

**New (Old) Fairy Tales for New Children**

By

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## **Abstract**

The creative thesis 'New (Old) Fairy Tales for New Children' makes a contribution to the field of creative writing research. It comprises creative work in the form of four fairy tales and a novel for upper primary/early high school readers (70%) and a short exegesis (30%). The creative work uses key fairy tale elements to tell new stories for contemporary children. The four fairy tales are intended to sit within the Western European tradition, drawing on the repetitions, cadence and storytelling voice of the tales collected by the Brothers Grimm.

The novel begins in the contemporary world and then moves to two connected fantasy worlds, one of which is Neither, a land of exiles. The other world is FairyLand where perfection, gluttony and ostentatious wealth dominate. The novel explores the ways in which fairy tales can act as subversive texts for children.

The exegesis reflectively explores the writing practice and the research that has informed it, with particular reference to the role of the unconscious in both writing and reading fairy tales for children. The first chapter of the exegesis focuses on the way in which the developed writing processes draw on the writer's unconscious in order to embed fairy tale symbols, language, cadence and themes into the first drafts of the works. The second chapter examines six works by other writers of original new fairy tale texts.

The second half of the exegesis details the research I have carried out and my conclusions as I endeavour to answer the question of the endurance of fairy tales over the past several centuries. I draw on evidence from fairy tale scholars, creative writers and psychoanalysts to show how the psychological depths of the tales and our unconscious responses to them have been a significant factor in ensuring their endurance. The insights into these responses and how they connect to the writing process have informed my own writing processes and led to the creative fairy tale works presented here.

The thesis as a whole explores the interplay of practice and theory.

## **Doctor of Philosophy Declaration**

I, Sherryl Christine Clark, declare that the PhD thesis entitled 'New (Old) Fairy Tales for New Children' is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature:



Date: 1<sup>st</sup> March 2018

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to my mother, Chrissy, who instilled a love of reading in me, and my sister, Karen, who continues to inspire me.

## **Acknowledgements**

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# **CREATIVE COMPONENT**

## **FOUR FAIRY TALES**

‘Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist,  
but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.’

Neil Gaiman (2002), quoting GK Chesterton

## THE WOLF AND THE BOY

One day Wolf found a small boy crying in the forest. The boy couldn't speak but, even if he had, Wolf could not have understood him. Humans spoke a strange language that didn't fit Wolf's ears or tongue.

At first Wolf thought about eating the boy, but he cried so long and so desperately that Wolf took pity on him. He took the boy to the edge of the forest for, after all, the boy must have been lost. He left the boy there and went back to his pack's cave.

But the next day, there was the boy again, crying in the middle of the forest. Again, Wolf took him back to the edge, thinking his parents must be very careless. This time Wolf hid and watched.

To his amazement, the boy's mother found him and slapped him hard and shook him. Punishment for getting lost, Wolf thought. But he decided to keep watching out of curiosity, even though his stomach rumbled with hunger. When darkness fell, he curled up on the fern and slept.

The next morning he was woken by crying. There was the boy and his mother, and she was dragging him into the forest. Wolf followed, watching and waiting.

When they reached the middle of the forest, she took the boy even further, close to Wolf's cave. There, she slapped him and pushed him down on the ground, and then away she went.

Wolf lay under a bush and watched the boy. He no longer cried. Was it any wonder? Wolf thought. Clearly he understood now what this meant.

But Wolf did not understand, not really. His pack cared for their cubs. Who would hunt for him when he grew old, if there were no cubs grown up?

Wolf approached the boy, who looked at him with dull eyes. When Wolf nudged him, he would not move. Finally, Wolf took the boy's shirt in his mouth and dragged him to the cave.

The other wolves crowded around. They thought the boy was food to share, but Wolf snarled and made them back off. "I will hunt for the pack," he said, "but leave the boy alone."

All that autumn, Wolf hunted far and wide, keeping his pack fed. The boy began to eat berries and mushrooms, and then he learned to eat raw meat, and

sometimes the she-wolves allowed him to suckle. He played with the cubs and curled up with them at night.

Still, Wolf knew the boy was not a cub and he worried about what might happen. That winter was long and hard and very cold. Snow covered everything and there was nothing for the boy to eat except scraps from the wolves. Everyone grew thin and haggard, but the boy most of all. His eyes sank into his face, and his legs and arms were like sticks. He was always shivering and spent the days with whichever wolf would keep him warm.

One long dark night, Wolf thought the boy would surely die. The other wolves would have happily eaten him, but Wolf couldn't bear the thought.

At dawn, when there was still a breath of life left in the boy, Wolf pulled him across his back and loped through the trees. This time he went in the opposite direction to a village on the other side of the forest. It was a long way and Wolf's back and legs ached.

Finally he reached the village and knew he would have to risk being seen. He carried the boy right to the nearest hut and eased him onto the ground. The boy's breath was so faint that Wolf could hardly feel it.

He scratched on the door and, when he heard footsteps, he leapt and ran. At the edge of the forest he stopped and watched. His heart beat like a small drum, and in his chest he felt a strange, sharp ache. He almost ran back to the hut and grabbed the boy up again, but he knew he must not.

The door opened and a plump woman with a red scarf around her head stared down at the boy. "Oh my, oh my," she cried out, and knelt beside the boy. She lifted him gently and, as she took him inside, she called to her husband, "Come quickly, we have received a gift from heaven."

Wolf couldn't understand her words, but he saw her gentle hands, the tears in her eyes and heard the thankfulness in her voice.

He sighed deeply. For long moments, he could not move, watching the closed door. It was as if he were suddenly weighed down with something he could not name. At last he was able to get up and lope back into the forest and begin the long journey home alone.

## THE HANDKERCHIEF OF TEARS

Once there was a horrible ogress who was so ugly and mean that tales of her had spread far and wide, and she could not find a single person to serve her. So the ogress stole a little girl away from her family in the night to be her slave. The ogress kept the girl imprisoned in a chain of bones in her tower and threatened her, 'If you try to escape, I'll add your bones to the chain.'

Every morning the girl had to boil water and wash the ogress's putrid feet. Then the ogress would sit by the window and the girl would comb the ogress's long green hair. The hair was full of lice and fleas and spiders and, as the girl combed, they fell to the floor and the ogress ate them.

'Yum yum,' the ogress said. 'Comb harder. I'm hungry.' Each day the little girl combed, and the ogress ate, and the bugs never seemed to be any fewer.

As time went on, the girl became more and more desolate as there seemed no hope of escape. If she wept, the ogress slapped her. Instead, each night the girl waited until the ogress was asleep and then she sobbed her heart out. Her tears dripped to the floor and formed puddles that the girl mopped up with her handkerchief. Before she crept to her pallet to fall into an exhausted sleep, she hung the handkerchief out on the window ledge to dry.

Many miles away, past hills and valleys and forests, lived a king who could not cry. He had lost his beloved wife and two children to plague, and his heart was incredibly heavy, so heavy that he could not get out of bed in the mornings, and each day seemed longer than the last.

The only thing that gave him any pleasure was the caged nightingale that had belonged to his wife. The bird would sing so sweetly for him, and his heart would grow ever so slightly lighter, but still he could not cry. One day his grief was so great and heavy that he thought he could no longer go on. He opened the door of the nightingale's cage and said, 'Fly, little bird. You deserve a better life than this.'

The nightingale didn't want to leave the king but she knew something had to be done to help him. She flew out of the palace and away on her search, swooping up high and down low. She flew east and west, north and south, but she found nothing helpful. Exhausted, she perched high in a fir tree to rest overnight. At dawn she flew on, still searching.

Far to the north, past a dark forest, she spotted a bright white square in the distance. It shone like a daylight star, so she flew towards it. It was the handkerchief, still damp with tears. The nightingale took it in her beak and sped back to the palace. The king was close to death, lying in his bed, barely breathing.

The nightingale dropped the handkerchief by his hand and sang loudly to rouse him. As he struggled to sit up, his hand touched the handkerchief. 'What is this?' he asked, and picked it up. As he held it, he felt the sad, lonely grief of the girl pour out of it. Overcome, he burst into tears, and cried for a whole day and night.

At last, as the sun rose, he felt so light and free of his grief that he was able to get out of bed, dress and go outside to greet his people. They were jubilant to see him recovered, and crowded around, but he wanted to find out where the handkerchief had come from. He called to the nightingale and asked her.

The bird flew into the air towards the north, then circled back, singing loudly to the king. So he called for his horse and his sword and set off after the nightingale. She swooped high and low and showed him the way across the hills and valleys and the dark forest to the ogress's tower. As soon as the king saw it, he knew who lived there. He climbed a tree so he could look through the window. He saw the girl in her bone chains combing the ogress's green hair. Just a few fleas and lice and spiders jumped out. The ogress slapped the girl hard and shouted, 'Comb faster, comb faster, I'm hungry today!'

The king was so horrified that he almost fell out of the tree. Full of anger, he climbed down and knocked hard on the ogress's door. Because the girl was in chains, the ogress had to answer the door herself. The king was ready with his sword and he cut off her head with one swipe. Then he gently released the girl from her bone chains, one by one, and carried her on his horse to her overjoyed family, who had almost given her up for lost.

The king rode back to his palace with the nightingale flying above him. She was never confined in the cage again. He kept the handkerchief close to him and let his tears fall freely for the rest of his days.

## THE GIRL AND THE ANCIENT TREES

Once there was a girl who lived with her mother near the forest. They were very poor and hardly ever had enough to eat, and she was thin and very small. But in the winter it was worse because they had no wood to heat their house, and shivered all day and all night. The king had forbidden the felling of any trees, wanting them all to build his ships.

The girl would go into the forest and search for fallen wood but often there was not enough even for a small cooking fire. The villagers had been there before her and scoured the forest floor bare. One day, she was so cold and hungry that when she couldn't find a skerrick of wood in the forest, she fell down on a damp, mossy mound and cried her heart out.

The trees around her rustled and creaked and whispered to each other. Finally, one bent down to her and said, 'Cry no more, child. The oldest of us will fall and give you wood to keep you warm.'

As she watched in fear and surprise, an ancient tree crashed to the ground and broke into hundreds of pieces, all small enough for her to carry.

'Oh, thank you, thank you,' she cried, and over that winter she carried home all the wood to heat the house and cook their food. There was also enough to sell, so that they didn't starve, and it carried them through the summer as well. When the villagers asked her, she told them it was just good luck that she'd found it.

But the next winter things were just as bad. Again, the girl searched the forest for wood but there was none. By the middle of winter, she and her mother were starving and shivering with cold, day and night. When the girl tried once more and found no wood, she couldn't bear to go home. She fell onto the mossy mound, crying and crying. The trees shifted and murmured and finally one bent down and said, 'Don't cry, child, we'll give you our oldest to keep you warm. But this time you must take only what you need and no more, and keep the wood secret.'

So the girl promised, and an ancient tree fell, and she gathered the wood and hid it in a cave. Every day she would go to her secret hiding place and take just enough, and carry it home to her mother. But the villagers were suspicious of the smoke rising from their chimney and one day one of them followed her into the forest. When he saw her secret store, he ran back and told the others.

They demanded that the girl tell them where the wood came from, and finally she did, explaining that the trees had spoken to her. They immediately cried, 'You must take us to the trees and make them give us wood, too.'

The girl pleaded and cried, and her mother pleaded and cried, for they knew it would mean no more wood for them. But three village men dragged the girl into the forest with them. 'Where did you talk to the trees? Show us!'

The trees watched and listened to all of this, and rustled and swayed and muttered to each other. When the girl reached the mossy mound, the men made her call out to the trees.

'I'm sorry!' she cried. 'I tried to keep our secret but they wouldn't listen. Please can you give them wood, too?'

Then the men pushed her off the mound and they stood on it instead. One shouted at the trees, 'One of you must fall.' A second yelled, 'Our village needs wood.'

'We've brought axes,' demanded the third, who cared nought for the king's edict. 'So hurry up or we will start chopping you all down.'

The trees creaked and moaned and muttered some more, and finally one said, 'Very well.'

The three men laughed and slapped each other on the back. The most ancient tree quietly swayed and sighed, and fell right on top of the three men, killing them all instantly.

The villagers came and got their dead men and buried them, and no one ever went into the forest again, except the girl who went every day to thank the trees and gather just what wood she needed and no more.

## THE TATTERED COAT

Once there was a boy who lived on a poor farm with his father and mother. They all worked hard, and the father was a naturally cheerful man, despite their hardship, and cheered them all up with jokes and banter. The farm was owned by a wealthy man who didn't look after his tenants. The father would often send his son into the nearby forest to forage for food such as mushrooms and berries, which helped them to survive.

But when the boy's parents suddenly died in an accident with an overturned cart, the boy was left all alone. The wealthy man would not let him stay in the cottage, so the boy decided to venture out into the world and look for work. He gathered the last loaf of bread and piece of cheese and set out on the road.

The sun shone, the day was warm, and he was happy to be on the road but was still deeply sad inside. He trudged along, feeling very lonely, and so was glad when an old man hailed him.

'I'm starving,' said the old man. 'I can't work and I haven't eaten for days.'

'Then you must have this loaf of bread and piece of cheese,' said the boy.

'What about you?' the old man asked.

'I'm making my way in the world,' said the boy. 'I'll find work and earn money for more bread and cheese.'

'Then let me give you my coat in return,' said the old man.

The boy looked at the tattered old coat and was of a mind to refuse, but he knew it would be ill-mannered and so agreed to take the coat. He put it on to please the old man and, as it didn't make him too hot, he kept it on as he walked.

He came to a dark forest and stopped, wondering if he should go through. It wasn't at all like the forest he knew. This one was dank and gloomy, with deep menacing shadows and no flowers, only rotting wood and black ferns. But the forest was so large that there seemed to be no way around it. He took a deep breath and set off along the forest path.

It wasn't long before night fell and he could no longer see his way. He decided to find a tree hollow to sleep in. He'd no sooner lain down than a rabbit came and curled up next to him. The boy thought about killing the rabbit, for then he'd be sure of a good breakfast for his empty rumbling stomach, but he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Then six sparrows alighted on him, tucked their heads under their wings and went to sleep. Finally, just as he was nodding off, a small fox came and settled by his

feet. The boy couldn't contain his surprise, not least because the animals were not afraid of each other. He fell asleep and, when he woke in the morning, they were all lined up in front of him, watching him.

'What do you want?' he asked, but of course they didn't answer. He put his hand into the coat pocket and found a meagre handful of crumbs that he sprinkled for the sparrows. In another pocket, there was a lettuce leaf for the rabbit, and in another pocket he found a few grapes for the fox.

When he set off again, he thought the animals would leave him, but instead they kept pace, the rabbit and fox at his heels and the sparrows above his head. The boy thought this was even stranger but he didn't want to tell them to go away.

Suddenly, he heard thunderous hoofbeats heading his way. There was no time to run or hide, but in a trice the sparrows flew into one pocket, the rabbit jumped into another, and the fox climbed into the largest pocket of all.

A few seconds later, two soldiers on horses raced along the path and stopped in front of him. 'What are you doing trespassing in the King's forest?' they shouted.

'I didn't know this belonged to the King,' the boy said.

'You lie,' said one soldier.

'Everyone knows no one is allowed in here,' said the other.

'You must be stealing game,' said the first.

'We'll take you to the King,' said the second.

'He will very likely hang you,' said the first.

'Very likely,' said the second.

The boy was dizzy, trying to follow what they were saying, and hardly struggled as they caught him up, tied his hands and feet and threw him across the back of the first soldier's horse. The boy hoped the animals in his pockets weren't being squashed, but he was much more afraid that the King might find the rabbit and surely hang the boy for poaching.

When they reached the palace, the soldiers dragged him to the King. The King looked even more grumpy and mean than the soldiers and the boy's heart sank. In fact, everyone in the court looked unhappy and frowning.

'You have been trespassing and stealing my game,' shouted the King.

The boy bowed low. 'No, Your Majesty. I have no bow or knife or sword. I am not a hunter, I promise.'

'What are you then?' the King asked.

The boy thought hard but all he could remember was his father's laughter and jokes and his mother's smiles, and how he would never see them again. Except ... if the King hanged him, maybe he would see them again!

That thought made him smile, and the King shouted, 'What is so funny, you fool? Are you some kind of jester?'

Immediately, the boy answered, 'I believe I am, Your Majesty.' For what did he have to lose? Perhaps if his heart stopped racing and he could calm his fear, he might even remember one of his father's jokes to tell.

'Very well,' said the King. 'Show me a trick. And it had better be a good one, or you will die.'

From within the coat, the boy felt the sparrows wriggle and jiggle. He put his hands into the top pockets and drew out the six sparrows. They twittered and chirped and then flew around his head in perfect formation, swooping up and down and finally coming to rest in a rafter.

The King and the court were silent but, from somewhere in the back, he heard a faint clapping which made the King start in surprise. He didn't mention it; instead he said, 'Not bad, but not enough to save you. What else have you got to offer?'

The boy felt the rabbit wriggle then, so he put his hand in the second pocket and drew it out. When he put the rabbit on the floor, it proceeded to perform like an acrobat, doing flips and rolls and finishing with a paw-stand, wagging its little furry tail.

This time the boy saw smiles around the court. Even the King's frown had almost gone. And again there was faint clapping and a small giggle.

'Not enough to save you yet,' the King growled.

The rabbit leapt back into its pocket and now the fox jumped out. When it sat on the floor, its whiskers twitching and its fine red fur gleaming in the lamplight, the court gasped and the King's eyebrows rose in astonishment.

The fox began to scamper around in circles, flipping and skipping, walking on its hind legs, and finally doing an amazing cartwheel before bowing to the King. All around the court, applause broke out, and even the King smiled. As the fox ran back to the boy and the applause died away, the sounds of soft clapping and a tinkling laugh came closer.

From behind a screen next to the King's throne, a girl emerged. She had pale, pale skin and long dark hair. Her cheeks were flushed pink and her eyes sparkled. 'Oh Father, that was the best show I have ever seen. I feel so much better.'

The King's face was a picture of joy. 'You have worked a miracle,' said the King to the boy. 'We feared she would pine away. I promised whoever made my daughter well and happy again could have whatever they wanted.'

The boy was so astonished that at first he couldn't reply. He looked at the sparrows perched on his shoulders and the rabbit and the fox at his feet while he thought about the King's offer. Then he said, 'Thank you, Your Majesty. What we would like is to live in your forest, but it is such a dark place.'

'When my daughter fell ill,' the King said, 'I was so sad and angry that I forbade everything to grow and be bright and happy. But now that she is better, I will restore the forest. You may live there as long as you wish and you will be paid a good stipend as your reward.'

So the boy went to live in the forest with all the animals, and flowers began to grow again and sunlight made its way through the branches and the rot disappeared. The princess loved to walk in the forest and often visited the boy and the animals, and she became completely well again. The boy still missed his parents greatly, but he found much joy in the forest and was not so lonely anymore.

**NOVEL**

**RED MAGIC**

‘If you are already a princess when the story starts, you usually have a problem.’

Alison Lurie (1990, p. 29)

## CHAPTER 1

Strange ice flowers and glaciers floated across my laptop screen, and then a shimmering yellow and blue sky dotted with stars. Mum had set me Iceland as a research project. That's what it was like being home schooled. Everything was a project.

Red-beaked puffins, huge splashing geysers and white-maned horses. I clicked, and clicked again, the website scrolling. *Sagaland. The land of stories.* My kind of place. Scuttlebutt bumped my arm and the mouse flew out of my hand. "Did you see something you liked?" I asked him.

The puffin popped up on the screen again and Scuttlebutt reached out a paw. Then the bird picture rolled to a photo of kids laughing as they swam in a hot pool, and it was my turn to reach out a wishful finger.

Friends. Fun. Adventure. If only.

Scuttlebutt licked my ear as if he knew what I was thinking. 'Hey, buddy.' I leaned against him for a few moments, but it was so hot in my bedroom that sweat was puddling under me. Ick. I peeled my legs off the vinyl chair and tried to ignore the sharp twinge in my bad leg.

Why was Melbourne so hot? Why couldn't we still live in Hobart? There'd even been snow there on Mt Wellington once. Nothing like the mountains of it in Iceland though.

In Hobart we'd lived in ... oh yeah, the little weatherboard house looking out over the river. And after that we'd moved to ...

Scuttlebutt stepped onto my keyboard with his heavy paws. Zap! Suddenly I was looking over his pointy ears at pictures of Vikings and trolls and elves. *What the ...* I sat up straighter. This was way more interesting. Iceland even had elf spotters who ... The back of my neck prickled and a moment later Mum loomed in the doorway. I quickly pushed Scuttlebutt aside and clicked on the back arrow.

'So, what have you found out?' Mum asked, peering over my shoulder.

'Um ... glaciers and volcanoes. Geysers and lava and snow.' *Elves and trolls. Better not mention them though.* 'How come they're all in the same place?'

'Geology and geography. It's an amazing country,' Mum said in her too-bright voice. I hadn't heard that voice in a while and a chill went through me. I glared up at her, and Scuttlebutt sat up straight, his whiskers twitching.

‘And?’ I said.

‘It’s meant to be a surprise,’ she said. The fake-o brightness was still there.

‘Mum, just tell me.’ We were moving again. I knew it.

‘Your dad will kill me ...’ But she couldn’t stick it out when both of us were glaring at her. ‘It’s for your birthday, Glory. You’re going to love it!’

I looked from the photos of snow and mountains and impossibly blue pools back to her smiling face. ‘We’re moving to Iceland?’

‘No, honey, a holiday. Truly. For two weeks.’ She reached over and scratched Scuttlebutt’s head; he ducked and pushed at her hand but he didn’t purr. ‘Your dad and I thought it would be a wonderful way to spend your thirteenth birthday.’

‘You said we might go camping.’ I hadn’t really been looking forward to sleeping in the bush with snakes and spiders all around me, but it was better than staying home and having the usual party with Mum, Dad and Scuttlebutt. Even if they did make it special with streamers and balloons and my favourite hummingbird cake.

‘Isn’t Iceland a million times better?’ She gave me a quick hug. ‘Now don’t tell Dad that I let the secret out, all right? He wanted to tell you himself.’

‘OK.’ The midday heat outside my window was radiating through the glass. The photo on my screen of people playing a game on the ice looked pretty inviting.

Mum went back to her workroom, leaving the door open. The scent of lavender drifted down the hallway, and the rustle of plastic told me she was packaging up the last of her lavender harvest now it had dried. Soon she’d start making the soaps and lavender teddy bears and herbal pouches she sold on the internet.

I clicked through the photos of Reykjavik, the ice skating, the geysers, the helicopter rides, the families at a festival in a grassy park. ‘It might be nice,’ I told Scuttlebutt but his moustache drooped alarmingly. ‘Hey, maybe we could go elf spotting in the snow ...’

He made an annoyed chirrup sound.

‘You’ll have a fur coat on,’ I said. ‘You won’t be cold.’

‘Er, Scuttlebutt can’t come with us, Glory,’ Dad said.

I hadn’t heard him come home and I jumped and spun around, knocking over my pen holder, making my leg twinge again. ‘What do you mean?’ Scuttlebutt had been going everywhere with me since I was two years old.

Dad bent to pick up my pens. ‘Quarantine rules. He has to stay here. It’ll be fine. Mrs Swan next door has offered to look after him.’

Dad didn't seem upset that Mum had told me, and I hardly cared about that anyway. Scuttlebutt was right at my shoulder, breathing loudly, his whiskers tickling my ear. He didn't want to stay with Mrs Swan.

'I can't go then,' I said.

'Of course you can,' Dad said. 'It's only two weeks. He'll still be here when you get back, and probably even fatter than he is now. Mrs Swan has bought enough cat food to feed a horse.'

'I can't go without my only friend,' I said. 'There's no fun in that.'

'You'll make friends in Iceland,' Dad said.

Now Dad was doing the fake cheerful voice and my neck prickled again. Scuttlebutt head-butted my ear and then licked it. I know, I know, I told him silently. Something's fishy.

'What'll be really amazing,' Dad said, 'is that on your actual birthday, we'll be on a ship cruising along the coast and seeing fjords and lava formations and stuff. A real adventure!'

I eyed him warily. 'When are we leaving?'

'Tomorrow morning.' Dad pointed to the suitcase on top of my wardrobe. 'Better get packing. Mum's even bought you some thermal underwear. Your very own long johns.'

I was trying to stop suspicion settling in my stomach. 'How did you book this so fast?'

Dad laughed. 'Oh we've been planning it for a while. Thirteen is a pretty special birthday.'

