket,' said Harrison. 'Don't interrupt.' The little old man shot Harrison a withering look. 'As I was saying, I had a rather ingenious idea. Bring children from your world into ours. Once you were here you'd be powerless against my mistress's magic. So, I persuaded my mistress to build a portal. And this is the really clever bit . . .' He started to snigger. 'I decided to hide it in a—'

'Supermarket,' said Lana.

'WOULD YOU PLEASE STOP DOING THAT!' shouted the little old man. 'But yes,

in a supermarket. Low prices to reel in the parents, and stories to hook the children.'

'But . . .' protested Lana, trying to make sense of this. 'You kept telling me *not* to read the story because it was too scary.'

'Exactly,' countered the little old man, fixing her with his beady brown eyes. 'How else do you get silly children to do what you want?'

'But wait,' interrupted Harrison. 'Why take us to all those other bits of the story? Why not bring us straight here?'

The little old man grinned. 'Why do you think?'

Harrison shrugged.

'To make you brave. If you'd come straight here, you'd have been terrified. And my mistress would hate that. She says

it affects the taste.'

'You're lying!' said Lana.

'And you're supper!' gloated the little old man. 'First, she'll turn you both into wood, like she did Hansel and Gretel. Best way to keep you fresh, she says. Then when she's good and ready, she'll boil you in that pot and eat you.'

Then he left, closing the door behind him.

'Quick!' hissed Lana, rattling the door of the cage. 'We've got to get out of here!'

But the door wouldn't budge.

'See if you can reach the bolt!' urged Harrison. But Lana could only get the tips of her fingers through the gaps between the bars of the cage.

'It's too narrow!'

'What are we going to do?' he gulped.

'We have to stay calm.'

'She's going to eat us! The witch is going to come back, and then she's going to eat us!'

'HARRISON!' Lana gripped her brother by the shoulders. He stared at her with eyes like saucers. 'Remember our mission. We're here to save Hansel and Gretel. Somehow, we have to get out of this cage!'

'How are we going to do that?' asked Harrison, a note of despair in his voice. Everything he'd studied hadn't prepared him for this particular problem.

Lana's mind was blank. She had no idea how they would escape. But then a thought struck her. It was risky, but it just might work.

'When he comes back, ask me to tell you a story,' said Lana.

But that was all she had time to say, because

at that moment the door flew open, and in came the little old man, struggling with a heavy basket of logs.

Lana watched him work in silence, choosing her moment. Her heart was racing, but she was determined not to show it.

'I have to admit,' said Lana, doing her best to sound as casual as possible. 'The supermarket, the pick 'n' mix, hooking us in with fairytales . . . it really was very clever.'

The little old man gave her a suspicious glance, then threw a couple more logs on the fire.

'The witch is going to be so pleased with you.'

There was a pause, while the little old man prodded the flames with a poker.

'When is she coming back?'

'Never you mind.'

'Lana?' Harrison pleaded. 'Please will you tell me a story, to take my mind off the witch?'

'Oh, very well,' said Lana, pretending to be cross. 'Just a quick one.'

'Can it be a fairytale?'

The little old man pricked up his ears.

'Of course,' replied Lana. 'Now, let me think . . .'

Lana pretended to think, but all the time she was watching the little old man closely. He was stirring the cauldron, but Lana could tell that he was listening.

'I know,' she said, in a confident voice, 'what about *The Little Boy, the Little Girl, and the Little Old Man*?'

'Oh, yes please,' said Harrison. 'I love that one.'

Of course, Harrison had no idea what Lana

was talking about.

'Now, how does it start?' mused Lana.

'Ah, yes . . .'

And this . . . well, this is pretty much what she told him . . .