Mum loomed behind Dad in the doorway. 'It sure is. I've got you a snow jacket, too, and new gloves. Just in case. I can't wait to get there and see it all, can you?'

They both beamed down at me like magicians who'd just performed their biggest, cleverest trick. I forced a smile. 'Yep, it sounds amazing.'

They both sagged with relief. It was noticeable. But what could I say? They were totally my biggest cheer squad, and I always went along with them, even when I least felt like it.

'Lunch will be ready soon,' Mum said.

'Is it still super-hot in the kitchen?' I asked.

'Yes. The air con repair man still hasn't come.' She sighed. 'You can take your sandwich out to the garden if you want. It might be cooler out there.'

They both went towards the kitchen and I pushed my laptop away. I couldn't imagine what to pack for a freezing cold country. I didn't even know where my winter clothes were, or if they still fitted me. I pulled my dog-eared copy of *The Hobbit* out of my desk drawer and flicked through to find my bookmark. Scuttlebutt stretched out across my desk, curling and uncurling his claws. He wasn't happy.

I tried to read. I was up to where Bilbo Baggins was creeping across the gold trying to beat Smaug. I loved how he got to go adventuring with a bunch of dwarfs and outsmart a dragon, even if he took a bit of persuading at first. After this I planned to read *Lord of the Rings* again. Aragorn was my hero; on my poster he held his sword high, on his way to becoming the king. He was tough and brave, and everyone wanted to fight with him. Sometimes I felt like such a wimp. More than sometimes. Most of the time.

Not allowed to go to school or join any clubs, and I couldn't play sport with my leg anyway. Mum and Dad said it was for the best. They wanted to protect me. From everything. Especially the people who stared when I limped. I shouldn't have hit the girl in Grade Two who called me names, but ... I'd had friends, too.

Not anymore. Not after we'd moved house four times in six years.

Harry Potter was lucky. Not because he did magic and defeated Voldemort. Because he escaped from under the Dursleys' stairs and went to school and made *two* best friends.

Scuttlebutt blinked at me and his ears twitched. 'Yes, you are my best friend,' I said, 'but I want some human friends, too. Sheesh, I'd be happy with just one.' Sweat trickled down the side of my face and I wiped it away. The murmur of Mum's and Dad's voices floated to me from the kitchen. They sounded urgent somehow. Maybe they'd forgotten to get me a passport?

Iceland looked interesting. Exciting, even. But why were we really going there? It seemed a bizarre thing for us to do. OK, we moved a lot but it was always to another ordinary house in another boring suburb. Dad was an accountant; he wore a suit and tie to work every day. Mum's business was growing – people kept emailing her and saying she'd cured them, but she said they were probably exaggerating. Wherever we lived, our house was filled with lovely scents and boxes of post bags.

Mum called me for lunch and I reluctantly closed *The Hobbit*. Screams of laughter came from outside and I peeked out my window, wondering what was going on. The sun blazed down, and even the grevilleas in our front garden were sagging.

Across the street, a pile of little kids ran in and out of the lawn sprinkler. The mist made a faint rainbow and I watched for a minute, wishing I could join them. Better still, join their two older sisters who sat on the front porch, painting their toenails. Even from here, the tiny splashes of bright red lit up their feet. I'd never painted my own toenails any colour, with anyone.

For a moment, the loneliness was like an arrow through my chest. I let the curtain fall back and lay my head next to Scuttlebutt's. 'You and me, hey?' I said to him softly. He nudged me hard and I sat up. He was right: I was throwing another pity party. I should just walk across the street and say hi. Those girls looked friendly, didn't they? But what if they told me to get lost?

Maybe Iceland would be an adventure, and it'd be great to get away from this summer heat. I went to the kitchen, Scuttlebutt padding along behind me, and sat at the table. The pedestal fan was blowing hard, ruffling the newspapers they were both reading, but barely shifting the rest of the hot, sticky air. The crusts on my cheese sandwich had already started to curl up at the edges. I went to the fridge and got out tomato sauce and mustard and spread both on my cheese.

'Do I have my own passport?' I asked Mum. I liked the idea of that, my own little blue book that let me go anywhere.

'Yes,' Mum said. She glanced at Dad. 'They're all packed away together.'

'Can I see mine?'

'Not now, Glory.' Mum turned a page and the fan caught it and lifted it into the air.

Not now, Glory. How many times had I heard that? A million? Two million? I made holes in my sandwich with the knife, then pushed it all aside. It was too hot to eat. I thought of the cool rainbow sprinkler, the laughter, the bright red toenail painting. I felt that deep ache again.

'When we get back from Iceland, I want to go to school,' I said. 'I don't want to be home-schooled anymore.' I had no idea where the words came from and they made my stomach fizz with nerves, but I knew I meant them.

'Don't be silly,' Mum said.

'That's not a good idea,' Dad said.

Their eyes never left their newspapers, and that made me mad.

'It's not silly. It's an awesome idea.' I folded my arms.

This time they both looked at me. The silence stretched out and then their faces kind of shut down, and Mum said, 'Don't forget you have to do your PT after lunch.'

Physical therapy. Pfft! 'Aren't we even going to talk about it?' The heat bubbling up in me had nothing to do with the weather.

Mum raised an eyebrow. 'Lower your voice, Glory.'

Dad cleared his throat. 'Look at this logically,' he said.

'I am being logical,' I said. 'I want to go to school, wear a uniform, have some friends and be normal.'

'You don't know enough about the world yet,' Dad said.

'It's safer for you to be home with us,' Mum said.

'Why?' I shrieked. Yep, I'd turned into a volcano. Just like that.

'You know why,' Mum said flatly.

But that was the problem, see. I didn't know why. Not really. Not when I thought about it, which I was doing now, all at once in a big angry rush. 'If I can't go to school then I'm not going to Iceland!' I stood up from the table and my chair fell over. Scuttlebutt raced for the back door.

My heart was thumping so hard I thought it might crack my ribs. I ran out of the room and down to my bedroom, but even my posters seemed to be frowning at me. I grabbed my wallet and headed for the front door. I heard chairs scraping back in the kitchen. Dad called my name, but I refused to answer. I pushed open the screen door, stepped onto the porch and out into the bright sunlight.

The little kids and their sisters were gone, the sprinkler turned off, and the whole street was empty. I hesitated. I didn't know which way to go, but Dad's footsteps echoing along the hallway behind me propelled me into action. I turned left and walked fast, my leg jolting and protesting, but I kept going to the end of our block, crossed the street and hurried on.

I didn't want anyone staring at me or my leg or saying a single word. I just wanted to be alone. At the end of the next block, I stopped under a gum tree for a moment. Wow, it was hot. Fried-egg-on-car-bonnet hot. I'd always wanted to try that. I wished I'd brought a hat and sunglasses but it was too late now. No way was I going back for them.

I crossed again, the road surface burning the soles of my feet right through my runners, and tried to keep in the shade, walking from tree to tree. In the next block, there were store awnings but the air burned into my nose and throat. I had to get

somewhere cooler. Across the street was a cafe, half-full of people all drinking from cold glasses filled with ice. They all looked cool. They had air con!

I crossed and went inside, the cold air washing over me. Nobody took any notice of me, and I sat in a booth at the back, sliding across the red vinyl. I wanted an ice-cold, creamy, chocolate thickshake and I had just enough money for it. A teenage girl in short pink shorts and a black T-shirt came and took my order as if I was the most boring kid in the world and I was lucky she had bothered to come over, but I didn't care. I was just happy to be in a place with other people, people who weren't my parents.

I watched a group of teenagers in the booth across from me near the front. They were about sixteen, the boys cracking jokes and having sword fights with plastic straws and generally being loud, and the girls laughing and comparing nail polish and telling the boys they were idiots. If only that were me in that booth with a bunch of friends, laughing and having a great time, making lots of noise so that the grownups frowned and sniffed. If only.

But if I won the fight with Mum and Dad, that could be me. At high school. Making friends at last, maybe having a sleepover, going camping. All those things that kids my age did. Nobody would care about my dumb leg. And if anyone said anything, or teased me, I'd ... I'd ... well, I wouldn't be the crybaby I was when I first went to school. And I wouldn't hit anyone like I did in second grade.

Be honest, I told myself. You have no idea what you'll do. You'll probably fall to pieces and run home to Mum and beg to be home schooled again.

No! I wouldn't. I couldn't! When the other kids got to know me, they'd forget about my leg, I was sure.

The waitress put my thickshake down in front of me with a thump and slid the bill onto the table, tucking it under the salt shaker. 'Anything else?'

'No. No, thanks,' I said.

I stuck my straw into the thick, creamy shake and sucked hard. A river of sweet, delicious coldness slid into my mouth and down my throat. Yum. I sucked again, the shake so thick that my cheeks hollowed in.

This was so cool. Me, in a booth, with a scrumptious, chocolatey shake. Yeah, it'd be even better with friends, but for now, I was having a great time.

Except I wasn't, not totally. In the back of my mind, something niggled, a little hook in my brain that tugged and pulled and wouldn't let me be. Wouldn't let me just suck down some more shake and enjoy myself.

I tried to nudge it off, push it away, but it wouldn't budge. I drank more thickshake, determined to ignore it. It was just me feeling bad about yelling at Mum and Dad, that was all. They'd forgive me.

But it wasn't that. It wasn't the familiar I'm-in-trouble feeling, because that was always for little things – refusing to do PT, or not turning the light out at night, or not staying on the porch.

It was a bigger, darker thing, like a black crow sitting on the fence with its wings folded in tight and its yellow eye staring right at me so I couldn't look away.

Whoa, where did that come from?

It didn't matter. What mattered was that I suddenly knew I had to get home as fast as I could.

I slapped four dollars on the table, took one last huge mouthful of the shake and ran outside. The heat still pushed at me like a burning wall, but in the sky, dark purple clouds were moving fast and, in a few seconds, they'd covered the sun. The street went dark, everything was a purple shadow and I started running. Too bad I was limping, and within a block my dumb leg was aching and no matter how I tried, I couldn't make it work any faster. I was desperate to get home.

When my house appeared at last in the distance, I tried to speed up, my leg doing a hobble-di skip, but no matter how fast I went, I knew it was already too late.

## CHAPTER 2

I wiped my clammy hands on my shorts and pushed open our squeaky front gate. The path seemed impossibly long and I felt like I was walking in slow motion. Everything was silent.

Our screen door was hanging off its hinges, totally trashed. Nails had popped out and the mesh screen was ripped clean across. Marks on the bottom half looked like a rake of claws. No matter how worried or mad Dad was, he wouldn't have done that. I stopped on the path, and a rush of cold air swirled around me. My feet didn't want to go anywhere near the inside of our house. I wanted Mum or Dad to come rushing out and yell at me.

Nothing happened. Nothing moved.

I made myself go closer, to the bottom of the steps, then up them, one at a time, stopping and listening before I got to the porch. The porch chairs were both upended and their cushions ripped. The thickshake gurgled in my stomach. A strange smell wafted out of the house towards me. It was like ... when you strike a match, that sharp sulphur smell that hurts your nose.

I didn't want to go inside. *There's something in there. No, there isn't, don't be stupid, you're not a little kid, come on ...* Every bit of me trembled, inside and out. But I needed to know where Mum and Dad were. Right then, I hoped Dad would come out and shout at me for going away without permission. But he didn't. I stepped onto the porch, my heart pounding. Far away, at the other end of the hallway, light was streaming in through the back door. Maybe they were in the garden!

I crept along the hallway; the paintings hung crookedly, and the rugs were askew. I reached Mum's workroom. The door was wide open, its handle broken and the side of the frame was splintered. 'Oh my -' The floor was covered in broken glass and dried plants, a stool lay on its side, and books were ripped apart. Mum's work table was in two pieces, as if something had smashed an enormous fist down on the middle and broken it like balsa wood. The smell of herbs, sharp and tangy, filled the air but overlaid by something foul, something ... dead.

'Mum? Dad?' My voice came out all squeaky. I could hardly breathe, let alone talk. 'Scuttlebutt? Puss, puss ...' My chest hurt and my stomach lurched, but I had to keep going. Tears burned in my eyes. A breeze whistled through the back door. They had to be out there.

I forced my feet to move again, one step at a time, holding onto the wall for support, then the door frame. The kitchen was empty but all the cupboard doors and drawers were open, as if someone had been desperately searching for something. Packets of food were split open and splattered across the floor and benchtops. Everything had been pulled out of the fridge and the eggs smashed. The back door had been wrenched open so hard that the handle had made a dent in the wall. *They have to be outside. Safe.* My legs were wobbly but I made it to the top of the back steps. 'But ...' The word jammed in my throat.

Our backyard looked like a tornado had hit it. Every single plant Mum had been growing had been destroyed. Not one shrub was left whole. The pebble paths were gone. Even her intricate network of pipes and sprinklers was just a mess of plastic.

This wasn't possible. I sank down onto the back steps and wrapped my arms around myself, staring at the chaos.

How long had I been gone? Not even an hour.

Were Mum and Dad hiding? A rush of hope forced me to my feet again and I went back through the house, room by room, looking for clues, praying that I'd find my parents and Scuttlebutt huddled inside a wardrobe somewhere, or under a bed. Every room was tossed upside down, beds upended, books and clothes thrown around like playing cards in a wild trick. I crawled under mattresses, pushed aside broken chairs, even made myself go up through the little door into the roof space.

I tried to call Scuttlebutt again but the words wouldn't come out.

I left my room till last – I don't know why. Maybe I couldn't bear to see it messed up, like all the other rooms. But when I opened my door, I found it was the worst. Every book was shredded into lumpy confetti. My three bears were ripped apart, stuffing and bits of furry cloth everywhere. The posters on my walls had been pulled down and shredded. Even brave Aragorn was torn apart. The contents of every drawer had been tossed around like rubbish.

It hardly mattered. Because my parents were missing.

Tears rolled down my face, but I couldn't make a sound. The huge lump in my throat wouldn't let me. A black, slimy fear grew inside me so fast that there was no room for the milkshake anymore and I had to run for the bathroom and throw myself at the toilet, just in time for the chocolate milk to come spurting out in a creamy brown fountain.

At least the vomiting got rid of the lump in my throat. I washed my face and hands and sucked in a long shaky breath. There was only one thing to do – I had to call the police. The words ‘home invasion’ rang in my mind.

I searched for Mum’s phone, and found it in the kitchen covered in flour and egg yolk. When I cleaned the mess off it, the screen was cracked like a spider’s web and wouldn’t light up.

‘Hello?’ A woman’s voice echoed down the hallway. Maybe it was Mrs Swan.

I ran out, hoping she had Scuttlebutt, and stopped. A strange, squat, grey-haired woman in a purple dress stood at the front door, gazing around at the mess.

‘Bogger,’ she said. ‘That’s bad.’

‘Who are you ...’

She barely glanced at me, just walked right in and peered into Mum’s wrecked workroom. ‘Never ready, never ready, never ready,’ she muttered.

‘What ...’ Was she from the police? I’d never seen a police detective who looked like this.

She spun around. ‘You can’t stay here.’ She eyed me up and down, a scornful look on her face, but I caught a flash of fear in her face.

‘I –’

‘You’d better come with me.’

She was crazy. Why would I do that? I had no idea who she was. ‘But –’

‘Pack some clothes. Now. Hurry up. Chop chop!’ She made shooing gestures and then actually pushed me towards my bedroom. ‘*Hurry, girl!*’

I couldn’t not obey that tone. ‘Who are you?’ I demanded, while searching for my backpack.

‘Your grandmother, who do you think? Hurry up!’

‘I don’t have –’

She made a rude *tsk* sound and came into my room, pulling the backpack out of my hands and shoving in clothes from the floor where they lay, not even bothering to check what she had.

‘Right, that’ll do,’ she said. ‘Let’s go.’

I opened my mouth to object but she grabbed my arm and pulled me with her. ‘What about shoes?’ I squeaked.

‘There are some on your feet.’ She kept pulling, down the hallway, out the front door, down the steps, across the street. It was like trying to fight with a small army

tank. The old jeep she dragged me to looked like it had spent twenty years in the desert. Its grey paint was flaking and pocked, its canvas top faded and flapping. ‘Get in!’ she said, her voice shrill with panic, and shoved me at the passenger door.

A stab of fear cut through me; I scrambled onto the cracked leather seat and looked for a seatbelt. She leapt into the driver’s seat, started the engine and put it into gear with a horrible grating sound, then gunned the motor and took off with a screech of tyres. My door slammed shut and I clutched at the dusty dashboard.

‘Sit back,’ she shouted. ‘Hold on!’

A large black 4WD roared at us from a side street and she swerved wildly around it and accelerated. I glanced back – the car was following us but its windows were so dark that I couldn’t see inside. Before I could ask who they were, she swerved again and I fell against the door, banging my elbow hard, pain shooting up my arm. I yanked at my seatbelt, finally getting it to click home. That calmed my heart rate from a zillion beats per minute down to a million.

The woman bent forward over the steering wheel as if that might make the jeep go faster. Her grey hair was tucked behind her ears but tendrils stuck to her face. Same as Mum’s hair did. She had a dead-straight nose like Mum’s, too. Her hands on the wheel were wrinkled but strong – tendons stood out as she wrestled the jeep around another corner.

Up ahead was a T-intersection and off to our left was the entrance to a dark alley.

‘Hang on tight,’ she said. The jeep tyres screeched as she wrenched the wheel and crossed the middle line, steering straight for the alley.

A car was coming the other way but she kept going, cutting in front of it, jeep engine roaring as we sped into the narrow alley. Dirty bricks whizzed past my window and I clung to the sides of my seat. The alley was a dead end and this crazy woman wasn’t slowing down one bit. I was about to die like a fly splatted against a wall.

The red-brick barrier at the end came closer and closer. I braced, desperate to close my eyes, but I couldn’t. I opened my mouth to scream.

There was a bang, leaves flew into my face, and then we popped out of a hedge and were driving down a country lane.

Sunlight spilled into the jeep, along with the smell of jasmine and gardenias, and the woman relaxed back against her seat, slowing down at last. A small smile twisted her mouth. ‘Glad that exit still works.’

‘You ... you mean you weren’t sure?’

‘Not entirely. But the alternative would’ve been worse.’

‘Yeah, we would have been smashed against a brick wall.’

She frowned at me. ‘No, they would have caught you, stupid girl.’

I fumed. Mum and Dad never called me stupid. I tried to think of an insult, but my brain was still full of red bricks. ‘Where are we going?’

‘The safe house.’ She pulled a plastic container out of her pocket and handed it to me. ‘Here, have a mint. Your breath is disgusting.’

My face burned. ‘I threw up.’

‘Clearly.’

I took two mints and gave her back the container. The mints did make my mouth taste a lot less like a garbage bin. The jeep roared along past hedges and trees, over a small stone bridge and stopped at a crossroads. Beside me a herd of brown cows munched grass in a field. She peered at the signposts, mumbling, ‘Little Southey? West Westwick? Maybe I need to go through North Westwick.’

‘You don’t know where your own house is?’

‘I’ll know it when I see it,’ she said. ‘It’s been a while. I’m pretty sure I have to go west.’ She accelerated straight across the crossroads, bouncing through potholes and going so close to the hedge that sprigs of it ended up on my lap. Soon, she was smiling. ‘Yes, this is it.’

I thought it might be safe now to ask a question. ‘Why did you say you’re my grandmother?’

‘Because I am.’

Her scornful tone was back and I snapped, ‘Mum said you were dead.’

‘Obviously I’m not.’

‘You might just be saying you’re my grandmother.’

She sighed. ‘I’d hardly risk my life to come and get you if I wasn’t, now, would I?’

She had a point. I remembered our wrecked house and shivered. ‘Where ... where are Mum and Dad? Are they ... dead?’

She glanced at me. ‘You’re a big girl now. You can take the truth, can’t you?’

I flinched. All this and suddenly the *truth* sounded too big and horrible. I squeezed out the words, ‘I guess so.’

‘Aha!’ She pointed through the dirty windscreen. ‘Found it.’

At first I couldn't see what she was pointing at, but then she swung the jeep around one last corner and roared up a gravel driveway, coming to a shuddering halt outside a grey, gloomy stone house. It looked like a jail. There were even bars on all the windows, painted white with curved spikes on them, but bars all the same. 'This is your house?'

'A safe house. One of them. There's a difference.' She got out of the jeep and stretched, then marched up to the front door and put both hands on it, muttering some words. The door swung open and behind it was a dark hallway. Very dark. No way was I going in there.

She beckoned me sharply. 'Get a move on, girl. Never met anyone so slow.'

'I never met anyone so bossy and rude,' I muttered, but I climbed out of the jeep and stumbled to the doorway. In the hallway, she opened a power box and pulled down a lever, then flicked the light switch next to it. An old chandelier lit up white walls and ceiling and the pale yellow wooden floor. She beckoned to me.

'Get your bag. Don't unpack. You can have a bath when the water is hot.'

I wanted a shower but I didn't dare say so. She pushed open a heavy wooden door on the right-hand side of the hallway. 'You can have this room.'

I peered in – it was like a cell, with a single mattress on a metal frame and a light bulb dangling from a wire. At least in jail they had TVs. My stomach gurgled loudly, but I could still see all those eggs smashed across our kitchen floor, and I didn't think I could eat.

She said, 'If you like baked beans, there might be a tin or two in the cupboards. Not much else.'

I nodded. A strange tiredness was creeping over me and all I wanted to do was sleep. Instead I went back to the jeep for my bag and stopped on the front steps, gazing in amazement. The whole countryside was spread out around me, a patchwork of green fields and woods and distant houses. A bumblebee buzzed past, brown-and-white birds chirped and a squirrel ran up a nearby tree. What? A squirrel? 'Where are we?'

'We're in England,' she said behind me, making me jump.

'That's not possible,' I said.

'Just like your mother,' she snapped. 'If I say black, will you say white?'

I turned and glared at her. 'What's this truth you were going to tell me?'

'It can wait. We'll eat first. Then we'll talk.'

I sighed and fetched my bag, throwing it on the mattress, and found the kitchen at the end of the hallway. It was old-fashioned, with a huge black stove and a row of dented saucepans hanging above it. The old wooden table had drawers underneath it, and the chairs held faded patchwork cushions. Everything was covered in a layer of dust. She emptied baked beans into a rinsed pot, heated it on a gas flame and then scooped a huge pile of the steaming beans into a bowl for me, and gave herself a small amount.

‘Aren’t you hungry?’ I asked.

‘Not at the moment. Too much on my mind.’

As I breathed in the aroma of the baked beans, I was suddenly starving and when I’d finished gobbling them down I wanted to lick the plate. She’d only eaten half of hers and was staring at the many-paned window in the far wall.

*That’s a mullioned window.* The thought popped into my head and out again as she blinked and focused on me.

‘It’s getting cold. Put something warmer on.’

I didn’t argue because she was right. Goosebumps covered my arms, and I was almost shivering. I went to my room and put my backpack on the old iron bed, pulled out my jeans and a grubby blue hoodie, but there was no hair brush. My hair was too short to bother anyway. At least I still had on my favourite red runners, the ones Scuttlebutt liked to sleep on.

*Scuttlebutt!* With the jeep and the wall and now this England thing, I’d completely forgotten about him. I slumped on the mattress, my face in my hands. How could I have forgotten my best friend? What was the matter with me? A wail built up inside me and I tried as hard as I could to keep it back. But my cat! Where was he? I thought back. I’d last seen him heading for the back door.

*Oh please, please, let him be safe under Mrs Swan’s house.*

Mum and Dad missing seemed unreal. Scuttlebutt missing and frightened ... Tears filled my eyes. Dad always said, no sense crying over spilt milk. But this was more than milk. This was the worst thing that’d ever happened to me.

Still, I didn’t want *her* coming in and telling me I was being a baby.

I sat up and wiped my face and took three big breaths. *Steady, heart, steady.* I didn’t know what was going on, but this woman, grandma or not, did know and it was time she told me. I found her in the front room, putting a match to a pile of scrunched-up newspaper and kindling. The room was freezing, with only one tattered rug on its

stone floor. Over the fireplace, there was a painting of dark green woods and a stream, and a stag that looked down at me with strange yellow eyes.

She stood up, brushed her hands on her skirt and watched the flames flicker and then catch hold, creeping up the paper and licking at the kindling. Before I could get out a word, she said, 'Right, come with me.'

I sighed and followed her back to the kitchen where she opened a door that looked like a broom cupboard and flicked a light switch. Out of the gloom emerged a set of wooden stairs leading down. 'Follow me. Stay behind me. *Don't* walk past me.'

I was getting tired of her ordering me around. Never a please or thank you, not even a 'Could you?' She didn't wait for me, just set off down the stairs holding the wooden rail tightly. I followed, trying not to breathe. The smell of damp, stinky clothes rose up, reminding me of when Mum forgot she'd done laundry and three days later found it all still in the machine. Ugh! At the bottom of the stairs, the woman walked straight to the stone wall on the other side. She bent, peering all around, and then said, 'Aha' to herself. 'See this?' she said to me.

I bent down. I couldn't see a thing at first; then my eyes adjusted. It was a hole in the stone, about the size of a two dollar coin. If she hadn't pointed it out, I would never have found it. 'Yes.'

'That's your escape. Don't forget it. Probably you'll never have to use it. You have to remember, when you put your finger in, say, 'I'm going home' or it will take you ... somewhere you don't want to go.' She glared at me. 'Never forget that. Words are always important. *Very* important.'

My escape? That little hole? I felt an overwhelming urge to say something rude. First she said she's my grandmother, then she drove me through a wall, then she pointed to a hole in a stone and gave me crazy instructions. But I couldn't think of anything rude enough.

I knew I'd had enough of all this bulldust though. I wanted proper answers. Not this stupid finger-in-the-hole stuff. I'd get answers out of her and then I'd leave. We couldn't possibly be in England, for crying out loud. We hadn't been on a plane, I didn't even have my passport. It was somewhere with Mum and Dad's. Probably shredded.

I stomped back up the stairs and went to sit by the fire. When she came in and put a log on the crackling flames, I waited, fuming, until she sat down. Then I said, 'Right. Tell me the truth. All of it. Now.'

I thought I'd have to wrestle it out of her, but she leaned back in the tattered armchair and said, 'I think your parents have been taken away. To prison.'

I spluttered, 'That's ridiculous. Dad's an accountant but he's totally honest.'

She ignored me. 'They could be in one of several places. All a long way away.'

Obviously, if we really were in England. 'Can we go and get them out? Talk to the police? Get a lawyer or something?'

She chewed on a fingernail. 'No. they're in Fair ...' She peered at me. 'You don't know, do you? She hasn't told you.' Her voice fell to a mutter. 'Radiance, what have you done?'

Cold snaked through me. Nobody but Dad and me knew Mum's real name was Radiance. She always told people to call her Rina. Maybe this woman *was* my grandmother. 'What's going on? Why was our house wrecked?'

'There's ... did you see anyone at your house? What did you see?' She frowned as if she'd suddenly thought of something, something that was my fault. Her eyes were little lasers. 'Where were you when they came?'

'When *who* came?' Two could play that game.

'Where were you?' she shouted, so loud that I jerked back in my seat and my heart pounded.

'I was having a chocolate milkshake,' I said. 'At the cafe. By the time I got home, they were gone.'

'You were lucky,' she said, and her mouth was a thin hard line. 'Very lucky. If you'd been there, you'd be the one gone and your parents would be ...' She sniffed. 'She said you were worth it.' Those laser eyes came back to me. 'Are you?'

I couldn't answer. It was like she was accusing me of doing something terribly wrong, just because I was alive. I stood up. 'If you're not going to help me find Mum and Dad, I'm leaving.' I hated how shaky my voice was but I couldn't help it.

I got as far as the door and there she was, blocking my way, pushing me back. 'Don't be stupid. You think your mother did all that to protect you and you're just going to limp out of here and be grabbed? You have no idea. Stupid, stupid girl.'

'Stop calling me stupid!' Spit sprayed from my mouth. As bad as calling me Gimpy or Hoppy. I'd seen her frown when she watched me walk. Too bad. I was getting out of there. 'You're not the boss of me,' I said. I pushed her aside, a bit more roughly than I meant to, and walked to my room to get my bag.

'You're making a big mistake!' she shouted.

I kept my back to her and pushed my dirty clothes into my bag, then tried to zip it up. I had no idea where I was going, but I was determined to get out of this horrible house and away from her. We must be somewhere in Australia. I had to find my way home and start looking for my parents.

She loomed in the doorway, her face bright red, her hands gripped tightly together. ‘All right. Fine. It’s just ... I tried to tell Radiance it was no good running.’

I didn’t like the way she was being nice now. Usually in stories that meant they were faking it. ‘What do you mean?’

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

I jumped, my hand clutching at my bag zipper. It sounded like a giant was knocking on the front door. I would swear the house shook, and stone houses shouldn’t be able to shake like that. In the doorway, she stood frozen, her face nearly as grey as her hair, her eyes as big as an owl’s. Her mouth moved like she was trying to talk but nothing was coming out. My stomach rolled and I could taste the baked beans again. ‘Who’s that?’

Her hand jerked, pointing downwards. ‘Down there,’ she cried. ‘Down there! Do what I told you.’

*Bang! Bang!* The door shuddered and shook and a big iron nail popped out of the top hinge and clanged onto the floor. What the heck could do that to a six-inch thick door?

I edged out of my room, dragging my backpack with me, moving towards the kitchen and the basement door. She screeched, ‘Leave the bag, stupid! Run!’

The panic in her voice finally released my frozen legs. I ran to the kitchen, flung open the cellar door and scrabbled for the light switch. When the bulb flickered into life, it barely lit up the gloom below. I scuttled down the stairs, clutching the rail, and across to the stone wall. What should I do? Look for the silly little hole? How would that save me? I stopped. Maybe whoever was knocking was just a neighbour. Maybe she was ...

From above, there was an enormous thud as though the huge front door had just slammed open against the wall. Dust and grit rained down on me, and heavy footsteps thumped down the hallway above. She screamed, a high-pitched ‘Raaaahhh’ that was cut off with a loud thud. My heart was fluttering in my throat like a trapped moth. I knelt, my fingers scrabbling across the stones, frantically searching for the hole she’d shown me. It wasn’t there! The footsteps were right above me now in the kitchen. More

dirt and bits of concrete and plaster fell down around me and I heard myself whimpering.

Where was the hole?

There!

A huge black shape filled the doorway at the top of the stairs. Every hair on my head rose up like dog hackles. I thrust my trembling index finger into the hole.

Too late, I remembered I was supposed to say something.

Lightning flashed all around me, an acid smell burned all the way up my nose and down my throat, and everything went dark.

### CHAPTER 3

I spun through cold blackness as if I'd been thrown into a clothes drier, my arms and legs twisting and flying. Before I could do anything, I landed with a thump, and pain shot up my bad leg into my hip. I screamed. Everything went black again. I think I passed out.

When I came to, I knew straightaway I wasn't in the cellar. This place smelled like Mum's garden. Maybe the hole had taken me home after all! I opened my eyes and blinked, trying to focus. Three centimetres from my face, on thick green moss, a huge red-and-green beetle stared at me, its antennae twitching.

'Whoa!' I sat up fast, backing away from it, and pain zig-zagged up my leg again. The beetle scuttled away and I looked around.

*OK, take a breath. Don't freak out. Do. Not. Freak. Out.*

This wasn't home. It wasn't even a garden – it was a forest, and I recognised oaks, elms, birches, and pines, as well as ferns and bluebells. I was sitting on a mound covered in soft moss, inside a circle of white stones, sunlight angling down through the canopy towards me. It seemed peaceful but, with everything that'd been happening, I half-expected a fanged, purple monster to rush out of the bushes and eat me. The trees kept on rustling and the sun kept on shining, and nothing moved.

After a while, I judged it was safe to stand up and move off the mound. I tested my leg but it wasn't too bad, just a bit achy, and I massaged it the way I'd been taught. Then I walked around the clearing, a little nervous about that purple monster, and discovered a path. It seemed like the only logical thing to do was follow it.

I was thirsty and hoped I'd find water. Maybe I'd find berries or nuts I could eat. Not mushrooms. Mum hadn't taught me enough about them to risk eating one. I followed the path out of the clearing. Perhaps it led back to the safe house, although I didn't think it was so safe anymore. It probably wasn't even standing. And my grandmother – was she still alive?

I stopped. I should know what to do next, but I didn't. I didn't know anything anymore and that terrified me the most. I sensed eyes watching me and spun in a circle, searching, but there was no one there, just the ferns and the trees. Everything had gone silent. I took a step back. Another step. But there was no point going back. Up ahead, sunlight streamed through a gap in the trees, as if it was beckoning to me. I took a breath and moved slowly along the path, the undergrowth brushing against my legs and arms and closing over behind me. I went faster, but the sunlight was like a rainbow – it

never came any closer. My leg ached again and my lungs burned and then my toe caught in a tree root and I fell flat on my face in a carpet of dead leaves. It didn't smell so bad. Like autumn.

But what Dad called my 'get up and go' had all got up and went. With a huge effort and a couple of groans, I sat up. The sunlight was a few feet away but I wasn't going to be fooled again. I was going to sit for a while and rest. Something rustled in the bushes ahead of me and I turned, searching for a stick to defend myself with, but there was nothing.

I looked back towards the sunlight and blinked. A fox sat next to a tree, watching me. It was so still I wondered if it was a statue. It was dark coppery red, with white-tipped ears and emerald eyes and a long pointed nose.

'Hey, Mr Fox,' I called softly, and it opened its mouth, showing sharp white teeth. *Great, a fox that wants to eat me. Probably got rabies.* The fox stretched and stalked towards me, its glowing eyes fixed on me. I scuttled backwards but it just kept coming. 'Hey, stop, get away from me.' I banged into a solid tree behind me with a *thunk*.

Trapped. What were the symptoms of rabies? A frothing mouth?

'What are you doing here?'

'Who said that?' I looked around, but it was all trees and bushes.

The fox sat and twitched its tail. 'Obviously, I did. What are you doing here?'

The fox was talking. I saw its mouth move. What kind of place was this? 'I ... have no idea.' It seemed pointless to try to explain the grandma and the house and the hole in the stone to a fox.

'You shouldn't be here. Whoever sent you is in big trouble.' The fox didn't blink at all and its cold, glinting stare freaked me out.

If the person in trouble was my fake grandma, I hoped they zapped her good. 'Tell me how to get home again then,' I said.

'How should I know that?'

Of course, that'd be too easy.

'What's your name?' The fox wasn't asking in a friendly way. It was asking like a policeman would. A policeman who suddenly had decided I'd committed a crime.

Something made me lie. ‘Clarissa.’ Clarissa was the name of a character I’d seen on TV who was really clever and solved crimes and things. I liked the idea of borrowing her name.

The fox’s ears perked. ‘Clarissa. Are you sure?’

I nodded.

‘Clarissa what?’

‘Er ... Smith.’

The fox closed its eyes for a few seconds, like my dad used to do when I’d tried his patience once too often and he was doing his best to keep his temper. Then its eyes sprang open again. ‘Fine, Clarissa Smith. You’d better come with me.’

‘Are you going to help me?’

‘Probably not.’ The fox walked away from me, its thick red tail swaying. ‘But I’ll take you to someone who might, just to get rid of you.’

How to make someone feel welcome. *Not*. But the sky had darkened and a big black cloud above the forest now looked as though it was about to dump a whole lot of rain on me, so maybe wherever the fox was taking me had shelter. And food. I didn’t have much choice.

I limped along after the fox, trying to keep up and look around at the same time, and tripped over another tree root. The fox stopped with a sigh. ‘Watch where you’re going.’

‘Thanks for the sympathy.’

It watched me struggle to my feet and brush all the leaves and dirt off my clothes. My eyes were stinging, but I wasn’t going to cry in front of this snooty animal.

It kept walking and I kept limping and after a while we came into a clearing. ‘Wait here,’ the fox said, and then it was gone.

I was alone again. The trees were making a funny moaning sound, and a freezing wind whipped around me. Now I was freaking out, more than a bit. I sat against a tree and wrapped my arms around my knees, trying to keep warm. How I wished I was back in my bed, hugging my favourite bear, but then I remembered him in shredded bits all over my floor, and I started to cry. The tears wouldn’t stop leaking out. I definitely wasn’t tough. Footsteps thumped towards me and I curled up tighter.

A tall, thin man wearing a grass-green suit and wooden clogs stopped in front of me. His yellow hair was like a fuzzy halo. He waited and I waited and nobody said a word. He spun around and made to leave.

‘Wait!’ I cried.

‘Well!’ He spun back. ‘I thought you were in a trance or something.’

‘No.’ I couldn’t think what else to say. My teeth started to chatter.

‘Come on then.’ He put out a hand and pulled me up, then set off, dragging me with him.

It felt like I was being marched off to jail. ‘Stop!’

‘What?’ he said impatiently.

‘Wh-where are we going?’

‘To the middle. It’s where I take all trespassers.’

‘I’m not ...’ Maybe I was. ‘Where am I? Right now, that is.’

He pursed his lips, as if he thought I was joking with him. ‘The forest. Clearly.’

‘No, I mean what country?’ I held my breath for his answer.

‘This is Ain’t Forest. In Neither.’ He glared down at me. ‘You shouldn’t actually be here.’

‘It’s not like I chose it,’ I said, wiping my face with a sleeve. He wasn’t making sense. Ain’t Forest? Something behind him shimmered, and I leant sideways to see what it was. Silvery, gauzy wings. They whipped shut faster than an umbrella going down. ‘Are you some kind of fairy?’

His face turned almost purple. ‘How dare you?’

‘You’re either a fairy or a dragonfly,’ I said. I knew that was rude, but he wasn’t being nice either.

He drew himself up until he towered over me. ‘We are called neerims.’

‘I’ve never heard of you.’

‘Good,’ he said. ‘Any more questions?’

An unspoken *stupid* hovered in the air between us, but I asked anyway. ‘Have you got any idea how I ended up here?’

He shuddered. ‘I, too, want to know this. That way, I can punish those responsible.’

I thought of my grandmother driving me into a wall. ‘Yeah, well, you and me both.’

‘What name should I call you by?’

I nearly told him my real name but stopped just in time. ‘Clarissa Smith.’

‘That’s as good an alias as any. You can call me Orlando.’ He peered at me.

‘You’re very young.’

I stood up straighter. 'I'm nearly thirteen.'

He ignored that and checked his arm as if there was a watch on it. There wasn't. 'We have to hurry. Dinner will be over soon and I don't want to miss it.'

The forest had grown even darker while we talked, and no way did I want to stay in it on my own, so I followed him, and was glad to soon see lights in the distance. As we got closer, they turned into lamps hanging among the trees, and then we came out into a huge clearing with patchwork tents and stalls and picnic tables. I blinked hard. It was like being in a picture story book. The place was filled with people who all looked a bit like him – fuzzy haloes of hair of different colours, mostly brown and green and yellow, and they had wings, too. His were still firmly zipped away, just two lines down his back, but the others had theirs out. A few had theirs fully open and gleaming, showing off. You can tell when someone is showing off. They prance around, sticking their chest out and patting their hair and making fake loud conversation with people who aren't really listening because they're too busy doing the same.

'Here.' Orlando gave me a large green pottery plate with leaves engraved on it. 'Don't leave the area. Go around and take what you want to eat.'

'How will I pay for it?'

'Nobody pays here,' he said. 'We share.' He flounced off with his own plate and stopped at several different stalls, spooning food onto his plate. I stood, clutching my plate, an ache growing in my chest. I felt so lost, so alone. Everyone ignored me, chattering and laughing as if I didn't exist. I would've given anything for Mum to hand me a curled-up cheese sandwich and say, 'Eat this.'

A delicious curry smell drifted past me and my stomach grumbled. Maybe I should eat. Who knew what was coming next? I ventured across to a stall that was run by a short chubby man with bright red cheeks. He smiled and nodded at me and slurped something bubbling from a mug. I examined the huge bowls on his stall and saw not one thing I recognised. Not even salad, which was my least favourite food. Blue beans, long skinny green things, purple spirals. Perhaps all this stuff wasn't safe to eat, but it was that or starve, so I scooped up the things that looked like purple pasta and went on to the next one.

This time the old woman stared at me as I looked over her bowls of weird food, making me so nervous I hurried on without taking anything. The next stall was run by a

boy who looked to be around my age. He had a thin, friendly face and bright hazel eyes and was playing with a tin whistle, trilling it up and down. I said, 'What are all these?'

He pointed to a bowl of round dark blue things. 'Mushrooms.' A bowl of bright yellow strands. 'Cat noodles.' A bowl of black mushy stuff. 'Costly stew.'

'What's costly stew?'

'You're not from here?'

'No.' I didn't want to tell him I was a trespasser. 'Have you got wings, too?'

'Course.' He turned and they unfolded behind him, all sheer and green and shiny; then he snapped them shut again. 'You haven't got any?'

'No. So ... costly?'

'It's a plant that only grows this time of year up in the hills. Special. And costly, if you have to buy it. Which we don't. You going to choose something or not? They're getting tetchy.' He gestured and I glanced over my shoulder. There was a queue of about ten neerims behind me, all looking cross.

'Sorry.' I scooped up some mushrooms and noodles and left the costly stew for the others. The next stall had piles of what looked like little multi-coloured sausages, so I grabbed some of them and a mug of water and went to sit down. There were no spoons or forks, but everyone else was pulling apart flat brown bread from baskets on each table and using that and their fingers to eat with.

Despite the weird colours of the food, it tasted good and I gobbled it down. Orlando sat down across the table, his plate piled high.

'You found something to eat?' He peered at my plate. 'You didn't try the costly stew.'

'Another time.'

'Last time you'll see it for a couple of years.' He shrugged. 'Your loss.' He had a lump of it on his plate and it looked like black creamed spinach to me.

'Thanks for the food. What are you going to do with me?'

He looked up at the sky, which was now totally black, without any stars. It was like looking into a bottomless hole. 'Take you back to where you came from.'

'Home?' At last, someone who could help.

'Yes, the city,' he said. 'You came from Not, didn't you? Wandered out without permission?'

‘Um ... not really.’ I thought back to what he’d said. Ain’t. Neither. Now Not. I didn’t know how to explain my town. My world. They suddenly seemed a million kilometres away.

‘Well, you must have. Children do it all the time. One day you’ll learn.’ He nodded hello at the old, red-cheeked man from the first stall, who thumped down on the seat next to him, and a woman in a deep purple dress and matching hair, who sat next to me.

I finished eating and gazed around at the stalls and people and little kids running around, their little haloes of hair all fluffed up, their wings shining. ‘You said this is Neither. I don’t come from anywhere here. We don’t have neerim in my world.’

Orlando stopped eating and stared at me, his eyes narrowed. ‘How exactly did you get here?’

‘I ... I was in my grandmother’s house and I stuck my finger in a hole in the stone.’

His mouth opened and closed a couple of times. ‘Oh. Where was your grandmother’s house?’

‘She said it was in England.’

‘*Human* England?’ He scowled at me so deeply that I shrank down on my stool. ‘Who is your grandmother?’

‘I ...’ I glanced around. Everyone around us had stopped eating and was listening intently. ‘I don’t really know. She came and fetched me when a ... thing wrecked our house.’ There was a collective gasp.

The red-cheeked man asked, ‘When you put your finger in the hole, what words did you say?’

‘Um, I forgot to say any. There was someone upstairs bashing down the door. I was in a hurry.’ I glanced around again. Everyone was staring at me, and goosebumps popped up all over my arms.

‘See, that’s where the problem started,’ Red Cheeks said. ‘If you’d said the words, you might have ended up in FairyLand. Where everything is pink and sparkly and happy. If they were the *right* words.’

‘I would?’ That sounded a heck of a lot better than being here.

‘Not that it would’ve been safer, mind.’

‘Safer?’

‘Whoever was after you would’ve known and been right on your heels.’ He went back to eating, shovelling in a mouthful of black costly stew.

‘There’s one thing wrong with that,’ I said. ‘My grandmother said the words would take me home.’ Probably the idea of going to FairyLand should have made me scoff, but I was here in Neither, wasn’t I? I could hardly scoff at that.

Orlando rubbed his temple for a few moments, staring down at his plate, and then he said, ‘Why did you follow Foxer?’

‘He told me to.’

‘You understood him.’

‘Yes, it was a bit weird, but ...’ I stopped.

Orlando and Red Cheeks looked at each other and raised their eyebrows; then Orlando leaned across the table and whispered urgently. I couldn’t hear a lot of it, but I did hear ‘nearly thirteen’ and ‘limping’ and ‘leg’. Not again. Not here, too. I was so sick of people either staring or feeling sorry for me.

The red-cheeked man focused on me again. ‘What’s your name? Your *real* name?’

Pinned down like that, I fessed up. ‘Glory.’

‘Glory? Or Glorious?’

How did he know my full name? ‘Glorious.’

Red Cheeks sucked in a breath, nodded and said, ‘FairyLand *is* your home. If you are who we think you are.’

I gaped at him. ‘Who am I?’

‘Is your mother still alive?’ Red Cheeks asked in a serious tone.

A hard, hot lump grew in my throat. ‘I hope so,’ I whispered. ‘My grandmother said Mum and Dad were both in jail. I don’t understand that. They haven’t done anything.’

The neerims around us shuffled and murmured and some of them shook their heads. The boy from the mushroom and noodle stall had pushed to the front of the crowd; his eyes were bright as he listened, head tilted.

Orlando leaned over and patted my arm. ‘Glory, there was a bounty on their heads, has been for nearly thirteen years.’

‘But ... what did they do?’

Red Cheeks blew out air in a big pffft. ‘You don’t know anything, do you? Did your parents never tell you? They, er ... kidnapped you, and did away with someone. Someone big. Famous.’

‘What? Killed them?’ I gaped at him, an icy chill sliding down my spine. ‘I don’t believe you. My mum is the gentlest person in the world. And Dad is just an accountant. They wouldn’t hurt anyone.’

There was a deathly silence all around the clearing. Orlando cleared his throat. ‘They were found guilty.’

‘It’s this place!’ I said. ‘I bet no one here gets a fair trial.’

Orlando patted my arm again. ‘Nobody here ever gets arrested or tried or punished. All that happened in FairyLand.’

‘But you said that’s the pink, happy place,’ I said.

‘All the more reason for them to have big, secret jails and lots and lots of laws, and punishments that you wouldn’t believe.’ He scraped his plate with some bread and popped it into his mouth, chewing. ‘We’re on your parents’ side, by the way. Everyone here knows they had no choice.’

My brain was clunking around like an overloaded washing machine. Kidnapped me? From FairyLand? Who had they killed? I still couldn’t believe it. It was as if someone was trying to shove me into a Harry Potter book. I tried to think of some questions that might have helpful answers. ‘So what was chasing me? In my world, I mean?’

The woman with the purple hair answered. ‘Probably a conjurement. Did you see it?’

I shook my head. ‘It was big. It destroyed everything.’

‘Hmm, a bogger, maybe. They’re easy to conjure if you have the power.’ She leaned towards me. ‘If you see it, run. It’ll tear you limb from limb if it catches you.’

‘You’re scaring her, Hetty,’ Red Cheeks said. ‘It can’t follow you here, don’t worry,’ he told me.

‘But I can’t stay here,’ I said. ‘I have to find my mum and dad.’

Everyone shuffled their feet but the boy nodded his head. Red Cheeks and Orlando glanced at each other again as if neither of them wanted to say the words, so I had to say them out loud instead. ‘They’re in FairyLand, aren’t they?’

They nodded.

‘In jail there.’

They nodded again.

A dizzy feeling swept over me, like a misty grey tornado that picked up everything I knew and dumped it down again. I rubbed my face and dug my fingernails into my head. One thing at a time. Finally, I looked up.

‘OK, how do I get to FairyLand?’

Everyone, including Orlando and Red Cheeks and Hetty, all still had on their sympathetic faces but nobody answered me. Then the bright-eyed boy came right up to my table.

‘No one here knows,’ he said, ‘or wants to know. But my godma will.’ As if his words were contagious, everyone took a step back, and he was left in a little space all of his own. I didn’t care. He was the only one offering to help.

‘Where is she?’ I asked. ‘Can you take me to her?’

## CHAPTER 4

For a moment, the boy looked nervous, then he smiled. 'I can take you most of the way. You'll have to go the rest on yer own.'

'Oooh, yes, that's right,' Red Cheeks said, whistling through his teeth. 'You can't get too close to her, Boyo. You'd never get away again.'

Orlando added, 'And it's dangerous. You know it is.'

The boy held up his hands. 'Aye, but she can't stay here. You know who she is. And I'm the only one who ...'

'Maybe wait until tomorrow,' Orlando said. 'Think it over more.'

I almost agreed, but that horrible feeling was building inside me again, the one that'd nagged me in the cafe. There was no time to lose. 'I need to go now. I don't know why, I just do.'

Boyo eyed me for a few long seconds and then grinned. 'I'd better pack me bag then.' He went off behind his stall and all the other neerims melted away as if I was no longer of interest. Red Cheeks nodded at me. 'You take care now.' He and Orlando left, and I sat at the table, feeling small and cold and very alone.

'You're the girl!' somebody chirped. A little blue bird hopped along the table, its white tail like a fan. 'You've put the cat among the larks, I must say.'

'Pigeons,' I corrected, not even caring that I was talking to a bird.

'No pigeons in Neither,' it said. 'Boyo will be back soon. Are you ready to go?'

My mouth tasted like a furry, smelly animal had been nesting in it, and my eyelids drooped. 'I need to wash and clean my teeth.'

'Over here. Come with me.' The bird fluttered through the air, and I struggled up from the table to follow. It hovered over a waterhole at the edge of the clearing. 'Here you are.'

The water trickled out of a rock face into a small dark pool. I knelt and splashed it into my face a few times until I felt better; then I bent right down and took a mouthful, swishing it around and spitting it out onto the ground. It tasted faintly minty.

'Here he comes,' chirped the bird.

Boyo skipped across the clearing towards us. He'd changed into a brown shirt and pants, and he carried a bag over his shoulder. He'd tucked his wings out of sight. 'Hello, Diddy,' he said, holding out his hand. The bird landed on it and gave a little trill.

'All set?' Diddy said.

‘Sure thing,’ Boyo said. He glanced at me. ‘You?’

‘I guess so.’ Now we were going, I wanted to stay in the forest where it was safe and friendly. I had a feeling where I was going wasn’t going to be either of those things.

‘I have food,’ Boyo said.

‘Any for me?’ Diddy chirped.

‘Of course.’

‘The bird is coming?’ I asked.

‘She knows the way better than me,’ Boyo said.

We set off, soon leaving the clearing far behind, but the forest seemed to go on forever. The sun melted towards the horizon, and it grew dark. Boyo lit a lamp and we kept going, Diddy on his shoulder and me following behind as the path narrowed. I was determined to keep up. The trees were so thickly leaved here that I never caught one glimpse of the sky. Diddy chattered the whole way, telling long, twisting stories.

‘And so he puffed himself up and was twice the size, and none of it mattered. He ended up as a feather duster.’

‘A rooster one day, a feather duster the next,’ I said. One of Mum’s sayings.

‘Yes, yes, exactly,’ Diddy chirped. ‘Clever girl.’

I warmed to her words. As we walked, I thought over all that had happened to me, but I still couldn’t make much sense of any of it. ‘What does Orlando do?’

Boyo said, ‘He’s a forest guardian. Him and Copper Foxer.’

‘A forest guardian? What does that mean?’

‘If anything comes in, they stop it before it harms us.’ Boyo looked over his shoulder at me, almost dislodging Diddy. ‘You’re the first person of any kind we’ve seen in a long time.’

‘She’s not like a skerrit or a mish, though,’ Diddy said.

‘This forest is ours,’ Boyo said. ‘Here in Neither everyone has territories. It’s not a good idea to trespass. If you want to travel, you have to negotiate crossings.’

‘How far will I have to go?’ I didn’t like the idea of hostile territories.

‘Maybe all the way across the sandworm desert even.’ He made a clucking noise with his mouth. ‘Be a real shame if you couldn’t find a portal.’

‘Do you mean like another hole in a wall?’ I said.

‘Oh, portals can be any kind,’ Diddy said. ‘Holes. Chimneys. Tiny doors.’

‘Real tricky, they are,’ Boyo said. ‘Let’s see what my godma says before yer get to worrying.’

‘Who is your godma?’

‘Abellona,’ Boyo said. Diddy jiggled on his shoulder and made peeping noises.

‘Hush, Diddy! You didn’t have to come.’

‘Wouldn’t have let you do this alone,’ Diddy said. ‘No chance of that.’

Boyo smiled at me. ‘Abellona isn’t that bad. She’s just always a bit cranky. Even for a witch.’

‘A *lot* cranky,’ Diddy said, and ruffled her neck and head feathers. ‘It’s not your fault she isn’t allowed in FairyLand. She was the one who –’

‘Let’s not talk about that,’ Boyo said.

I really wanted to talk about it but Boyo’s mouth was shut tight and even Diddy stopped tweeting for a while. My leg was aching so badly now that it was like a line of fire from knee to hip. I hated sounding like a wuss but finally I said, ‘Can we stop for a while please?’

‘Sure,’ Boyo said. He told me to wait there and, after a few minutes of searching ahead, he beckoned me to come and sit on some moss he’d found.

‘It’s puffdowny moss,’ he said. ‘We fill pillows with it.’

It was definitely super soft. In the lamplight, Boyo’s face was serious as he watched me stretch out my leg and rub it. ‘Can they not fix it in your world then?’

My face grew warm and I shrugged. ‘I had some operations on it when I was little. Now ... seems like I’m stuck with it.’

‘What’s an operation?’

I frowned. ‘Where they ... you ... do you know what a hospital is?’

‘No.’

‘Medicine?’

He shook his head. Diddy chirped, ‘Potions and remedies, right?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘None of it worked.’

‘Do you really think you can save yer born-froms?’ Boyo asked. ‘It’ll be dangerous, don’t you know.’

Born-froms? I frowned. Ah, parents. ‘I have to try. They’ve all I’ve got.’

‘You said you had a grandmother, an old born-from,’ Boyo said.

‘I’m not sure she really is,’ I said. His face was puzzled, but I didn’t want to talk about that. ‘What about your parents? Your born-froms?’

‘I’m a norffin,’ he said.

Diddy chirped and gave him a little peck, then she cocked her head to me and said, ‘Boyo lost both his born-froms in the Mountain Wars. Some of the exiles brought him through a portal and left him with Abellona.’

Boyo suddenly became very interested in his big toes, and there was silence for a few long moments.

‘But you’re with the neerims now,’ I said. ‘That’s good, isn’t it?’

‘Aye,’ Boyo said brightly. ‘It is. I’m hopin’ to be a forest guardian one day. When I get me wing fixed.’ He sighed. ‘Orlando won’t take me until I do.’

‘That’s not very fair.’ There was another awkward silence, so I said, ‘It’s very nice of you to take me to Nor.’

He chuckled. ‘I do like adventures, even little ones like this.’ He peered upwards at a gap in the canopy and added, ‘We’re already near to the wall. We should eat now and get some sleep. Be ready for market opening.’

‘Good idea,’ Diddy said, hopping onto Boyo’s bag.

Their idea of eating was to give me a long orange strip of dried stuff that tasted fruity. It was filling, especially when I drank some water as well. Boyo lay down for a nap and Diddy curled up under his chin. I didn’t feel tired with the dread nagging at me, but I lay down too, to be polite, and was asleep before I knew it.

When I woke, dawn was tinting the sky pink and Boyo was nudging me. After more water and dried strip, we walked again until the sun was well up, and then Diddy said, ‘We’re here,’ and she was right. Just a few metres from the treeline was a huge wall that was so high I could barely make out the top of it. It went in either direction as far as I could see, and was made of neatly shaped rectangular stones, packed so tightly that there wasn’t even any mortar.

‘The boundary wall,’ Boyo said. ‘Behind it is the City of Not.’

‘How do we get inside?’ There were no gates, doors or stairs in those stones.

‘Neerims only visit the city to trade at the markets, and you have to have a special pass to do that,’ Boyo said. ‘We have to go in through Solomon’s door.’

‘Who’s Solomon?’ I asked.

‘He’s one of us,’ Boyo said, ‘but he chooses to live in the city now. Says the forest gives him rumatik.’

We set off to our left, staying close to the wall. Every now and then, Boyo stopped and touched the stones, running his fingers up and down; then he'd shake his head and we'd keep walking.

Finally, he touched the stones and said, 'Here.' The wall looked exactly the same to me, but he simply leaned against it and it opened, a whole section swinging back. The passageway beyond was dark and damp. Dripping water plonked and plinked and fell on us as we climbed stone stairs. The drips were icy cold and seemed always to fall down the back of my neck, making me shiver, as though a chilly finger was touching me. I was grateful for Boyo's lamp until I looked up and saw huge spider webs hanging down from the ceiling and white spiders that scuttled away from the light to the corners of their webs.

My leg was aching and my lungs burned, but Boyo kept walking up and up and up. The steps were odd heights, some broken and cracked, and I kept having to stop and rest. He was patient; it was me who felt like I was a big pain in the bum. Finally, we came to a heavy wooden door with no handle or key hole.

'Go on then,' Diddy said. 'Knock hard. He's getting deafer by the day, he is.'

Boyo sighed. 'He'll be angry. He told me not to come back to the city.'

Diddy chirped. 'Point to her. Say who she is. He'll be all right.'

Boyo sucked in a long breath and then knocked hard. He put his ear against the door. 'Nobody there. You don't think he's ...'

'Deaf, I think he's deaf. Knock louder.'

Boyo tried again and a faint shout came. 'Just wait a bloomin' minute.'

Something crashed, something else screeched like a chair being dragged across the floor, and slowly the door opened a few inches. A man's head, with thick white eyebrows and bushy white hair, appeared, and two deep-set eyes stared at Boyo. 'You.'

'Er, yes.' Boyo shifted from foot to foot. 'I know I ...'

'Looking for a thrashing, are you?' the man growled.

'It's not him. It's because of her,' Diddy peeped.

'Shut up, bird,' the man said. 'Her who?'

Boyo moved aside so the man could see me. His eyebrows shot up, almost meeting his hair, and came down again. 'Who's she?'

'She came through a portal,' Boyo said. 'Didn't use the words.'

'Not my problem,' said the man.

'Come on, Solomon,' Boyo said. 'She just wants to go home.'

‘A packet of trouble is what I see.’

I was shivering again, arms wrapped around myself, and I was sick of standing in a freezing stone passageway. I could see flickering beyond the door and the thought of warming myself by a fire was overwhelming. ‘Please just let us in. Then we can talk.’

‘Oh ho,’ he said. ‘You’d better have something good to say then.’ But he pulled the door open and let us through. I went straight to the fire and stretched my hands out to the flames. The rug in front of the fire was made of woven bits of bright-coloured cloth and it was warm beneath my feet, despite the stone floors. A kettle filled with bubbling water hung over the fire on a metal rod.

They muttered behind me but I couldn’t hear any words clearly until Solomon said, ‘You’re crazy. She’ll grab you again like a tooth tiger.’

‘I wasn’t planning to go near her – just take Glory there.’

I turned around. ‘Who will grab you like a tiger?’

‘Nobody,’ Boyo said. ‘We’ll be off now, Sol. Thanks for letting us through.’

‘You get any grief from that hag, you let me know.’ Solomon patted Boyo roughly on the shoulder.

‘I’ll keep clear of her, don’t you worry.’

‘And watch out for the street patrol. Keep your wings zipped. You got no passes.’ He sighed. ‘Give me a hand with the door then.’ Together, they pushed a large dresser back in front of the door and rearranged the plates and cups on it; then Solomon straightened the rug on that side of the room. ‘That should do it.’ He glared at me. ‘Don’t you let Boyo near her, you hear me?’

‘OK.’ I guessed *she* was Boyo’s godma. I still had no idea what the danger was, but Solomon was giving me a fair warning. Boyo rolled his eyes and Diddy flew to his shoulder from where she’d been perching on the back of a chair.

Solomon picked up his own lamp, opened a small plain door in the far wall and walked ahead of us down a long hallway. At the other end, he opened an identical door. Light spilled in from outside. ‘Daft sun,’ he said. ‘Barely summer yet. You take care, Boyo. Watch your back. And your front. There’s always crunchers about, more’n just her.’

‘I will. Thank you.’

I followed Boyo through the door and immediately had to shade my eyes. The sun was high in the sky, a burning reddish-gold orb.

‘Watch it!’ Boyo said, grabbing my arm. I looked down and froze. We were on the top of the wall and I’d been about to step off it. Far below, the city teemed with people, and all along the main streets were brightly coloured awnings and flags. Here and there, donkeys carried piles of goods and baskets of vegetables and fruit, and nearly everyone wore hats or carried parasols. The wall was circular, and we could walk along the top of it like a path.

‘How do we get down?’ I asked.

‘Over there are stairs.’ He pointed further along. ‘But we won’t use them ones. We need to go to the south side and use the stairs there. It’ll be quicker than trying to force our way through the crowds.’

I gazed down at the swirls of people. ‘Are they here for the markets?’

‘No. They all live here. Do you see a gate in the wall anywhere?’

I shook my head.

‘That’s because they’re hidden. Once you’re in this city, you’re here for good, unless you can pay someone like Solomon to let you in and out. Or you have a market pass that tells you a street name for a gate. Most people don’t want to leave though.’

‘Never?’

‘They have all they need here,’ he said. ‘Most are exiles, so there’s nothing outside they need more. There are only two choices anyway – forest or desert.’

He set off before I could ask another question. Getting to the steps Boyo wanted to use took a long time, and the hot sun bounced off the stones and heated the air around us. There wasn’t even the tiniest breeze to cool us down. Once we started down the steps we were in the shade of the wall and Boyo waited several times while I rested my leg. There was no point forcing myself to go on, though – the steps were narrow, with no rail, and I had to hug the wall. If my leg buckled, I’d crash down into the street below. *Splat.*

Once we were at the bottom, we found a place to rest in deep shade and drank from a water fountain that bubbled out of the stone wall. The sunhats people wore were super-ugly and floppy, pink and green and yellow, but I fancied a parasol, maybe a white one with blue flowers. Boyo laughed and said, ‘Then you’ll have to carry it everywhere, and what use will it be in the rain?’ We walked through dark-shaded alleys, out of the sun’s glare. I couldn’t help staring in the tiny shop windows that held all sorts of amazing things: twinkling jewelled mirrors, shoes embroidered with weird eyes, and a bat hanging upside down in a gold cage.

I followed Boyo along several winding streets until he stopped and said, 'Here it is.' We stood back against a rough stone wall as two donkeys laden with loaves of freshly baked bread bustled past. I breathed in the lovely smell. Then he pointed across the street at a heavy black wooden door with a small barred window. 'In there's where you need to go. Just ask for Abellona.'

In the midst of sunshine in this busy city, the black door looked like an opening to doom. My voice quavered. 'You're not coming in?'

Diddy chirruped on his shoulder. 'Course not. And neither am I. We told you that right at the beginning.'

'Yeah, but ...' I eyed the door. 'She sounds pretty scary. And you said she was your godma.'

'Doesn't mean it's safe for me to go near her,' Boyo said.

'Why not?'

Boyo didn't answer but Diddy chirped, 'She believes Boyo is a wizard and he's just denying his magic and being stubborn. Whenever she sees him, she ties him up and tries to force him to be her apprentice and cast spells.'

Just when I thought things couldn't get any weirder. 'You're a wizard?' I asked him.

His face was pale in the gloom. 'I'm absolutely not, but she won't listen, so I have to stay clear of her.'

Several women carrying large baskets pushed past us, laughing loudly and chattering. They barely noticed us, but I flattened against the wall. Abellona sounded like an ogre waiting to eat me.

'What – what will she do to me?'

'Nothing. You're not family. She won't care a whit about you.'

Despair swept around me in a grey, smothering cloud. 'What am I doing here then? She sounds horrible. She's not going to help me.'

'She will,' Boyo said. 'For her own reasons, but ...'

'Is that supposed to make me feel better?'

'Nothing is going to make you *feel* better, except not giving up,' Boyo said.

'Are you going in or not?'

'I guess ... Are you going to wait for me?'

'We weren't,' Diddy said, 'but if she does say no ...'

'We'll be around,' Boyo said. 'Hiding.'

I nodded. If she wouldn't help me, I had nowhere else to go except maybe back to the forest. My limbs felt heavy and my head ached but just standing there wasn't going to get me to Mum and Dad. 'I'll give it a try then.' I took a step forward, and another, and suddenly I was out from the shadows and in the full light of the sun, pushing my way between the streams of people, my feet trodden on three times and an elbow in my ribs.

I made it across the street, right up to the black door, and huddled under its small black awning. There was a knocker at the side of the bars, a large iron fist with a red stone embedded in the middle finger where a ring might be. Underneath a little plaque said *Witches' Fun Club*. It didn't make me feel any happier. I touched the knocker and shivered at the cold that spiked through my hand.

*Just lift it. Stop being a wuss.*

The knocker was heavy and I made sure I banged it hard, once, twice, three times, and then waited. Finally a little window behind the bars opened, and two dark eyes topped by thick green eyebrows stared out at me.

'What?'

'Is Abellona inside?'

'Might be.'

'Is she?'

'Might be.'

I wanted to stick my fingers through the bars, right into his eyes. 'Can I come in?'

'What's the magic word?'

Oh, for goodness sake. 'Please.'

'No, that's not it.'

From nowhere, a word burst from my mouth. 'Rhinoceros.'

The eyes disappeared and the door opened, silently and smoothly. Beyond it was total darkness. I was so surprised that I'd guessed the right word that I stepped inside without thinking. The door slammed shut behind me.

## CHAPTER 5

I froze. It was so dark inside that I couldn't see the floor, let alone which way to go.

The doorman shoved me in the back. 'Don't just stand there. She's in the back bar, straight ahead.'

I moved out of his reach and stepped carefully along, my arms out so I wouldn't smack into the walls. The corridor became clearer as dim lights clicked on; I dodged the skull lamps hanging from the ceiling and stepped over the sleeping wolfhound spreadeagled halfway along. It was snoring and just as I put my foot down, it let out a bubbly, stinky fart. The smell was sickening and I rushed past, bursting into the back bar and knocking over some empty glasses on a wobbly side table. They crashed to the floor and the whole bar went silent. Everyone turned and gazed at me, as if they were all contemplating a different kind of punishment; then they turned away again as one and a low hubbub of conversation rose around me.

The bar was lit with yellow lamps that made my skin look like mouldy cheese. I was surrounded by dark backs hunched over glasses at tables or at the long bar. If these were all witches, they didn't seem to be having much fun. Behind the bar, the tallest girl I had ever seen, with stark white skin and long, bright green hair, dried a glass with a cloth. She was the only one still looking at me, so I went over.

'What're you drinking?' she asked.

'Um ... I don't have any money.'

'Don't need it here. Payment is by promise.' She flicked back her long green hair and waved at the row of bottles. 'Wine, beer, vodka, whiskey, arsenic or lemonade.'

'Lemonade, please.'

'Good,' she said, snickering. 'I thought you might want some arsenic and we're all out.' She poured some purple liquid into a glass and put it in front of me. I took a sip and screwed up my face. It was real lemonade, made with real lemons, but no sugar. My whole mouth felt like it had shrivelled up for a few seconds, but then it flooded with saliva and sweetness. Odd. I drank some more.

She watched me while she dried more glasses. 'So, what do you promise then?'

'Pardon?'

'Payment by promise,' she said impatiently. 'Now you have to promise something.'

'Er ... I promise never to come in here again?'

‘Lame,’ she snapped.

‘Ech, give her a freebie, Mallison. Stop being so picky.’ The speaker was next to me at the bar and just as I was about to say thanks, she turned and grinned at me and the word stuck in my mouth. Her face was twisted and bruised, and she had a huge black eye and two front teeth were missing. I gasped. Then quickly said, ‘Sorry, but you ... did someone beat you up?’

‘Yes,’ she said cheerfully. ‘It was the annual kickboxing championship last night. I won!’ She nudged me. ‘You shoulda seen the loser.’

‘Right. Yes.’ I took another sip of lemonade.

‘What’re you doing in here, kid?’ the kickboxer asked. ‘I can tell you don’t belong. No cloak, for a start, or winklepicker shoes.’ She peered down at my feet. ‘I like those funny red shoes though. Want to sell them to me?’

‘No, thanks.’ Time to get on with why I was here. ‘Do you know Abellona?’

The kickboxer moved away from me as if I had the plague. ‘Down the end of the bar. You shoulda said you were a friend.’ She hurried over to the other side of the room.

Friend? Hardly. I took my glass and edged past a row of hunched backs. Nobody turned around. ‘Excuse me.’ No movement. ‘Excuse me, which one of you is Abellona?’

Silently, the dark backs parted and drifted away and the one remaining slowly swivelled around to face me. I swallowed hard, expecting another horrible face, but she was quite beautiful under her hood. Her large grey eyes were framed by long curly lashes, and her mouth was a red heart shape. It took me a few moments to realise she was a lot older than I’d first thought.

‘What are you doing here?’ she snapped.

‘I’m hoping you can help me find someone, well, two someones.’ My heart was banging in my chest like a rubber ball against a wall.

Her eyes glinted. ‘I don’t do lost and found.’

‘They’re not lost,’ I said. ‘They were taken.’

‘That’s their own fault.’ She signalled Mallison for another drink. The thin girl scurried over and poured shiny red liquid into Abellona’s glass.

I waited but Abellona was ignoring me, tapping her fingers on her glass, her mouth pursed. Irritation flared inside me and I leaned towards her. ‘I was told you could help.’

‘By whom?’

The word slipped out before I could stop it. ‘Boyo.’ I cringed. *You idiot!*

Her head jerked around and she smiled nastily. ‘Did you bring him with you?’

‘No. He just showed me the way from Ain’t.’ Heat flooded into my face, a sure giveaway.

‘You’re lying,’ she said.

‘I’m not,’ I said desperately. I had to deflect her. ‘Now, are you going to help me or not?’

Her gaze fixed on me for several long calculating seconds; then she leaned back against the bar and drank some red liquid. Her lips gleamed. ‘You’re trouble, kid. I knew it.’

Typical grownup answer. ‘What? You saw that in a vision?’ I said. ‘Or you cast a spell on a bowl of water maybe, like Dumbledore?’

‘Dumb who?’

‘Never mind,’ I said. A horrible smell floated in the air and I saw the wolfhound had sneaked in. The other witches had shuffled back into their places around us at the bar, pulling their long, black robes around them, and they smelled bad, too. Musty, mouldy, damp. The last time I got a whiff of a smell like that was in the cellar.

I tried again. ‘Look, I was told my parents were in prison, and I have to go and find them, and get them out. But I need someone who can help me get to ...’ I looked around at the witches in black and the dreary lighting and the smelly wolfhound. Was ‘FairyLand’ a word I could say here?

‘Spit it out, for pity’s sake!’ Abellona said.

‘FairyLand!’ There, I’d said it. The roof didn’t fall in. But every witch in the room, except Abellona, laughed, a low, whistling, whispery sound that made my skin crawl.

Abellona just sniffed and leaned closer. Her perfume smelled like cinnamon.

‘When are you thirteen?’

That was a strange question. ‘In a few days.’

‘Not much time then.’ She put one finger up, its nail a bright, gleaming blue.

‘Mallison, give me your silver drinks tray, will you?’

Mallison came over with the tray and put it down on the bar. She gave the tray a cursory wipe with a towel, but Abellona gave her a glare and she wiped it clean.

‘Right,’ Abellona said, holding up the tray. ‘Let’s see what we can see.’ She tapped it with a blue fingernail three times and the silver went black; then it gradually cleared and fuzzy faces appeared. I leaned closer. ‘That’s Mum and Dad! They’re ...’ I faltered. They looked terrible, as if they’d aged fifty years since I’d seen them, and were peering out between bars in a window. They *were* in jail! But at least they were alive.

‘Now, where’s the zoom,’ Abellona muttered to herself.

‘Bottom right,’ someone else said.

She tapped bottom right of the tray and the picture zoomed out like a camera. Suddenly, Mum’s and Dad’s faces were just tiny white blobs in a black square. ‘Wait!’

‘Don’t you want to know what jail they’re in?’ Abellona said.

‘Yes, but ...’

‘Well, then. Can’t get them out if you don’t know which one.’ She peered at the huge stone building surrounded by rocks and snow and tall black trees. ‘Oh, that’s not good. They’re in Sweet and Mellow.’

‘Sweet and Mellow?’ I spluttered. ‘How can a prison be called Sweet and Mellow?’

She shrugged. ‘That’s FairyLand for you.’

I stared at the picture on the tray and shivered. The place was cold and somewhere remote, maybe on a mountain. ‘How can I rescue them?’

Abellona smirked at me. ‘That’s your problem. Obviously, you have to get there first. Then maybe you can wave a magic wand and free them.’

Sniggers erupted around me. ‘It’s not funny!’ I cried. ‘All right then,’ I said to Abellona, ‘how do I get there?’

‘I can send you through a portal,’ she said. ‘For a price.’

‘I don’t have any money.’

‘I only want one thing.’ She leaned close, her grey eyes steely. ‘Boyo.’

‘No! I can’t do that. He’s not a ... a book to swap.’

‘Can’t help then.’ She swung back to the tray and tapped it again. ‘Oh dear, look at that.’

I couldn’t help it: I looked. There in the tray was a poster nailed to a tree. *Public Execution of the traitors Radiance and Zed, this Thursday, midday. All welcome.* I couldn’t breathe – it felt as if a giant was sitting on my chest.

‘It’s Monday already. You’d better hurry,’ Abellona said, and the sniggers rolled around me again.

Then the tray showed Mum and Dad again, Mum crying and Dad pounding desperately at the bars. *Execution*. Did that mean hanging? Shooting? My head swam and my eyes went blurry, and I had to lean against the bar. I couldn’t bear the thought of them dying. Of never seeing them again. Ever. I prayed Boyo would forgive me one day.

‘All right,’ I said. ‘I’ll tell you where he is.’

‘No, no,’ Abellona said. She tapped on the tray and it zoomed in on Mum’s agonised face. ‘You have to bring him to me.’

I opened my mouth to tell her that was going too far, I couldn’t do it, but I already knew I would. To get my parents back, I’d do anything. ‘OK,’ I whispered, slimy guilt and shame sliding in to replace the panic. *I am lower than puddle mud. Than pond scum. Than toad farts.*

‘Bring him here then,’ she said, ‘and I’ll send you through.’

I slunk from the bar, shoulders hunched, feet dragging. The doorman slammed the door behind me and it took me a few seconds to realise that it was dark outside. The street was empty and Boyo was nowhere in sight. Good, one part of my brain said. Nooo! said another.

Then he stepped out of the dark shadows opposite, Diddy on his shoulder. ‘She wouldn’t help you, would she?’ Boyo said.

‘Yes and no ...’ I couldn’t bring myself to tell him. But I knew I’d have to, for my parents’ sake.

‘She’s made a deal,’ Diddy chirped. ‘Abellona’s tricked her.’

‘Oh,’ Boyo said, gazing at me. ‘What is it then?’

‘She wants you,’ I whispered.

‘Of course she does,’ Diddy said. ‘She’s not getting him though.’

‘I said I – ’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ Diddy said.

Boyo held up a hand. ‘Wait. What happened?’

I told them about the tray, and about Sweet and Mellow and the execution. Before I’d finished, tears were rolling down my face and I wiped them away. ‘But you’re right. I can’t sacrifice you for them.’ Even though I knew in my heart that I

wanted to. And it was a horrible knowledge that made me feel blacker and nastier than Abellona.

‘Maybe she’s not so bad ...’ Boyo said.

‘She is! She is bad!’ Diddy squawked. ‘You can’t do this!’

He sighed. ‘I can’t not do it. That’s the truth of it.’

‘You mean ...’ I ignored Diddy’s ruffled squawks and kept my eyes on Boyo, hope leaping up inside me.

‘I’ll agree to the bargain you made, but on one condition. We go with you to FairyLand first,’ Boyo said. Diddy jumped up and down and tweeted furiously, but he said, ‘I don’t think Glory can do it without our help.’ Then he whispered in Diddy’s ear, and I caught the words, ‘... find out ... prove ...’

‘Won’t she demand you stay here?’ I asked.

‘She wants me too badly,’ he said. ‘But I’ll have to promise on pain of a curse to come back to her.’

‘You can’t do that!’ screeched Diddy.

He shrugged. ‘I’ve got away from her before. I can do it again.’

‘She won’t be fooled again!’ Diddy said. ‘You only just squeaked out of her clutches last time. You can’t agree to this!’

‘I can’t let Glory’s parents die. You know why I can’t,’ he whispered, stroking Diddy’s ruffled feathers with one finger. ‘Abellona ... I’ll work that out later.’ He clucked to her softly, then straightened. ‘Besides, I fancy an adventure in FairyLand, don’t you?’

Diddy snapped her beak shut and turned her back on me, but I was so happy that he’d agreed to Abellona’s demand that I pushed away the black, nasty guilt and said, ‘We have to go back into the bar.’

‘All right,’ Boyo said. ‘I hope that smelly dog isn’t still there.’

The doorman opened to my password again and grumbled, ‘Tourists,’ as Boyo followed me inside. This time the bar was even darker and stinkier. Boyo muttered to Diddy, ‘That dog will be the death of these witches.’

The witches all ignored me but as soon as they spotted Boyo, their eyes gleamed in the green light as though they were ready to gorge on a big juicy roast chicken. I held his arm tightly to make sure none of them snatched him away.

Abellona lounged against the bar where I left her but when she saw us, she rushed forward. ‘Well, well,’ she said. ‘Somebody who keeps their word.’

I didn't want to be. That someone was a traitor. I took a breath and coughed as the stench went down my throat. Finally I managed to say, 'Boyo has to come with me first, to FairyLand. He says I can't do it on my own.'

'Does he now?' Her face was hard, as hard as her eyes. 'I don't think I'll let him.'

'You have to,' Boyo said. 'Or the deal's off. You're just sending her to be killed, otherwise.'

*Killed.* I swallowed hard.

It was a stand-off. She glared and he glared back, and I thought neither of them would back down. I glanced at the tray but it was blank. Time was running out. I had to force her hand. I summoned up a glare equal to Boyo's. It wasn't hard.

'He comes with me or the deal's off, like he says.'

She eyed me up and down with a faint smile and I could tell she was calculating again. How I wished I could read her mind. At last she said, 'Fine. But Boyo will be apprenticed to me for twenty years.'

Diddy squawked, 'You can't do that. It's nearly triple!'

'Twenty or nothing.' Her voice was steel now.

'Done,' Boyo said bleakly. 'Come on, then, get on with it. We haven't got time to stand around here while you gloat.'

Abellona put out a finger and ran one blue nail down the side of his face. Then she snatched it back. 'Right, come with me.'

'Hey,' Mallison called. 'You can't just use the portal without making a booking first.'

Abellona whirled around, and I swear her eyes turned red. 'You don't tell me what I can and can't do, missy. You forget who made it in the first place.'

'Fine,' Mallison muttered. 'But I'm writing it in the book.'

Abellona led us into another room further back, one that held nothing but a dusty, ash-filled fireplace with a mantel carved with roses. I was expecting another hole in a wall or maybe even a wardrobe. 'Stand in there,' she said, pointing at the fireplace. Boyo and I looked at each other and he moved first, planting his feet in the ashes, which puffed up around his ankles. Diddy dug her claws into his shirt. I followed and squeezed in next to him. It was a large fireplace but, even so, we had to crouch down.

'You'd better hold on to each other,' Abellona said, but before we could even touch hands, she reached up and pushed in a rosebud. Her vile laughter echoed around

us as we whooshed up the chimney and into a black void. I shrieked, tumbling and rolling in the darkness, until my head felt as if it would burst. Boyo was gone. Finally I steadied, upright at last, although I couldn't see or hear a thing as the air rushed past. 'Boyo,' I shouted but my voice was swept away into nothing. I was sure that Abellona had tricked us and I'd be stuck in this limbo forever. Then there was a *whoosh* and I landed with a thump that made my head spin and jarred my leg.

I lay still, shivering, surrounded by total blackness, and heard something rustling. Bushes, or small animals. Maybe she'd tricked me and sent me back into Ain't Forest, but this place smelled wet and muddy. I stood carefully, making sure nothing was broken or sprained, but I still couldn't see a thing and I had no idea where I was. Not the forest though.

'Psst.' The voice came from down near my knees.

'Boyo?'

'No.'

I froze. 'Who are you?'

'Nobody.' Whoever it was scuttled away, and I was alone. Too alone.

'Hey! Come back. I didn't mean to snap.' The footsteps scuttled back. 'It's just ... this place. I don't know where I am, and it's dark.'

'You're in FairyLand,' the small voice near my knees said. 'Eastern Glades.'

Glades? I thought I could smell swamp. 'Is there anyone else nearby?'

'No, just me.'

So Abellona *had* tricked us. Goodness only knew where Boyo and Diddy were. Probably still stuck in the fireplace while Abellona laughed at how gullible I was. I felt like smacking myself in the head.

## CHAPTER 6

I wanted to zoom back to the fireplace and shout at Abellona but I had no idea how and there was no time. It didn't matter how angry I felt, how worried I was about Boyo. I had to get moving. I bent down to where I thought the small person was. 'Can you tell me where Sweet and Mellow prison is, please?'

No answer. I listened hard, trying to open all my senses to what was around me. Cold air. A breeze smelling of mud and rot. A sliver of green moon. Frogs croaking a chorus and a faint dog's howl. Then the voice by my knees said, 'Follow me.'

'It's pitch black,' I said. 'I can't even see you, let alone a path.'

There was a *pzzzzt* and then a small glow at my feet, like someone holding a tiny lamp. It illuminated my runners and two tiny feet that were webbed. Like a duck's. I'd been talking to a duck. 'Come this way,' it said.

The light moved quickly and I had to trot to keep up, thinking all the while that I could be following a duck into a trap. A giggle bubbled out of me before I could stop it.

'Excuse me?' The duck stopped and I nearly trod on it.

'Nervous reaction,' I said. 'Sorry.'

It let out a small quack and waddled on, its feet slapping lightly, following the curves of the path between the reeds. The mud smell was stronger, and I heard more croaking frogs. 'How far does this swamp go?'

The duck didn't reply, just went faster. I was getting a stitch under my ribs, breath rasping in my throat, and my bad leg had a fiery ache up one side. 'Hey, can we slow down a bit? Maybe rest?'

'No time,' said the duck. 'The East Star will be up in a few minutes. You don't want to be blinded, do you?'

'I guess not,' I puffed. Sweat trickled into my eyes, and I wiped it away with a sleeve.

'Quick,' said the duck. 'In here. We're out of time.'

*In here* was a hole in the side of a small hill, and it looked dark and damp. The sky was growing lighter. 'The sun's coming up,' I said. The duck pecked my ankle, hard. 'Ow!'

'It's not the sun,' it squawked, 'it's the East Star. You want to stand out here and be blinded, please yourself.' With that, the duck ran into the hole and disappeared.

I still thought it was being ridiculous, but its voice had real fear in it – maybe I should do what it said. I crawled into the hole and immediately regretted it. It stunk of duck poop, and the ground under me was slimy and wet. Just as I was about to back out again, the light behind me flared and flooded the tunnel with a searing light that burned my eyes. I burrowed down into the slime, hands over my face.

‘Come on,’ squawked the duck desperately. ‘Keep coming!’

I scrambled forward on my hands and knees, eyes scrunched shut, and kept following. After what seemed like forever squelching and scrabbling, the duck said, ‘I think it’s safe for you to stop now.’

‘You’re sure?’

A kind of reassuring quack.

I opened my eyes. The light outside was so bright that even here I could see clearly along the tunnel. The duck stood right in front of me, watching me anxiously. At least I thought it was anxious. I’m not good at reading duck expressions, but its black-tipped beak looked twitchy and its eyes were sharp. Maybe it was the white and yellow rings around them.

‘Your eyes are all right?’ it asked.

‘Yes, thanks.’

‘You’re welcome.’ The duck turned its head and rooted under its grey-brown feathers for something. A flea, maybe.

The tunnel roof was low and I was tired of being on all fours. Everything ached. I tried to turn and sit but the roof forced my head down. Very uncomfortable. ‘Do you have anywhere with more room to move?’

‘We’re all small in here,’ the duck said. ‘No need for more.’

‘Who’s we? More ducks?’

‘Some.’ The duck pointed behind with its beak, and I made out several ducks, some swans hunkered down and a bunch of mice and rabbits.

‘How long is the star out for?’ I asked.

‘I’ve been told the East Star whizzes over pretty quickly.’ The duck clacked its beak. ‘First time I’ve ever seen it, mind. Gossip says it’s supposed to be a bad omen.’ It shook itself. ‘Still, that’s probably a people thing. Ten minutes and likely you can go out again.’

‘Cool.’ I looked down at myself. I was covered head to foot in mud and duck poop. I smelled worse than the swamp. But I wasn’t about to complain. I could still see, and I was still alive. So far anyway. ‘Is this where you all live?’

‘Goodness, no,’ said the duck. ‘I’ve got a lovely nest in the tree outside. This is our escape hole.’ It pointed its beak again. ‘We get all sorts in here.’

One of the swans shuffled around and I glimpsed another bird at the back, a black-and-purple bird with bright eyes that sat quietly, head cocked, almost as if it were eavesdropping.

‘What are you doing in the Glades?’ one of the swans asked in a gravelly voice.

‘I came from ...’ Suddenly, it didn’t seem like a good idea to reveal that bit of information. ‘The other side.’ I waved my arm and hit the roof of the tunnel, bringing down some dirt.

‘Hey!’ shrilled a mouse. ‘We don’t need a cave-in, thank you very much.’ The mice squeaked to each other and I caught ‘strange person’ and ‘trouble’.

‘And where are you going?’ the swan said.

‘Sweet and – ow!’ The duck had pecked me on the hand.

‘She was heading for the markets and got lost,’ the duck said. ‘I’ll show you the way,’ it added meaningfully, nodding at me; I got the hint and shut up.

Gradually the tunnel darkened again until finally the duck said, ‘Right, everyone out.’ It blinked at me. ‘You first, of course.’

‘Yes, right.’ I had to edge back out of the tunnel, with more of the mud and poop sticking to my arms and legs. Out in the fresh air, I stood and stretched to try to get the kinks out of my body. Bits of mud plopped off me onto the ground. The other birds and animals emerged and scattered; only the black-and-purple bird hung around, flying up to perch on a nearby small tree and watching us.

‘Don’t say a word,’ the duck murmured. ‘Big ears over there is a real tattletale.’

I said, ‘OK,’ and followed the duck along the path. The sun was coming up properly now that the star had gone and I gradually made out more and more of the swamp around me. Tall swaying reeds, stretches of smooth water, and lots of trees were reflected in the mirror-like ponds. Some of the trees were in flower, as were the water lilies in the ponds. ‘It’s really beautiful here,’ I said.

‘Yes, on the surface,’ said the duck. ‘You don’t want to get caught in a bog though, and humans don’t like all the bugs, although I think they’re quite tasty.’

A large silver dragonfly zoomed past my head, and I was so busy admiring it that I nearly walked into the web of a huge yellow-striped spider. I stepped back, shuddering, and ducked underneath it. 'Where are we going?' I asked. 'The markets?'

'No, no,' snapped the duck. 'The road to the prison. Isn't that what you wanted?'

Just then, a chorus of frogs began a ribbiting roll that grew into a choir for several seconds and then faded. Near the duck, one large green frog hopped out of the reeds. 'Duck. Message.'

The duck stopped short, almost toppling over. It righted itself and the frog croaked, 'Stranger. Fell. Pond Forty-seven.'

'Oh dear,' said the duck. 'Not another bad landing. Thanks.'

The frog let out a loud burp and hopped back into the reeds.

The duck turned to me. 'It's a bit of a coincidence, don't you think? That could be the person you were looking for.'

'Yes!' I said. 'Can we go and see?'

'Certainly.' At the next fork in the path, the duck turned left and I followed, glad it wasn't waddling too quickly. We were soon surrounded by ponds of water, large and small, cool and still. In the warm air, I stank something awful.

'Can I wash in one of the ponds?' I asked the duck.

'Ooh, no, not these ones,' it said. 'Wait till we get to Forty-seven and Forty-eight.'

'How far?'

The reeds were so high that we were at the pond before I realised. 'Here we are. Forty-seven.' Sitting on the edge, covered in mud just like me, was Boyo. Diddy was nowhere to be seen.

'You made it,' I said. I was so happy to see him that I gave him a big, smelly, muddy hug.

He sniffed. 'Where did you land?'

'This is from the tunnel.' He looked puzzled but I went on. 'Where's Diddy?'

'I don't know.' He sighed. 'Typical Abellona. I've been in limbo for ages. Thought I'd never get here. And Diddy could be anywhere.' He bent to try to wash some of the mud off, and the water turned a swirling brown.

'Next pond over has a sandy bottom,' said the duck. 'You should try that one.'

We did as the duck suggested and, after a great deal of scrubbing and rinsing, we were more or less clean, but we both still smelled swampy. Boyo flicked out his wings and flapped them quickly to dry them, then whisked them away again, as if he didn't want anyone to see them. Orlando's warning.

The duck was pacing up and down the path. 'Come on,' it said, 'I haven't got all day. I have to make sure Mr Wood is back sitting on my eggs properly.' It set off down the path and we scrambled after it. I was glad when we emerged from the swamp and onto a path that led up a slope and into some woods.

The duck stopped and lifted a wing to point ahead. 'Through the woods, turn right, follow the path up. If at any time, you're going down again, you've made a wrong turn. Sweet and Mellow is up in the mountains. Only way is up.'

It ran back down the path, flapped its wings and lifted off into the air, so fast that I barely had time to shout, 'Thank you,' after it, and hear a faint quack in reply.

I started along the path to the woods but Boyo didn't follow me. 'What's the matter?' I asked.

He was frowning, staring back over the swamp. 'I'm worried about Diddy. What if she's in the swamp somewhere and we're leaving her behind?'

'Well ...' From halfway up the slope, I could see that the swamp spread out for kilometres, with dozens of ponds and reed beds and trees. 'We could search in there for days and not find her.'

'I can't just leave her,' he said miserably.

'How do we know she's even in there? She can fly. Surely she would've been up in the air, looking for you by now? Diddy could even be still in the fireplace.' I was itching to get on the road to find Mum and Dad. I knew he was upset but I was still worried sick about where Scuttlebutt might be and there was nothing I could do about that either. 'Look, Diddy knows where we're going. I bet she'll catch us up in no time, or she might even be somewhere ahead of us.'

'Do you think so?' He brightened up a little. 'All right, let's walk then.'

At last. I set off again, trying to go as fast as I could, but my jeans were still wet and they chafed my legs. The sun was fully up now and steam wafted off our clothes as they dried on us. As we neared the woods, I began to look forward to the cooler shade they promised. We reached the first trees and Boyo stopped. 'Now what?' I said.

'I don't like those woods. I know woods and those don't feel right.'

I stared along the path. The trees were leafy and green, the undergrowth was ferns and flowering bushes, and the rays of sunlight filtering through the canopy were like gold streamers. 'Looks fine to me.'

'You're not a forest person.' He folded his arms and refused to move.

'There's one path, there's no way around that I can see, and this will lead us to the mountains.' I threw up my hands. 'What choice do we have?'

I couldn't see what the problem was. Unless there were things in there like bears, or worse. Giant spiders would be worse. Much worse. I shuddered, but then I thought of Mum and Dad in that jail, the desperation on Mum's face, and the execution in ...

'What day is it here? Is this the same as my world?'

'I guess so. Same as Neither, too.'

'So?'

He screwed up his face. 'I think it's ... Tuesday.'

'Shoot! Two days. We have less than two days until the execution.' I grabbed his arm. 'Come on. I don't care what's in the woods. I'm going through and nothing's going to stop me.'

I started marching along the path into the woods and he came with me, although I was expecting him to pull away and go back to look for Diddy. The further in we went, the better I felt. The golden sunrays were cheery, and the trees were so fresh and green, and the ferns were all fluffy and soft.

Suddenly a dark shadow cut out the light from above. Before we could run, something big and heavy dropped out of the sky, falling over us, smacking us down on the ground. I struggled but the thing was a huge net made of thick, sticky rope. *A web!* I panicked, pushing and kicking at the ropes, my hands getting stickier and stickier, the stuff getting on my face and hair until I fell back, exhausted. Trapped. I knew a huge black spider was about to crawl down from a tree, licking its lips over two tasty dinners, and I trembled.

'Boyo? Are you still here?' My voice was a hoarse whisper.

'Behind you.'

I heard heavy thumps as things jumped out of trees, and footsteps pattered towards us. This was it. Spider food, here I come. My heart tried to leap out of my chest.

'Boyo,' I croaked. 'Spider.'

‘It’s a net. I knew we shouldn’t ...’

A strange noise drowned him out, like a horse whinnying and wheels squeaking. It’d have to be a darned big spider to have a horse and chariot. I forced my head up a couple of inches and there was the horse, brilliant white with a long, combed mane, tossing its head. Lined up along each side of the horse were twelve sturdy little men dressed in powder-blue uniforms with white fur collars and fur cuffs. I had to be dreaming. Or I’d hit my head and was hallucinating.

A voice shouted, ‘Roll them up and put them on the cart.’

It sounded like a man, but everything else here talked, so why not a giant spider? I twisted my head the other way, and the sticky ropes nearly pulled half the hair off my head, but I glimpsed the speaker. A fat little man, no taller than me, in a gold-sequined suit that glittered like a disco ball when it caught the sunlight.

The twelve powder-blue soldiers all chorused, ‘Yes, sir!’ and tapped their heels together and, in a couple of minutes, they had us rolled up like a ball of string. Boyo and I were back to back, lying in the wooden cart. I’d calmed down a tiny bit since I wasn’t going to be eaten by a spider. Maybe we were being taken to Sweet and Mellow prison. Hope leapt up in me again. The horse whinnied and the cart rumbled through the woods but after a while, we headed downhill, so clearly we weren’t going where Mum and Dad were. My rollercoaster feelings dived again. I blinked back tears and muttered to Boyo, ‘Where are they taking us?’

‘I reckon to the palace.’ He wriggled around. ‘This rope’s cutting into my arms.’

‘Me, too. Why the palace?’

‘They must know who you are.’

‘That’s impossible.’ How did they know we were even here? Then I remembered the black-and-purple bird – the gossip. It must’ve tattled on me.

I couldn’t see anything over the high sides of the cart except the sky and tree tops, and it was nearly sundown by the time we rattled over a wooden bridge and under a stone archway. Inside the castle bailey, the walls rose around us, the white stone pinkish in the sunset’s glow. The cart stopped and footsteps came towards us. Then a man’s head appeared over the side of the cart. He slicked back his shoulder-length black hair and inspected us with sharp blue eyes. Then he nodded and said, ‘Take him to the dungeon. Take her to the interrogation room.’

Neither place sounded like a good option. I had a brief flash of me eating ice cream on a plane to Iceland. Like that was ever going to happen now. I wanted to grab hold of Boyo's hand and never let go so we could at least stay together, but the net nearly strangled me as the powder-blue men pulled us off the cart and stood us upright. Then the man with black hair waved his hand and the rope net fell into a heap around our ankles. My knees sagged and I almost fell; the powder-blues grabbed us both and hustled us through a wooden door and into a dark hallway. Oil lamps on the walls lit up dark stone, heavy beams and old painted shields, and I could smell disgusting boiled cabbage.

Boyo was lifted and carried off in one direction, and I was carried in the other. I struggled, shouting, 'Help! Stop!' but their little hands held me in steel grips. Down three flights of steps, along another hallway and up to a large door with metal studded nails hammered into it. It was like being carried by over-sized toys. One powder-blue opened the door and they took me in, put the lamp down, sat me on a chair and briskly tied me to it.

'Why am I –'

They were gone, leaving my words to echo around the small, bleak room. It had dingy walls studded with bolted iron rings, no windows, a stone floor covered in smelly, dirty straw and a wooden table with suspicious brown stains and gouges in it. At least I had the lamp; I'd hate to be in this room in total darkness. My throat was so dry I could hardly swallow. I tried to stay calm and twisted my shaking hands together tightly. Was I going to be left in here forever? I tried not to look at the table – it made me think of torture and other nasty things I totally didn't want to think about.

Slowly, the door opened and I stopped breathing. I half-expected a ghost to appear. Instead, the man with blue eyes came in. He flicked back his hair and walked around me three times, fingers tapping on his mouth as he inspected me from head to toe. I opened my mouth to ask him who he was and his hand shot up. 'Ssssh!'

I made a face. *Fine, then.*

Finally, he sat on the table, crossed his legs and smiled at me, which was pretty darned suspicious. So I inspected him instead. He didn't look like an interrogator but the friendly eyes and smile were probably an act. He wore a black suit, shiny black shoes and a white shirt with a narrow black tie, and he looked like a trendy undertaker. I tried to squash that thought out of my head.

'What is your name?' he asked.

I hesitated. 'Clarissa.'

His smile disappeared. 'Your real name. There is no point in lying. I can tell.'  
He reminded me of Abellona, that same impatient tone grown-ups use with kids.

'Glory.'

'Don't you mean Glorious?'

I half-shrugged. 'I like Glory.'

He wriggled on the table as if he didn't like my answer. *Too bad.* 'What's yours?' I asked.

'Gilt. When will you be thirteen?'

I nearly lied but it seemed pointless. 'Thursday.' I felt that stab of panic again.  
*Mum and Dad. Execution.* 'Why are my mum and dad in jail?'

He looked surprised. 'They were found guilty. They should've known we'd find them, especially now.'

'But how? Why? I don't understand any of this.' I'd been told bits, but nothing added up.

'Because they kidnapped the heir to the throne. You. It's a capital offence, no matter who you are.' His face darkened. 'Besides, they caused the death of my uncle Bronze.'

I focused on the first bizarre thing he'd said. 'I'm the heir to what throne?'

'Queen of FairyLand, of course. Your mother lost the throne when she ran away.' He shook his head. 'Really, feigning ignorance of all of this doesn't do you any good. It just makes you look stupid.'

*That word again!*

'Ignorance is not stupidity!' I shouted. 'I. Don't. Know. What. You. Are. Talking. About.'

## CHAPTER 7

Gilt's black eyebrows shot up, almost meeting his black, wavy hair. 'My goodness, you really don't know, do you?' He jumped off the table and walked around the stone cell, shooting questions at me.

'What's the King's name?'

'I don't know.'

'What is the name of this palace?'

'I don't know.'

'What is your cousin's name?'

'I have a cousin?' I stared at him. Why did I not know that?

'What was the name of the horse you were given at birth?'

'I have a horse?'

He heaved an impatient sigh. 'Not any more, of course.' He stopped pacing, pulled a frog out of his pocket and placed it on the table. The frog looked like it was in a trance: it never moved. 'Make that disappear.'

'Huh? How am I supposed to do that?'

'Stuttering starlight,' he said. 'This is going to really put ...' He touched the ropes around me and somehow my right arm was released. I stretched it out and flexed my fingers. 'Careful!' he shouted. Nothing happened. Except my hand got some blood flowing in it again. I gave him a nasty look.

'All right, all right,' he said. 'Er ... point at the frog.'

This was getting weirder by the minute. 'Why?'

'Just do it, please.'

I pointed.

'Now say, *Mutatis muris i Glorious.*'

It sounded like a spell of some kind, and I didn't like the gleam in his eye as he watched me, but I did as he said.

'*Mutatis muris i Glorious.*' OK, I didn't say it like Gandalf or Hermione would have, but I knew nothing would happen, and it didn't.

The frog blinked and hopped across the table. Gilt put a finger on it and it wriggled a little.

'Try again,' he ordered. I said the words, impatiently this time, and the frog blinked again but stayed as a frog.

'See?'

‘You’re not trying,’ he said.

‘How many times ...’

‘Never mind.’ He pointed at the frog and said, ‘Mutatis muris i Gilt’. It shimmered, changed into a mouse with a tiny squeak and jumped down to the floor, scurrying away into the straw. Then he looked at me. ‘See?’

Of course I saw. It was amazing. But why would he think I could do a trick like that? Not only had I never been able to do anything like it in my whole life, I didn’t even like magic shows. The ones I’d seen on TV were boring, and Mum always turned them off.

As I watched the mouse’s disappearing tail, the ropes around me fell to the ground and Gilt said, ‘Let’s go.’

‘Go where?’

‘You need to meet with your grandfather as soon as possible.’ He sniffed. ‘Not like that, though. You smell like a swamp. You need a bubble bath and proper new clothes.’

‘Hang on, where’s my friend, Boyo?’ I asked.

‘He’s fine,’ he said impatiently. ‘Come along.’

I really didn’t want to stay in the dark, grotty cell. I followed him back up the stairs to the entrance hall, and then through a door and up even more stairs, these ones covered in lovely thick, blue carpets. My leg hurt but I was more worried about Boyo. I didn’t believe he was fine at all. As for Mum and Dad, I seemed to be getting further and further away from rescuing them. I kept imagining a huge hourglass over my head, with the sand steadily falling through the hole.

I stopped to rest on each landing, which meant Gilt had to come back and wait for me. He watched me limping and muttered, ‘That part is true, at least’ and shook his head. But the more I had to stop, the more exasperated he became, so I made each rest longer and longer, just to annoy him.

Finally, we reached a landing with a blue and silver carpet and a silver, sparkly door that was covered in cobwebs. He brushed them away and they stuck to his hands, and then he couldn’t figure out where to wipe them. I shuddered and stayed away from him in case he had spiders crawling on him. He made a ‘Hmph!’ sound and opened the silver door. It creaked loudly and stuck halfway so that he had to give it a good shove. The room was dark and gloomy.

‘Come on,’ he snapped, but I waited in the doorway.

‘Turn some lights on first,’ I said.

‘Pah!’ But he went across to the windows and pulled open the thick curtains, letting in pale moonlight, and then, as he lit several large lamps, I peered in. The walls were pink, the carpet and curtains were blue with pink and yellow flowers, and a huge four-poster bed was covered in white frills. There were more cobwebs in every corner, and the surfaces were covered in a thick layer of dust. The place hadn’t seen a vacuum cleaner for years.

He pulled on a bell rope, showering himself in dust, and waited, tapping his foot. ‘Aren’t you coming in?’

‘If I have to.’ I stepped over the sill and peered at the paintings on the walls. They were of woodland scenes with deer and rabbits. All except for one, which was a portrait of a large, round man with a red face, dressed in orange pants and robes and a gold chain and crown. He looked like a pumpkin. A pumpkin with sharp, beady eyes. ‘Who’s that?’ I hoped it was someone long dead.

‘Your grandfather, of course.’

Erk. I was related to a pumpkin? That reminded me of the woman who rescued me from my wrecked house, the grumpy one who said she was my grandmother. ‘Where’s my grandmother?’

His mouth went into a lemon-pursing shape. ‘We don’t talk about her.’

I hate people who give wriggly answers. ‘Where’s my friend, Boyo, then?’

‘Never mind about him.’

‘But I want – ’

A woman bustled through the door behind me, gasping for breath, her hand on her chest. ‘Gilt, what on earth are you doing? Nobody’s been up here for years. Surely you don’t want it cleaned at this time of night?’

Gilt turned on a teeth-gleaming smile. ‘Mrs Tiggie, I do indeed. We have a guest. Or should I say, the rightful owner of the room has returned to us at last.’

‘What?’ she screeched. Now both hands were on her chest, patting and fluttering. It was a big chest, with nearly as many frills on her blouse as the bed, and they were all rippling like tiny flags in the breeze. ‘But she ... you ...’ She stared at me. ‘Is this really Glorious? Oh, tell me it’s true!’

Before I could correct her and say my name was Glory, Gilt butted in. ‘Yes, yes, and no doubt the news will be all around the castle in five seconds. But right now, I need the room dusted and cleaned, the bath filled, and suitable clothes found.’

‘I can’t do all of that. I’m preparing dinner!’ Her face was bright pink with dismay.

‘Find servants who can then,’ he ordered. ‘And hurry up about it. The King is waiting to meet Glorious and he won’t wait too long without somebody paying for it.’

Clearly, Gilt thought that somebody might be him. Good.

‘Of course, right away. I’ll send up as many as I can spare.’ With that, she was off, fluttering away down the stairs.

‘I can turn the taps on in the bath myself,’ I said. My stomach let out a huge rumbling groan. ‘But what I really need is something to eat, please.’

Gilt looked around the room, but of course there was nothing there but dust and cobwebs. Footsteps pounded up the stairs and two girls burst in, caught sight of me and giggled madly. ‘Ooh, that can’t be her,’ the one with dark braids said.

‘Awful grubby,’ said the other, her brown curls bouncing.

‘Listen!’ Gilt thundered, and they shrank back, giggles gone. He was turning out to be a lot tougher and meaner than he looked. That snazzy suit hid a real grouch. ‘You!’ He pointed at one. ‘Run down to the kitchen and bring Princess Glorious a plate of cheese and fruit. Now!’ He pointed at the other. ‘You. Open up the princess’s bathroom and run her a hot bath with plenty of soap and bubbles. Hurry!’

Princess Glorious? I snorted. He had to be kidding.

The servant girl with braids crossed the room to a door beyond the bed and pushed it open. ‘Euw. It stinks in here.’ She went in and the sound of rattling, thumping and creaking could be heard. ‘Taps don’t work, sir. Been too long, I’d say.’

Gilt sighed dramatically. ‘Do I have to do everything myself?’ He went into the bathroom but, despite more noise, there was no water to be had. Apparently, his magic didn’t extend to plumbing. He came out, his hands stained with rust. ‘I’m sorry, Your Highness, we’ll have to take you to a guest room.’ He pointed at the servant. ‘Take her to the Magnificent Guest Room and sort out that bath.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Gilt bowed slightly to me. ‘I will send for Princess Delight, Your Highness. I’m sure she will assist you with appropriate clothes.’ His tone and the bow were a big turnaround from snarling at me down in the dungeon. Probably because someone else was there.

As the servant girl bobbed past me, I caught her smirking at my dirty red runners, and my face burned. I kept my mouth shut, though, and followed her down one

flight, along a corridor and into a grand room furnished all in pale green and daffodil yellow. Dizziness swept over me again. I clutched at a chair and lowered myself onto it, then rested my head on the small table, knocking over a vase. I hardly cared. *I want to go home*. No, I wanted to go and get Mum and Dad and go home, back to my normal life with no weird people, no talking animals and nobody calling me ‘Your Highness’. Just Mum making cookies, and Dad coming home to sit in the back yard in the sunshine with me.

It seemed so impossible that the black dread inside me grew even bigger and blacker until I thought it might totally consume me.

‘Your Highness.’

Caught up in my misery, I barely heard her. Then I smelled food. Cheese, to be precise. I sat up.

The curly-haired girl stood in front of me holding a large plate, and my mouth started watering. ‘Yes. Thank you,’ I croaked. She put the plate down and I grabbed a piece of the brown, oaty bread, a slice of thick, creamy cheese, and put them in my mouth. *Oh, heaven!* I ate another, and another, and another, while she watched, her eyes popping.

‘I’m not usually this piggy,’ I mumbled through a mouthful of food. ‘But I was really hungry.’

‘Uh huh.’ She moved forward and poured me a glass of something pink from a jug. ‘Juice,’ she said.

I drank the whole glass. It tasted like watermelon and peaches. ‘Nice.’

The girl with braids came out of the bathroom. ‘Your bath is ready, Your Highness.’

‘Look, you don’t have to call me that. Call me – ’

‘Oh no, we do!’ they chorused. ‘We’d be in big trouble if we didn’t.’

I sighed. ‘What are your names?’

‘Soof,’ said the one with brown curls.

‘Whist,’ said the one with braids.

‘If you get in the bath,’ Soof said, ‘I’ll take your clothes and shoes away to be cleaned.’

‘But then I’ll have nothing to wear,’ I said. I didn’t like the idea of being trapped in this room because I was naked. That wouldn’t be a good look if I wanted to make a run for it.

‘They said to tell you that Princess Delight is on her way with some clothes,’ Whist said. ‘She wears lovely clothes, she does. So beautiful ...’

‘OK,’ I said. ‘I guess I can have a bath then.’ Soof led me into the bathroom and somehow I wasn’t surprised that it matched the bedroom, with green tiles and a huge yellow claw-footed bath and green towels. Even the bubbles in the bath were yellow. Soof and Whist stood behind me and, as I went to pull off my T shirt, I realised they weren’t leaving.

No way was I getting undressed in front of strangers!

‘I can do this myself,’ I said.

‘But we have to help,’ Soof said. ‘You’re a princess.’

‘I’m not useless,’ I snapped, and felt bad when they both looked miserable.

‘Truly, I would rather undress myself. You can come and get my clothes later.’ I gently pushed them out of the bathroom and shut the door, then untied my runners. The rest of my clothes ended up in a pile and I climbed into the bath. It was huge with curved sides, and taps that were shaped like tulips. I sank under the bubbles, the lovely hot water soaking into my skin. Straightaway, I felt relaxed and happy. Anyone would think it was a magic bath. That idea drifted in and out of my head as I lay back with a sigh.

The door sprang open and I sat up with a rush, sending water sloshing over the sides. ‘Don’t come in!’

But it wasn’t Soof and Whist. A young woman with blond curls piled on her head, wearing a long, pale pink dress with white lace and bows came in. ‘Don’t be silly, Glorious. It’s me, your cousin. Delight.’

She smiled down at me in the bath and I shrank under the bubbles. Her smile was like a shark’s as she looked me over. ‘Why, you have short hair,’ she said. ‘How strange.’

‘Easier to wash,’ I mumbled.

She glanced at my piled-up clothes. ‘And you have such funny clothes.’ Her foot nudged aside my clothes, revealing my runners. ‘Goodness. How droll.’

Droll? I sat up straighter in the bath. Those runners were my favourites. ‘They’re good for walking in, and playing ball games in the park.’

Her laughter was like tiny bells tinkling. ‘Ball games! Oh, you’re so funny.’

Except when she said funny, she meant stupid. I knew that tone of voice.

‘I’m having a bath,’ I snapped. ‘Do you mind?’

‘Not at all, darling. I just had to come and see you for myself.’ She smiled sadly and made a little face as if I had managed to confirm her worst nightmare. ‘Never mind. We’ll soon fix you up.’

Before I could tell her I didn’t need fixing up, she was gone, leaving the door open. I could hear her in the bedroom with Soof and Whist, giggling and making them laugh, too. All my enjoyment of the bath was gone. I scrubbed quickly with the yellow soap, rinsed and got out, wrapping a big yellow towel around me before I went into the bedroom. I had a bad feeling about the clothes she’d brought me, and it was as awful as I’d thought.

Across the bed lay half a dozen dresses just like hers, all colours of pink and pale yellow and pale blue, with lace and fluffy stuff. The shoes matched and sparkled with sequins. The underpants matched, too, and the lace on them looked scratchy and itchy.

‘There you are,’ Delight said. ‘Which is your favourite colour? I love pink but maybe you’re a ...’ She looked me up and down. ‘Blue?’

I didn’t like any of the wussy dress colours. I liked denim jeans and red and deep-sea blue. I sighed. I couldn’t walk around in a towel, and Soof had already grabbed my clothes and runners. ‘Fine, blue it is.’

Whist picked up the blue underpants and stood ready to help me into them. I grabbed them off her, and took the blue dress off the bed. ‘I’ll manage on my own.’

‘But ...’ Soof looked horrified but Delight laughed again.

‘Oh, let her have her funny little ways, Soof. You’ll have to let Soof button you up, though, Glorious, dear.’

‘Huh,’ I said, and returned to the bathroom. The underpants were surprisingly soft, and the dress seemed comfortable enough, as long as I didn’t trip over the skirt. All the buttons were at the back so I did have to go back and let Soof do those. First, though, she pulled on some other bits I couldn’t see and tightened the top of the dress so it fitted me like a stocking and the skirt belled out. Even the shoes she held out to me were the right size for my feet, which seemed strange.

Whist brought over a hair brush and tidied my hair, giggling at how little of it there was.

‘It’ll soon grow,’ Delight said.

I didn’t plan to be there that long.

Soof dragged out a mirror from the corner and Whist pushed me in front of it. I didn't want to look. I felt like I was going to a fancy dress party, one where everyone would laugh at me. But they all stood there expectantly so I risked a glance and gasped. It didn't look like me at all. The blue dress made my eyes bluer and my cheeks pinker, and Whist had done something to my hair that fluffed it out. I actually looked kind of pretty. I'd never been pretty in my life. Sturdy, Dad called me. Healthy, Mum said, healthy and strong.

I caught a glimpse of Delight in the mirror – her face was a scowling mask. But by the time I turned around, she was back to all smiles. 'Lovely. Now let's go and meet the King. He's waiting in the throne room.'

I gulped. I wasn't at all keen on meeting the Great Pumpkin, and I suspected that I was about to be interrogated again. I followed Delight down the stairs. She certainly knew how to walk like a princess, floating along as if she were three inches above the stone floor. I clomped after her. The doors to the throne room were at least four metres tall, and they needed both of the boys standing guard to push them open. These servants were also in powder-blue velvet – it must be the standard uniform.

The doors swung open slowly and I gritted my teeth, ready to meet the Pumpkin. It seemed ridiculous that he was my grandfather, but I hoped he'd tell me where Mum and Dad were. Maybe I could persuade him to let them go.

The throne room turned out to be a large hall, lined with carved gold arches and paintings of people in crowns and furs, and it was jam-packed with chattering people. I quailed and took a step back. They wore bright clothes of every colour, embellished with jewels and sparkly things; the women wore more jewels and sparkles and veils on their heads. It was like a huge box of moving, chattering Christmas decorations. Nobody stood on the central carpet runner. They were all in little groups to either side, talking and drinking, and servants moved around with trays of glasses and snacks. Delight pushed past me, hissing, 'Stay right behind me,' and swept through the doorway. I followed her, shuffling along, hunched over, hoping nobody would notice me.

But within three seconds, the whole hall fell silent and every single person swivelled around to stare at me. I froze, unable to take another step. *I can't do this.* Goosebumps rose on my arms and the dress felt so tight I couldn't breathe. Delight was halfway down the hall before she realised I wasn't behind her anymore. She turned and

her scornful look said a million things about me, all nasty. Hot anger ran through me and immediately I decided I wasn't going to let her win.

I straightened, stuck my nose in the air, and walked down the carpet as if I were a super model on a Paris runway. I'd seen them plenty of times on TV. I knew how to do that walk. Of course I was still limping a little – my leg made sure of that – but I was used to it. The cocktail crowd weren't. Most of them didn't even look at my face. They were all watching me limp. I wanted to slap every single one of them.

Instead, I looked straight ahead, and there was the Pumpkin, sitting on a huge gold throne, a glittering crown on his head. He wasn't quite as pumpkin-like as I expected, probably because he was about a million years older than the portrait, and he was dressed in purple instead of yellow, but his eyes were just as beady. He watched me coming towards him, and his mouth had an ominous twist to it that I didn't like at all. He seemed even less happy to see me than Delight had been.

Well, I wasn't planning on staying so what difference did it make? I'd learned to ignore rude people who stared at my leg, even when I felt like jelly inside, and this beady-eyed man was no different. I pressed my lips together, straightened my back even more, and marched to the end of the carpet. Gilt drifted out of the crowd of people to my left and hovered at my elbow. 'Curtsey,' he muttered.

'What for?'

'He's the King!'

I nearly said, 'He's not my king,' but I thought better of it. I was here to rescue Mum and Dad. I needed to watch what I said and did. I curtsied awkwardly and the Pumpkin grimaced.

'Come closer,' he commanded. 'I want to get a better look at you.'

The throne was on a dais so I had to climb six steps to reach his feet. They were clad in gold slippers, resting on a cushion – but they were swollen and looked painful. I met his eyes, trying not to be intimidated by his inspection.

'You limp,' he said at last.

Apparently my FairyLand relatives didn't know the meaning of the word tact. I didn't answer.

'Your parents were not able to get that fixed in that other place they ran away to?' His tone was scathing.

I pressed my lips together harder, so hard that they hurt.

‘Just as well you’re back,’ he said. ‘There’s not much time.’ He waved at Gilt, who bounded up the steps and stood just below me. ‘Coronation tomorrow, Gilt. Midday. See to it.’

‘Yes, Your Majesty. Immediately.’ Behind us, the hall erupted in whispers.

‘Coronation?’ I said. I had a bad feeling about this.

‘FairyLand has had no Queen for nearly thirteen years, thanks to your parents and their ridiculous behaviour,’ the King said. ‘The sooner we get you crowned, the better.’

‘I don’t want to be Queen,’ I blurted. I wanted to know about Mum and Dad, but I couldn’t get the words out.

‘Rubbish,’ the King said. He beckoned to Delight, who glided up to stand on my right and curtsied gracefully. ‘Get her a coronation dress. Something silver. Something magnificent.’

‘Yes, Your Majesty.’

‘But ...’ I tried again.

‘And Gilt,’ the King said. ‘Fix that problem, for the coronation, at least.’

‘Er ...’ Gilt glanced at me and then bowed. ‘Of course, Your Majesty.’

The King waved me away. ‘Go and learn how to be a queen. Do whatever Gilt and Delight tell you to do. Or else.’

‘But ...’ Before I could say anything else, Gilt pointed at my mouth and muttered, ‘Taciturnis.’ And my voice went. My mouth opened and closed but nothing came out.

Gilt grabbed me by the arm and hustled me down the steps, then whispered in my ear, ‘Don’t you dare try to speak again.’ Delight grabbed my other arm and together they marched me back along the carpet and out the door. I burned with anger and embarrassment at being silenced by a spell like a babbling idiot. It was impossible not to see the smirks and gleeful smiles of the people each side of the carpet. They didn’t feel the slightest bit sorry for me.

I hated this place more and more every minute I was here.

Before we reached the doors, I made a vow. I would escape from this horrible palace and get to Sweet and Mellow prison and release Mum and Dad. That meant rescuing Boyo, getting my clothes and runners back and finding a way past the guards. Hopefully we could steal a horse or two, even though I couldn’t ride. I’d work that out

later. Right now, I'd go along with these two and pretend all was well, but I was getting out of here, one way or another.

## CHAPTER 8

Once we were outside the throne room, I wrenched my arms free of Gilt and Delight and found, to my relief, that I could talk again. ‘What’s this coronation he’s talking about?’

Gilt at least looked embarrassed. Delight’s face was a storm cloud.

‘It’s your coronation, of course,’ Gilt said. ‘It’ll be ... lovely.’

‘No, it won’t,’ I said. I pointed at Delight. ‘You’re my cousin. You can be Queen.’

The storm cloud just grew darker. ‘You ...’

‘Look,’ Gilt said. ‘Let’s talk about this upstairs. Not here.’ He glanced around but nobody else was there except the powder-blue boys. Maybe they were spies. Gilt gestured for me to follow him and we went back up to my room. At the door, Delight said, ‘You can educate Glorious. I have better things to do,’ and marched away.

Gilt called after her, ‘Don’t forget that silver dress.’

She flung a rude word over her shoulder, turned the corner and disappeared.

‘She’s not happy,’ Gilt said.

‘You think?’ I went into my room and collapsed on the yellow couch by the window. What I really wanted was sleep, but I needed to know what was going on. ‘Spit it out,’ I told him. ‘Tell me everything. Now.’

He blinked a few times, then said, ‘You were kidnapped by your parents when you were one year old. Then ...’

‘Why?’ I didn’t want to interrupt him but I needed explanations.

‘It was your ... ahem. Your leg.’ His face was bright red. ‘It was ... deformed. The King was furious. Your mother had refused to be crowned queen after her mother was ex ... died, and then you were ... less than perfect. The King demanded that she get rid of you and have another child.’

‘Get ... get rid of me?’

‘I’m afraid so.’ He stared at his feet, his shoulders hunched. ‘There was even talk of ... death. An accident. Or hiding you in Sweet and Mellow forever.’

‘That’s murder!’ I screeched.

‘This is FairyLand. Imperfection is not well tolerated.’ He fell silent for a few moments, then let out a shuddering sigh that sounded a tiny bit fake to me. ‘When your mother and father ran away, my uncle tried to stop them. Your mother was in a rage and she pushed him, and he fell under a carriage wheel.’

I blinked hard. My mother shoved someone down and they died? I wasn't sure I believed him, but he did seem pretty upset. 'I'm sorry.'

'It wasn't your fault. And Uncle Bronze was a difficult man, and an even more difficult magician. Loyal to the King, totally loyal. He was going to spirit you away.'

So probably he deserved it. *Go, Mum.*

'So Mum and Dad ran off to my world.' I was trying to get any information that might be useful. 'How did they get there?'

'Through a portal into Neither.' He shrugged. 'There's no direct route into your world from here. And don't go asking anyone about it,' he added sharply. 'That will get you in big trouble. This place has eyes and ears everywhere.'

A chilling suspicion struck me. 'Why are you telling me all this? Aren't you the King's magician? Aren't you going to go and blab everything to him?'

A flash of something in his eyes told me I should be on my guard with him, too. Everyone here lied; everyone was against me. Everywhere I turned, the place was a steel trap, trying to snap shut on me. A wave of hopelessness swept over me, and I sagged.

'I'm trying to help you,' he said, patting my hand.

I so wanted to believe him.

The knock on the door made both of us jump. The door opened and Soof came in. 'I came to help you undress, Your Highness.'

'Good,' I said. 'I've had enough for one night.' I glared at Gilt and he took the hint.

'I'll see you in the morning,' he said, and left.

I looked around the fluffy, lolly-coloured room, and ached to be back home, or at least have something familiar with me. 'Where are my clothes and runners?' I asked Soof.

'I ... we ...'

'I need them back right now,' I said. 'Dirty or clean. Please!'

'Yes, Your Highness.' She scuttled out of the room and I waited until her steps faded, then checked the other rooms near mine. They were all coloured bedrooms and all empty. Good. Nobody to spy on me.

A few minutes later, Soof returned with my clothes and shoes. 'They're still damp,' she said. 'And your shoes are still dirty.'

‘I don’t care.’ I took them from her, hugging them close. ‘Get me out of this dress, please.’ I felt mean, ordering her around like that, but it had been a long day. I waited until she’d unbuttoned and loosened everything, then said, ‘You can go now, thanks.’

‘But ...’

‘Good night.’

She curtsied, her face pale. ‘Your nightdress is under your pillow, Your Highness.’ She rushed out and shut the door.

I ripped off the dress and pulled on my clothes. They were damp, yes, but they were mine and they made me feel a million times better. Besides, a long dress would just slow me down. I tied my sneaker laces and left my room, heading down the stairs. If I went right at the bottom, I’d end up at the throne room again. But if I went left, I was sure I could find the way down to the dungeons, where Boyo had been taken.

I crept down, a few steps at a time, checking around corners and listening for sounds of movement. On the ground floor, I turned left and opened doors until I recognised where we’d been brought in – the entrance room with the brown matting and the shields on the walls. I followed the lamp-lit corridor where they’d carried Boyo, past wooden doors and the sounds of men snoring and coughing. Outside every door were neatly lined-up pairs of green leather boots, and I guessed these must be the soldiers’ quarters.

The next set of stairs led down into darkness, so I took the last lamp off its holder and edged forward, one hand on the wall, hoping there were no spider webs. I didn’t want to let out a loud scream and bring the soldiers running, although those snores sounded pretty ginormous. The stone steps here were smooth with a dip in the middle, worn from years of feet going up and down.

At the bottom was an endless row of doors with high barred windows. I had to pull myself up to see inside each cell but they were all pitch black holes and the guttering lamp had no effect. I started whispering, ‘Boyo! Are you there?’ and getting answers. Some muttered ‘Go away’, some groaned, some snored. But at the very end, a familiar voice answered.

‘Glory, is that you?’

‘Yes. Are you tied up? Chained?’

He rattled something that sounded big and heavy. ‘Yes.’

‘Oh, poop.’ I lowered myself and tried the door. It wouldn’t budge. There was no key hanging conveniently on a hook, either. After more rattling inside, Boyo sounded close to the door.

‘Have you escaped?’ he asked.

‘No, I came to rescue you, but ... I can’t figure out how. I’ll have to find keys, or bribe the jailer, or ... I don’t know.’ It should have been easy but it wasn’t.

‘Where have you been? What was the interrogation?’

‘Gilt asked me a lot of dumb questions, and then they decided ...’

‘What?’

I made a face. ‘It’s really stupid. They say I’m the Queen and they’re going to have a coronation. They’re making me wear awful dresses, and this guy who is supposed to be my grandfather is really horrible.’

Boyo laughed. ‘Can’t be that bad.’

‘I just want to get out of here and go find Mum and Dad.’

‘You could anyway. Escape now.’

I gasped. ‘I’m not running off and leaving you here.’

‘Makes no difference to me. Better here than with Abellona.’

My face burned. ‘It’s all my fault. You wouldn’t be stuck here, or stuck with Abellona if not for me. I’m really sorry.’

‘Don’t worry, the rats down here are quite friendly,’ he said. ‘Besides, anything could happen. It often does.’

I took a breath. ‘Maybe. But I am not leaving you here to rot while I run off. I’ll find a way out for both of us.’

‘That would be nice.’ There was a short silence, then he said, ‘You haven’t seen Diddy, have you?’

‘No. I’m sorry.’ I was saying sorry a lot, but I needed to.

‘Abellona mighta kept her, like a ransom. To make sure I go back.’ He sighed.

‘We’ll get Diddy back, too,’ I said. ‘I promise.’

‘You promise.’

I heard the doubt in his voice and it stung. ‘Yes! There’s got to be a way out of this. A clever way that these awful FairyLanders haven’t thought of. You wait and see.’

‘All right, I will,’ he said.

‘I’m going to get some sleep,’ I said. ‘I think I’ll need all my wits about me tomorrow.’

We said goodnight and I made my way back to my room. My brain was spinning with ideas and possibilities, and most of them centred around the King. He didn't like me, I could tell. But it was clearly important to him that I be crowned. Maybe I could use that to get what I wanted. My bargaining chip, as Dad would say. All the same, I'd have to play it carefully.

## CHAPTER 9

The next morning, Soof burst into my room, flung open the curtains and bustled around, laying out six different dresses for me again, while I was trying to bury my head under the pillow. But once I was awake, all of my problems exploded in my brain. It was one day until Mum and Dad were executed. Boyo was stuck in the dungeon. My stupid coronation was at midday. There had to be a way to turn things around, to rescue Boyo and Mum and Dad and then make a run for it.

Surely if I was going to be Queen, I could order people to do what I wanted? But I remembered the King's words, his sneering face, his commands. I would be Queen in name only, with no power at all. Last night I'd been so determined, but now I was darned if I could see how to fix things. Even when I thought I was doing the right thing, a grownup would barge in and change the rules or wreck my plans. I was probably being told big, fat lies, too.

As I lay there, watching Soof and screwing my face up at all the dresses, I suddenly realised – Mum and Dad had never been honest with me either. My whole life in our world, which now apparently wasn't our world, was an act. Had Dad really moved us around for better job opportunities? Or were we just constantly on the run from FairyLand? What was that trip to Iceland really about?

If I was the Queen, what did that make Mum? She'd refused, abdicated her throne, which should've meant it applied to me, too. But Gilt had insisted that I was *it*. Queen instead of her. Why couldn't I abdicate, too? My head ached. Why hadn't they ever told me any of this? It was way past unfair. It'd turned out to be downright disastrous. The more I thought about them keeping all of this a big secret, the madder I got. They shouldn't have hidden it from me.

Fine, then. If it was up to me to get us all out of this mess, maybe I'd have to tell a few lies of my own. I'd have to pretend and tell these weird people what they wanted to hear, and buy some time. I'd find a way to get Boyo out and save my parents. Even though I was angry with them, I loved them and I'd curl up and die if they were executed. Surely I could beat these FairyLanders at their own game. Yeah, I'd outsmart the lot of them.

I got out of bed and went over to the dresses. Ugh. All sappy colours, all lacy and frilly. The least worst one was green, the colour of pistachio ice cream. It had dragonflies embroidered around the neck, which I had to admit I liked; anyway, it

would have to do. I washed my face and let Soof tie and button me into the dress. She was quiet and kept her head down.

‘Are you all right?’ I asked. Maybe I’d been too grumpy with her.

‘Yes, Your Highness,’ she whispered. As she turned away, her sleeve rode up and I saw red marks like fingers on her skin.

‘Oh my goodness, how did you get those?’

She flushed and opened her mouth but no words came out.

‘Who hurt you?’

She clasped her trembling hands together tightly but still didn’t answer me.

‘If you tell me who did this,’ I said, ‘I’ll make sure they get punished.’ My words sounded feeble, even to me. I had no power to do anything here.

She shook her head. ‘I’m fine, truly, Your Highness. You have a dress fitting in half an hour. Breakfast is in the dining room.’

I huffed and muttered, ‘All right.’ Even though it wasn’t.

She insisted I sit so she could brush my hair, then led me downstairs to a room near the throne room. A long table against one wall held every kind of food I could possibly want for breakfast, and more that looked and smelled gross. There were giant black sausages, a whole baked fish with a shiny blue skin, pink roast potatoes and long curly beans. I avoided it all and chose thick pancakes with blueberries the size of gobstoppers and a lemon-flavoured cream. As I sat down with my plate, Delight swished in, wearing a pink dress with frills all over the skirt and sparkly jewels around the front and sleeves. She looked like a princess doll. Maybe she meant to.

Her face soured when she saw me, but then she pasted on a big smile.

‘Glorious, how lovely to see you this morning. All ready for your dress fitting?’

‘I suppose.’ The pancakes suddenly didn’t taste so good.

‘I believe the palace hair salon is planning to give you some hair.’ She laughed, and it sounded like breaking glass. ‘You’ll need something to sit the crown on, my dear.’ She put three blueberries, three strawberries and three raspberries on her plate and sat down, glancing at my plate. ‘Are you one of those lucky people who can eat whatever they like?’

‘It’s just food,’ I said.

Her eyebrows shot up towards the blonde curls arranged along her hairline.

‘You won’t be saying that when it goes to your hips.’

I shook my head. She was already so skinny that her bones stuck out. ‘What do you mean, they’re going to give me hair?’ I asked. ‘My hair is fine as it is.’

‘You’ll see,’ she warbled. ‘Now you’d better go and have your fitting. Madame Glissard is in such a panic, having to get your dress done by twelve for the coronation.’

‘It wasn’t my idea,’ I said. ‘We can put it off for a few days.’

‘The King won’t hear of it,’ she said firmly.

‘Why not?’

‘Pardon me?’ She stared at me, one strawberry halfway to her mouth.

‘Why does it have to happen today?’ I sat back in my chair, sucking the lemon cream off my spoon as the germ of a plan formed in my head. ‘What if I said no? That I didn’t want to be rushed?’

I thought she might get upset, but instead she smiled an evil little smile, strawberry juice staining her teeth. ‘You go right ahead, dear cousin.’ She rang a little bell on the table and a boy in powder-blue came running. ‘Message for the King,’ she told him. ‘Glorious wants to put off the coronation for a few days.’

The boy went white and tottered. I thought he was going to faint. ‘You want me to tell the King that?’ he whispered.

‘Yes! Right away.’ She waved him off and ate a raspberry, watching me out of the corners of her eyes. She was up to something. I made myself casually eat another pancake, even though they were sitting in my stomach like boulders now.

The blue boy was back inside two minutes, breathing fast, his eyes wide. ‘Th – the King, His Majesty, he – he wants to see her immediately.’

She smiled at me again. ‘You’d better go, dear. He doesn’t like to be kept waiting.’

I pushed my plate aside and followed the blue boy into a room across the corridor. It was another dining room, but everything on the white-clothed table, from the knives and spoons to the plates and salt and pepper shakers, was made out of gold or embossed with gold. The King sat on a white-and-gold patterned chair, eating from a plate filled with strips of crispy bacon. I stood in front of the table, but he didn’t even look at me, just kept eating.

Mum always did this when she was mad at me. I knew this game.

After a few seconds, I turned and walked out. I’d reached the corridor when he shouted, ‘Come back here!’

I turned. He was glaring, but at least he was looking at me. I went back in and stood just inside the door. I stayed silent. Two could play at this.

Finally he said, 'What's this I hear? What silliness is this?'

'What difference will it make to delay it a few days?' I faked a yawn. 'It's not that important, is it?'

I thought the top of his head was going to lift off, he went such a dark shade of red. 'It's vital to our land! How dare you question my decision.'

I considered all the things I could say, and what I wanted, and chose my words carefully. 'You don't own me. You haven't even convinced me I am either related to you, or that I'm really the Queen. It all seems a bit farfetched to me.'

'Farfetched?' he spluttered. 'Farfetched? I'll have you know that you are the last in a very long line of kings and queens, and it is your *obligation* to continue our rule.'

'It's not *my* obligation,' I said. 'Until yesterday, I didn't know you existed.'

'That is the fault of your mother.'

'Speaking of my mother, why is she in prison?'

'She and your father were found guilty of heinous crimes.' He thumped the table. 'The penalty is execution. The Royal Court's decision cannot be overturned.'

I took a step forward. 'That's just silly. What if I *wanted* to be taken away? What if I asked them to take me away? That's not kidnapping then, is it?'

'Don't be ridiculous,' he said. 'You were only a year old.'

'Old enough to be taken away and got rid of, I hear.'

'That ... that was not my suggestion,' he said. 'I said no.'

I took another step forward. 'Sounds to me like my mother saved my life. So unless my parents are released immediately from Sweet and Mellow and are here at the coronation, I refuse to go through with it. You will have to throw me in jail with them.'

He sat in absolute silence, glaring at me, his beady eyes like sharp stones that might gouge mine out. Inside I was wobbly, but I stood as straight as I could and met his gaze, even though what I really wanted was to run away and hide.

'Hmph,' he grunted at last, and waved a hand. From behind a curtain on the wall, Gilt emerged. He must've been there, listening, the whole time. My knees still shook but I gritted my teeth. I couldn't give in now.

Gilt moved towards me. 'His Majesty agrees to your terms. There are terms of his own in return.'

‘Like what?’ I didn’t like the sound of this.

‘You will submit to whatever is required for the coronation. You will take the vows without question. You will remain in FairyLand for as long as you live.’ Gilt’s voice was steady but his eyes were troubled. He seemed to be asking me if I was sure I wanted to agree to this.

I’d agree, but I wouldn’t stick to it. Why should I? Nobody in FairyLand cared about me. One small lie wouldn’t make any difference. My only task would be to find a way out when all the fuss had died down.

‘Sure, I can do that,’ I said.

The King went back to eating his bacon, smacking his lips and smiling triumphantly at me. It made me uneasy. Maybe I’d been tricked somehow. But I was going to escape, so none of it would matter.

‘Very well,’ Gilt said. ‘You will have to come with me now and get your dress fitted.’

That darn dress again. What was the big deal? They were fussing about it more than if I were getting married. I sighed and followed him out of the room and up the stairs. We walked along a long corridor, right to the end. Before he opened the door, he said, ‘I hope you know what you just promised.’

‘I have no idea,’ I said. ‘I guess I’ll find out along the way. More importantly, how are you going to get Mum and Dad here by midday?’

He sighed. ‘They’re already here. They have been for two days. They were only in Sweet and Mellow for a few hours.’

Abellona! Another liar. Mum and Dad were already out. That silver tray had been a trick to get hold of Boyo. I ground my teeth. I was going to pay her back for that.

But all the same ... they were here!

‘Can I see them?’

‘Of course not.’

‘But ...’

He scowled. ‘You’ll see them at the coronation.’

‘But ...’

He held up a hand. ‘You made an agreement. Too late now.’

I glared at him but he ignored me, opened the door and ushered me in. The room was large but it was full of bolts of material in all colours of the rainbow, along

with jars of buttons and rolls of lace and swathes of chiffon and net. We had to step carefully to get to the middle where a woman sat, sewing sequins onto a glowing white veil.

Gilt coughed but she didn't look up. 'Madame Glissard.'

'Yes, I can see she eez finally here, Monsieur Gilt.' Two more stitches and Madame raised her head and inspected me from top to bottom. 'The estimate I was given was two centimetres taller and a centimetre wider. You all wish to make my task so much harder, n'est-ce pas?'

'My apologies, Madame,' Gilt said. 'The King –'

'Pah!' She waved a hand. 'Allez! Come back in an hour.'

Gilt bowed and left, while I was inspected again. She muttered to herself, got up and circled me with a tape measure, then nodded. 'It is fixable. Of course it is. Stand on this.'

She helped me up onto a small platform. 'Take off your clothes and shoes, s'il vous plait.'

I opened my mouth to object, and then remembered – I had said I would cooperate. If putting up with this meant seeing Mum and Dad soon so we could plan our escape, I'd do it. I took everything off except my underwear and stood there, shivering, until she returned with a huge armful of white and gold silk. She carefully shook the cloth out and it became a dress that was so dazzling I could barely look at it. She lifted it up and gestured for me to bend so she could put it over my head. It looked as though it would weigh a ton, but it settled around me like feathers. Madame pulled the material this way and that, pinched it between her fingers to fit it against me, and knelt to fold over the hem.

'Do you want me to take it off now?' I asked, when she stopped to thread a needle.

'No time,' she said. 'Surely you can stand still for a while longer? Princess Delight can be like a statue for hours.'

That didn't surprise me. 'All right.' But I was itching to see my parents.

Madam threaded five needles with white thread and set to work, her fingers moving so fast I saw only a blur. First she hemmed the whole skirt, then sewed all around my waist, pulling it tighter and tighter. Then she buttoned all the buttons down the back and sewed some more. I was never going to get out of this thing. It felt like a straitjacket.

Just as she stood back to inspect me again, Gilt arrived back. ‘Oh my,’ he said. ‘Madame, you have outdone yourself this time.’

‘Pah,’ she said. ‘I made this twenty years ago, when my skills were younger and faster. It will do.’

That must mean she had made it for my mother, but before I could ask, Gilt put two white sparkly shoes in front of me. ‘Put these on,’ he said. ‘There’s no time to lose.’

‘It’s not midday yet,’ I said.

‘There are other things to do,’ he said. He bowed to Madame and led me from the room, down the corridor and into another room where two women with brushes and combs waited to do my hair. When they saw my short hair, they both sucked in a breath and shook their heads. ‘There is nothing of it,’ one said.

‘The rumours were true,’ said the other.

‘No wigs,’ Gilt said.

‘But ...’

‘Do your best,’ said Gilt. ‘The crown has already been made lighter.’

They advanced on me with two low stools but I wasn’t allowed to sit. ‘You will crush the dress, your Highness,’ one said. Instead, they stood on the stools, one on each side, draped towels on my shoulders and did my hair. Somehow they washed it, dried it and fluffed and pinned it up in just a few minutes. It felt like I had a head of fairy floss.

‘Good work,’ said Gilt. ‘Come along, Glorious.’ By now, my leg was aching again and all I wanted was to sit or lie down and rest, but I followed him without protest back along the corridor. My mutiny would come later.

‘What are we doing now?’ I asked. ‘How much more glamming up do I need?’

‘One more thing,’ he said. He opened another door and I went in, expecting more hair stuff or even makeup, but this room was completely empty, apart from a round, black rug in the middle and something tall covered in a black sheet. ‘Stand on the rug, please.’

I did as he said and waited, alarm growing inside me as he circled three times, whispering to himself. When I tried to ease my leg, he said, ‘Stand perfectly still. Don’t move.’ His voice was so cold that it frightened me into obeying. As he continued to circle me, his voice got louder and louder and his hands moved in the air. I couldn’t understand a word of what he was saying, but I could feel the power of it in my bones.

To be exact, I could feel it in my hip and leg bones, the ones in my bad leg. It was as though they were melting and moving and reforming, and it was the weirdest sensation I'd ever had, not painful, just bizarre.

Gilt finished with a series of words he repeated three times and fell silent, his eyes closed. I was too scared to move. He'd done something to my body, something magic. His eyes snapped open and he stared at me. 'Well?'

I couldn't answer.

'Can you walk?'

'Walk?' I wasn't sure. I put out one tentative foot, then the other. I walked to the door and back again. No limp. I bent, I stretched, I stood on tiptoes. No ache. I wasn't sure what normal would feel like, but I was pretty sure this was it. It was absolutely, amazingly incredible. Thrills of happiness ran up and down my arms and legs like fizzing electric wires. I wanted to leap into the air, run a hundred kilometres, climb a mountain, ride a bicycle in a race and win. Even just to hit a baseball and run around all the bases without stopping or limping.

'So it worked,' Gilt said, smiling back at me. 'Good. But ...'

'You didn't think it would?'

'I wasn't sure. I've never conducted that kind of spell before.' He frowned. 'It could have gone horribly wrong, and then I would've been the one in Sweet and Mellow.'

I pretended I didn't hear that bit and laughed. 'I can't believe I'm ... fixed!'

'Well ...' He frowned deeper and went to the tall thing against the wall. 'Are you ready to look at yourself?'

'Sure!' I knew I wouldn't be able to see my straightened leg hidden under the big skirt, but I wanted to imagine I could.

He pulled the black sheet away to reveal a huge mirror with a silver frame. A nervous tremor rippled through me. What if ... what if I looked ugly? What if fixing my leg had made my face twist? Or something even more peculiar?

'Come on,' he said impatiently. 'We have to go down in a minute.'

I scuttled across the room, eyes down, too scared to see, but the dress created a big white flash in the mirror and I had to look up. 'Oooh.'

The person in the mirror couldn't possibly be me. She was stunning, awesome, beautiful. No, it wasn't me. It couldn't be. But it was. It was me looking like a princess,

all gorgeous and sparkly. And the very best part was that feeling of my leg, under that incredible dress, my leg as a straight, strong, ache-free leg.

For the first time in my life, I felt normal.

I wanted to cry but I was too stunned. If this was what my reward was for staying in FairyLand and being Queen, I'd take it. I would never go back to Ordinary. If I could be this amazing forever, it was worth staying here.

Sure, I'd still have to make sure Mum and Dad were safe, and I'd have to get Boyo out of the dungeon, but I'd be the Queen. I could do anything. Everyone would have to obey me. Mum and Dad wouldn't mind staying here, surely. I could command them to stay. Boyo, too, and find him another bird.

Yes, it would be awesome indeed! My FairyLand. My normal leg. *Mine, precious, all mine.* And I could do everything I'd always wanted. I kept staring at myself in the mirror, getting even more excited. Probably as Queen, I'd have a horse to ride. Gilt said I'd had one as a baby. Oh, I'd always wanted a horse, even more than a bicycle. I could go for long rides, I could dance, maybe learn ballet. I could do other strong stuff, too, like archery and sword fighting. Wouldn't that be great?

Gilt coughed, and coughed again. 'Glorious?'

'Mmm?' I tore my gaze away from the mirror and realised he was fidgeting. 'Are we late?'

'Almost.' He fidgeted some more. 'There's something I need to tell you.'

'What?'

'Your leg.'

'Yes. It's amazing. Thank you!' It was. He was a great magician.

'You're welcome. Except ... it won't last. I'm sorry.' His face was pale and sweaty, like he was waiting for me to punish him or go berserk at him.

My mouth dropped open, and then the fizzing excitement faded, dying away like someone had pulled the plug. In a few seconds, I went from ecstatic to devastated. Zap.

'You're kidding.'

'No, I'm not. I'm really sorry.'

'But ... if it won't last, why did you do it?' I burst into tears that ran down my face and soaked into my dress. 'How could you do that?' I screamed.

He took a step back. 'I ... the King commanded me.'

‘Why? What difference does it make to him?’ I brushed the tears away but they still kept coming.

‘He wants the coronation to be perfect.’ Gilt grimaced as if he was in pain.

No, I was the one in pain. Pain so bad that I thought my heart might burst out from beneath my ribs and splatter on the floor. The tears stopped but I couldn’t catch my breath. It hurt too much. It all hurt too much. I had to be perfect for FairyLand. That was the price I was paying for what I wanted. I couldn’t just be me, prettied up, and limping a bit. I had to be a perfect Queen, but only for as long as it suited them.

‘How long will it last?’ I whispered.

‘Probably only until tomorrow. I’ve never done such a spell before. It was very difficult, and ...’ He rubbed at his face with both hands. ‘I am so sorry. I hadn’t thought ... I didn’t understand how you would feel.’

‘But you still would have done it,’ I said heavily. ‘The King made you.’

‘Yes.’

This was the first payment. Submit to whatever was required for the coronation. What else had I promised? Take the vows without question. The black dread I thought had gone was creeping back, sucking me down, smothering me. What would the vows be?

I had to promise to live here forever. Live in FairyLand, where everything was beautiful and FAKE. I thought right then that I might go insane if I had to stay here one more day, let alone the rest of my life.

## CHAPTER 10

Everything that I had promised the King I would do was now closing in around me like prison bars. ‘Where are Mum and Dad?’

‘Downstairs,’ Gilt said. ‘They’ve been released and given clothes to wear.’

‘Already? Do they know what is about to happen?’

‘Yes.’

*Oh boy, Mum will kill me. I’m doing the one thing she tried to protect me from.*

Gilt fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a large white handkerchief. ‘You need to clean your face and come downstairs. We’re out of time.’

Just as he said the word ‘time’, bells began to ring, both near and far. The peals echoed and bounced around the room and clanged inside my head. I wiped my eyes and scrubbed at my face and handed him back his hanky, then followed him out of the room and down the stairs. There was no pleasure now in walking normally, or even without pain. I almost prayed for the pain to come back, to punish me. By the time we reached the throne room doors, the bells had stopped and deathly silence had fallen. The two powder-blue guards on the doors glanced at me, surprise on their faces, then stared forward again, arms stiffly by their sides.

‘Glory,’ Gilt said. ‘Listen carefully. You have to do exactly as I say.’

‘Or?’

He closed his eyes briefly. ‘Trust me. You do not want to get this wrong.’

‘OK.’

‘You have to do this alone. When the doors open, you stand on the threshold and wait for the trumpets to finish; then you walk all the way to the King. Straight down the middle of the carpet. No limping.’

‘My leg is fine!’

He raised his eyebrows at me. ‘I suspect you are the kind of girl who might fake a limp, just to see what the King says.’

‘Well ...’ I had been thinking of doing exactly that.

‘Don’t do it. Don’t even think about it. Your parents aren’t safe yet.’

I nodded. I got it.

‘When you get to the King, the Grand Vizier will come forward with the crown, and he will tell you the vows, which you will actually make to the King.’

‘I thought you were the guy in charge.’

‘No. I’m the court magician. Are you listening?’

I nodded again.

‘After you say the vows, you have to kneel on the cushion, and the King will crown you. While that is all happening, you must not move or speak, no matter what. Eyes down, ears closed, is the best policy.’

‘Why? What’s that about?’ A niggles of fear snaked through me. Something else was going on with this coronation business.

‘There might be some objections. You must not get involved. You must not move or say a word. The King ... will be angry with you. He’ll blame you.’

‘Is this like a wedding?’

‘Sort of.’ I could tell he nearly added, ‘But worse.’

I rubbed my sweaty hands down the silky skirt, not caring if I marked it. ‘Then what?’

‘Once you are crowned, you can relax. The King will be happy and everyone will be ready to celebrate.’

‘Everyone except me,’ I said. ‘And Mum and Dad, I bet.’

‘But they’ll be safe by then. Their executions will be postponed indefinitely.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’ Gilt leant forward and straightened my skirt and tweaked one sleeve of my dress. ‘Right, are you ready?’

‘As ready as I’ll ever be.’ *Which is never.*

‘I’ll see you afterwards.’ He gestured to the guards and they pulled open the huge doors. Gilt slipped inside and disappeared in the crowd, who were all waiting in the huge hall. Like last night, they were gossiping and laughing, but as I stepped forward, the trumpets began and they all turned as one towards me. It was like one of Dad’s old cowboy movies and I was the baddie at the saloon door. My stomach lurched, but I took another step and paused on the threshold. The trumpets were worse than the bells and went on and on, tootling up and down the notes until I thought my eardrums would burst. I was trying not to look at the people staring at me, but it was almost impossible. Their faces were so full of different things – curiosity, malice, fear, arched eyebrows and, everywhere, amazement. Clearly, they hadn’t expected me to brush up so well.

Silence fell. My feet wouldn’t move. Then I focused on the other end of the throne room, the throne and the King. Today he was in white, like me. A white pumpkin. He was growing more furious by the second, his face above his white coat

getting redder and redder. Maybe he thought I was going to back out. I wanted to. But I couldn't. *Move, feet, move.* I took a step, and another, and that was it. I was walking, smoothly, rapidly, straight down the carpet.

To my doom.

But I wasn't limping, and clearly they all thought I would be.

*Take that.*

As I neared the King, his face calmed and he stood. A man wearing a big floppy purple hat and long purple robes approached from my left. The Grand Vizier. His face was wrinkled and his hands were webbed with blue veins, but his eyes were sharp and his mouth was a thin line. He glared at me as if to say, 'Don't you dare cause trouble.'

I clenched my hands to stop them from trembling and, before anyone could speak, I said quietly to the King, 'Where are my parents? Show them to me or I leave right now.'

The King's nostrils flared and he glared, but he said, 'To your right.'

I turned and there they were. Dressed in black, but alive and well. My knees wobbled and I reached out a hand. 'Mum. Dad,' I whispered.

Dad smiled at me but his eyes didn't crinkle. A fake smile. Mum just looked at me, her eyes bright with tears, but I knew exactly what she was thinking. *You shouldn't have agreed.*

*Too late now, Mum.*

I wanted to run over to them, to explain, to ask all of my questions, but it was too late. I wouldn't be allowed. I hoped with all my heart that they'd understand.

I sighed and turned back. The King said, 'Your vows.'

I nodded. The Grand Vizier stepped right next to me and unrolled a scroll. 'Repeat after me,' he said in a loud, demanding voice. What followed was a flowery string of promises that included stuff like, 'Protect the people', 'Rule with utmost fairness', 'Use your magic only for good' (not a problem because I didn't have any), 'Help the needy' and 'Be kind to animals'. All do-able. I repeated everything. Then came the sticky bit, with pauses for me to repeat each phrase in a way that made it hard to follow, but I listened harder and a chill rippled through me.

'I, Glorious, heir to the throne of FairyLand, promise to rule as Queen ... for the rest of my life ... without disregard for the laws of the land ... I promise to live in FairyLand ... and never leave ... never be disloyal to my subjects ... and defend their

rights ... This I promise on pain of death ... execution to be immediate ... if I should break my vows.'

Execution?

My mind tumbled. These were the vows I planned to break as soon as I could. My punishment would be death.

The Grand Vizier nudged me and pointed to the cushion on the floor. Oh, right.

I knelt, closed my eyes and tried not to listen as the King bellowed, 'If any here should have sound and valid and provable reason why Glorious Mistlewhite Starlight Twinkletoes should not be crowned, speak now or forever hold your peace.'

That was my full name? What a joke. Glorious was bad enough.

Footsteps thumped up the middle of the hall behind me and a man cleared his throat. 'The girl is deformed. We saw it earlier. She cannot be Queen. She is not perfect.'

'You saw her walk the royal carpet,' the King said. 'Did she limp? Does she look deformed?'

'Nooo ...'

'Objection dismissed.'

Deformed. Ugh. I hated that word with every cell of my body. Who were they to call me that? I refused to think about what Gilt had said. *Not permanent*. Apparently the King was happy to lie about that, too. What a surprise. Not.

A woman's voice this time. 'She hasn't lived here since she was born. What does she know of us? She's been in *Ordinary*.' She sneered. 'Not fit for ruling us. We're special.' A clamour of voices agreed with her.

'She is royal blood,' the King said. 'That's all that matters here. Objection dismissed.'

The clamour grew and the Grand Vizier shouted, 'Be quiet!' The noise died to a murmur and someone else stepped forward, coughing nervously.

Now what? I was secretly hoping someone would have a really good reason to stop this.

'I ... I am supposed to marry the Queen,' a boy said.

What? No one had said a word about this. How dare they? I nearly jumped up to protest, but Gilt's warning kept me still. The boy sounded about fifteen, and scared stiff. I was busting to see what he looked like, and tried to squint sideways but couldn't see more than his feet in bright blue-and-yellow boots.

‘And?’ the King boomed. ‘Speak up, Lord Brilliant.’

‘I haven’t even met her yet. What if I don’t like her? What if she’s mean, or nasty, or spiteful or ...’

The King snorted out a laugh. ‘Lord Brilliant, I think you have the wrong end of the stick here. The question is – will *she* like *you*? If not, I believe she can spurn you.’

What a relief. A way out.

The hall filled with malicious titters. I imagined the poor boy so embarrassed that he all he could do was slink away and hide. Instead, he spoke again, confidence in his voice. ‘It will be quite easy to dissolve the betrothal, your Majesty, from *either* side. We shall see and be advised.’

Great, he wasn’t such a scaredy namby-pamby after all.

The King forced out his next words. ‘Anyone else?’

From my right, my mother said, ‘I – ’

‘You aren’t allowed to speak,’ the King snapped.

I didn’t hear another peep from Mum or anyone else. I glimpsed a blue boy coming forward with a white cushion, and on it was a crown. A coronet of gold, studded with little diamonds and emeralds and sapphires. No wonder the hairdressers were worried my hair wouldn’t hold it up. It’d probably give me a headache within five minutes.

The King reached for it and lifted it above me somewhere.

‘By the power invested in me as King of FairyLand, I crown you Queen Glorious. From this day forward, you shall reign at my side.’

*I have to hang out with him every day? No way!*

Too late. The crown landed on my head with a thump that jolted me down to my knees, as if he wasn’t too happy about it either and was letting me know. But once the thing had settled on my fluffy hair, it seemed to like being there and suddenly felt much lighter, as though there was a nest of feathers on my head instead of a heavy gold monstrosity.

‘Rise, Queen Glorious, and meet your subjects.’

The King didn’t help me up, the Grand Vizier did and, thanks to Gilt’s spell, I stood easily and straight, without even a twinge. But my heart was heavier than twenty crowns as I turned to face the crowd. I’d already named them in my head – the Haters.

Sure enough, instead of being happy and ready to celebrate, they all leaned forward as if they were waiting to take bites of me. Everywhere I saw white glistening

teeth and greedy eyes. I avoided their stares and searched for Mum and Dad, who'd been pushed to the back. They were standing together, arms around each other, and Mum was crying. That was when it really hit me.

Mum and Dad had run away with me, kept me hidden from these people and this horrible King, for twelve long years. In one single day, I'd undone everything. All their sacrifices, the moving house over and over, the lack of money – and what must have been their constant fear I'd be found. Look what had happened. That huge monster wrecked our house and chased me halfway around the world. All that running for nothing.

But if I hadn't agreed to the coronation, surely they would have been executed?

I wasn't so sure now. I was beginning to think I had been tricked, and there was much more to all of this than I'd ever suspected.

I needed to talk to Mum and Dad, right now, and find out what was going on. I took two steps towards them and a hand with a steel grip grabbed my arm and pulled me back. The Grand Vizier snapped, 'Where are you going? We have the coronation dinner and you must sit next to the King. Your reign starts now.'

'I want to talk to my parents,' I protested.

'They are irrelevant,' he said. 'You took vows. You must obey.'

'But I'm the Queen. Surely ...'

'The King rules, not you.' He pulled me with him and held me in place as the King came down from his throne and joined me.

'Time to eat,' the King said. 'And drink, ha ha.'

I glared. There was nothing to celebrate. But everyone crowded in behind us, the doors at the side of the hall swung open and we walked through and into another huge hall, filled with tables and chairs. At the far end, a dais held two tall thrones and one long table covered in a white cloth. The table was sagging under the weight of food on it. The King and I were left to walk to the dais on our own while, all around us, the lords and ladies scurried to grab the best seats. The noise of their chatter and high-pitched giggles rose to a roar, and a couple of women fought over chairs.

'They do like parties,' the King said with a chuckle.

At the dais, we separated and circled around the table; when I sat on my throne, I could barely see over the mountain of food. Golden baby roast chickens, a haunch of red beef, roast suckling pig with an apple in its mouth, piles of golden fried pink potatoes, chocolate cake, yellow and pink cream cakes, multicoloured pies that I

guessed were chocolate, banana and cherry. The bright colours made my head swim. There were other dishes down the King's end of the table. The empty plate in front of me was patterned with gold, and the knife and fork were gold, too.

I looked around for Mum and Dad and, at first, I couldn't see them. Down at the front table, I saw blue-and-yellow boots – Lord Brilliant. I hoped he would look friendly, but his face was one big scowl and he was stabbing something on his plate as if he wanted to kill it. I finally spotted my parents right at the back table, sitting with a big gap on either side as though nobody wanted to be near them. They both looked miserable and were whispering to each other.

'I want to talk to my parents,' I said.

'You stay right here,' said the King. 'Or else. Now, eat up. Your people expect you to enjoy the celebration and have a good time, so *smile*. Surely you can manage that?'

'Why are you so mean to me?' The words burst from my mouth and I expected him to get angry with me again, but he sighed.

'You're here for the good of FairyLand. The *good*. Always the good. I don't think you are good. I think you've been corrupted by those two over there, and I don't trust you for a minute.' He picked up a huge turkey drumstick and took a bite, talking with his mouth full. 'So you'll have to excuse me if I'm a bit sceptical about your ability to be a real Queen. Still,' he shrugged, 'you're what we had to have.'

'You didn't have to. You could have had Delight. She'd have loved to be Queen. She probably would be really terrific at it.' Delight was sitting at a table near the King and she looked stunning in rose pink, her hair in curls and her face perfectly made-up. Diamonds glittered around her neck, and her laugh tinkled above the babble as she chatted with the woman next to her. She didn't look my way once.

The King nodded and ate some shiny chocolate cake. 'You're right, but we had to deal with a little issue first. It was all about the next in line.' He sniffed and reached for the plate of fried potatoes. 'Next week, if something should happen to you, Delight might be just what we need.'

If something should happen to me?

Royalty only went down to the next in line if the one above died.

I'd been about to eat a little chicken leg, but I put it back on my plate. The mixed smells of chicken and beef and fried potatoes and chocolate and cream clogged in my throat and tasted like swamp mud. All my ideas about escaping could be

unnecessary if they were simply going to get rid of me. ‘I thought you were my grandfather.’

‘I am. Blood is thicker than water.’ He slurped at a goblet of red wine and shoved a whole sausage in his mouth.

‘What does that mean?’

‘You’re Queen because I’m King. What’s so hard about that?’ He was getting impatient with me again.

‘So where’s my grandmother? Is she dead?’

He choked and his mouthful of chewed food sprayed all over the table and down the front of his white-and-gold coat. His face was almost purple as he dabbed at his coat, and blue boys rushed to clean the mess up and replace the food he’d splattered. I didn’t think he was going to answer, but finally he turned and said, ‘She was sentenced to ten years in Sweet and Mellow. She escaped so now she is exiled – permanently.’

‘Ten years? For what?’

‘Several things. Mainly for helping your parents steal you from me.’

‘Sheesh, I don’t belong to you,’ I snapped.

‘Yes, you do.’ He slurped more wine and started eating a huge piece of cherry pie. Cherry juice dribbled down his chin, and a blue boy ran forward and dabbed it away for him. No wonder the man was a pumpkin – he’d already eaten more than a normal person did in a whole day.

I slumped down on my throne. He was right. I did belong to him now. I hadn’t before, when Mum and Dad were on the run with me, but I’d handed myself over like one of these dishes of food he was gobbling down. And so I also belonged to all these people here. I gazed out across the hall, taking in every part of it. The bright-coloured dresses and coats and breeches in every hue including fluorescent, pastel and luminous. The women’s hair, piled high on their heads with jewels and combs and feathers and tiaras. The men’s hair foofed up into curls and quiffs and swoops and sprayed colours to match their coats. The mountains of food on their tables that were being slurped, slopped and spread everywhere as if starving dogs were attacking them. The shrill laughter, the gaping mouths, the flushed faces. The moments when someone pointed at me and laughed, or whispered behind their hand while staring at me and giggling.

And there at the back table, Mum and Dad sitting silently, holding hands, looking even more miserable than they'd been in the picture Abellona showed me of Sweet and Mellow.

I'd failed my parents. And now I was stuck in FairyLand forever, with these horrible people and this grandfather who was nothing like a grandfather should be. He wasn't even nice as a person. My only friend was in the dungeon, and I had no hope of getting him out. If I ordered him out, the King would overrule me. Plus I'd caused Boyo to lose Diddy. And I still didn't know where Scuttlebutt was. I slumped down further.

'Why aren't you eating?' the King demanded. 'Everything has been tasted. You're insulting our cooks.'

'Oh, I'd sure better not do that,' I said.

'No, you'd better not.' He waved a hand and the trumpets started again. 'Sit up, girl. The theatre is about to start. Look halfway interested, for goodness sake. It's a special performance Delight has organised just for you.'

Mercifully, the trumpets only gave one flourish and then the doors opened and in ran a troupe of actors, two dressed in white and gold, throwing silver confetti into the air that sparkled in the candle light. Those sitting near the front moved their chairs back to make a space and see the performance. The six actors in the troupe lined up to face the King and me and bowed deeply. As they straightened, they all looked at me and grinned, and I realised that they were dressed to imitate us all. The actor who was clearly meant to be me had dark hair teased out to stand on end so she looked like she'd had an enormous fright, and her cheeks were painted with bright circles of red. A clown version of me. Great.

The actor playing the King obviously knew better than to mock him, so no big cushions stuffed up his coat. Another actor was playing Delight, I guessed, from the bright pink dress and pink hair and layers of makeup including extremely long false eyelashes. The others were possibly the Grand Vizier and Gilt, but I had no idea who the last one was meant to be until I spotted the blue-and-yellow boots. Aha, Lord Brilliant.

Now I was curious.

The play began. It was a replay of what had happened. They carried actor-me on their shoulders across the floor and pretended to tie me up, then whack me with pretend sticks. The crowd of lords and ladies laughed hysterically at that. Then they stood me

up like a statue in the middle, and the actor-Delight had a huge tantrum and tried to strangle actor-me. Hmm. I watched her reaction and she laughed hilariously.

Then we had a scene where they brushed actor-me down, trying to tidy me up. At that point, everyone stood back and actor-me walked up and down, *limping*. Really limping. Far worse than I had ever limped, even when my leg was aching. Everyone laughed hysterically again, and lots of lords and ladies pointed at ME and laughed harder. The more they laughed, the more the actor limped until she was nearly doubled over.

My face burned so hot that I thought my skin would melt. How dare they! I glared at the King, waiting for him to shout and get rid of them, but he was laughing like all the others. Laughing fit to burst. I wished he would. I wished his pumpkin head would explode off his shoulders and splatter onto the floor. I wished *all* them would splatter into tiny pieces.

I sat up straighter until my back was jammed against the back of the throne. *I will not cry, I will not cry!* But in fact any tears that might have been forming were burned away into nothing. A red-hot rage was boiling up inside me, bubbling and steaming, searing away my shame and my guilt and my hopelessness. How dare they laugh at me like that.

Because they knew I had no real power.

Well, we'd see about that. We'd see about who had power and who thought they could stop me escaping and make me stay here against my will. I wasn't staying in this fake, glitzy, no-good land just to give them something to sneer and laugh at. I'd get out of here and back to Ordinary if it was the last thing I did, and I'd take Mum and Dad and Boyo with me, and this lot could rot!

I could feel my face was still burning but I wouldn't give them the satisfaction of seeing me cry or wince or turn away. I kept watching, and I kept plotting in my head how I'd pay them all back by escaping. And I'd especially pay back the King by getting out of his clutches and out of his land. Grandfather, my foot! He was no grandfather of mine.

I watched the rest of the play but hardly saw it, my brain was working so hard. I vaguely noticed actor-Lord Brilliant swooning around actor-me, and the other actors prancing around, and I did wonder why they didn't show Gilt putting a fixing spell on my leg, but then maybe that was a secret. Or else they weren't prepared to show that and make the King mad.

I no longer cared.

The actors finished and there was a standing ovation, with whistling and cheering, and I managed a polite clapping and a little smile. I could fake it just like any of them. After the troupe left, they all went back to pigging out while a small orchestra set up in the corner.

I stood up.

‘Where are you going?’ growled the King.

‘To the bathroom,’ I said. ‘To wee. Is that all right with you?’

He grunted and waved me away and picked up a slab of roast beef, pausing only to slather mustard on it before shoving it into his mouth. I stepped down off the dais and went to the doors nearest me. The blue boy there stared at me but the doors stayed shut.

I made my voice sound like the King’s. ‘Do you want me to wet my pants?’ I said. ‘Open the door and show me the bathroom. Or else.’ He paled, then opened the door and pointed down the hallway. I swept through the doorway and walked along, head high, until I heard the door close behind me. Then I stopped, my whole body light with relief. I was alone. This was not the time to make a run for it – I had another goal. I kept walking and turned left. Sure enough, further along was another door into the banquet hall, and this one had no guards.

I turned the gold handle and eased it open, hoping I had estimated right.

Yes! There, just a few feet from the door, were Mum and Dad, still sitting alone, with no food in front of them. Everyone who had been near them had moved to other tables. Their black clothes made them look tired and sick, and Mum’s hair was lank and greasy. Had they not even been allowed to shower?

‘Psst!’ I hissed. ‘Mum! Dad! Over here.’

Mum turned and saw me and, for a moment, her face lit up, then she shut it down again, back to miserable. She nudged Dad and whispered in his ear. I expected them to stand up and come over to me, but instead they slid off their chairs onto the floor and crawled over, using the table as cover. Once through the door, they stood and hugged me both at the same time, so I could hardly breathe.

Then Mum said, ‘Oh, Glory, why did you go through with it?’

I knew she’d be upset with me, but I wanted them to understand it was partly their own doing, for goodness sake. ‘Mum, you and Dad were in jail. They told me they were going to execute you. What choice did I have?’

‘You should have said no,’ Dad said. ‘We would have been all right.’

‘Dad!’ I said. ‘Come on. If you two had been honest with me from the start, none of this would have happened. Why did you keep it a secret? If I’d known ...’

They looked at each other, faces miserable again. ‘She’s right,’ Mum said. ‘We should have told her.’

‘I just wanted her to have an ordinary happy life,’ Dad said.

‘We were on the run,’ I said. ‘What’s ordinary about that? And they still found us.’ I frowned. ‘How did that happen, by the way?’

They glanced at each other again, as if they were going to make up another story, then Mum sighed. ‘We should’ve known they probably wouldn’t try to grab you until now.’

‘It’s because you were nearly thirteen,’ Dad said.

‘And?’

‘You had to be crowned before you turned thirteen, or FairyLand goes grey.’

‘What does that mean?’ I asked.

‘The Great Reversal curse.’ Mum pointed at my glowing dress. ‘Nothing here would be coloured anymore. Everything would be grey. Clothes, food, sky, trees. Everything reversed. No more lords and ladies. Everyone the same.’

‘It’d be like a very bad version of Ordinary,’ a voice behind us said.

We swung around and there was Delight, leaning against the wall, arms folded, her face a mask. I felt a jolt of fear – was she going to dob me in to the King?

‘Delight,’ Dad said. ‘Nice to see you again.’

‘Can’t say I feel the same way,’ Delight said. ‘But if it saved us, I can cope for a while.’

‘Surely this can’t all be about keeping colours,’ I said. ‘And if the next in line has to be crowned by thirteen, Mum, how did you get out of it?’

‘The curse only applies to you,’ Mum said.

‘Why me?’ But before they could answer, Delight laughed.

‘You mean you haven’t told her any of this?’ she said to my parents. Her eyebrows had shot up so high that I thought they might get stuck up there. ‘What were you thinking?’

‘We were thinking about keeping her safe,’ Dad said flatly. ‘Unlike you and your family, who wanted her dead.’

‘Well, it would have made things so much easier,’ Delight drawled. She clicked her fingers and around the corner came four blue guards, thickset with mean faces, not at all like the boys who opened and closed the big doors. These guys meant business. ‘Queen Glorious has to go to her room now. Make sure she gets there safely.’

They bowed and then surrounded me like a human fence. I pushed at them, and then said, ‘I’m the Queen. I order you to stand aside.’

Delight laughed again. ‘Don’t you understand yet? Nobody will take any notice of you. You’re just an ... ornament, and not a very pretty one at that.’

I stood on tiptoes to see past the wall of blue. ‘Mum?’

‘Be careful and watch your back,’ Mum said. ‘We’ll see you later.’

‘No, you won’t,’ Delight said. ‘The King has decided to send you back to Sweet and Mellow.’

‘He can’t do that!’ I yelled. ‘We had an agreement.’

‘You wanted them to be at the coronation. They were. There was no discussion about afterwards.’ She smirked. ‘You need to pay more attention to details, cousin dear.’

I tried to argue but the four guards hustled me away and it was either go or be grabbed and carried. ‘I’ll get you out, Mum, Dad,’ I called over my shoulder, but there was no reply, and the last I saw of them, more guards were pushing them down the corridor in the opposite direction. Delight stood there, watching me be taken away with a smile on her face that chilled me to the bone. She’d known right from the beginning what was going to happen – she’d probably helped to plan it.

The guards kept me hurrying along, up many flights of stairs that looked unfamiliar. I wasn’t being taken to my bedroom. Finally I forced them to stop as I gasped for breath and bent over with the stitch. They simply picked me up by my arms and kept climbing. On the last landing we came to a white door with a gold handle and they put me down. One guard opened the door and lit the wall lamps; the others stood behind me so I couldn’t escape down the stairs. Nobody said a word. They waited with stolid faces for me to go in and, since there was nowhere else to go, I did.

The door swung shut behind me and I heard it lock with a loud click, but still I ran to it and tried the handle. Nothing budged. I was locked in. I turned around and saw the bars on the windows. Mum and Dad were going to Sweet and Mellow. I was already in my jail.

## CHAPTER 11

I prowled around the luxurious room, with its cushions and carpets and lace and frills, all in white and gold. I couldn't stand it. It was a soft, smothering jail. I reached between the bars to open one of the windows and managed to see enough to understand where I was. I was imprisoned in a tower, the highest tower for miles. With my short hair, I was no Rapunzel. I shuddered at the thought that I might be locked in here long enough for my hair to grow like hers. Beyond the palace walls below me was the city, spread out with three more circles of walls like an archery target. It looked more like Toytown from up here, but maybe there wasn't much difference.

I wished I'd eaten at the coronation dinner, despite the play curdling my stomach. Even pink potatoes would have been good right now. Had they put me up here to starve to death? They kept talking about 'getting rid of me'. This could be one way of doing it. The easy way. Leave me here for months, where nobody could hear me screaming, and come back when I was just a pile of dusty bones.

I left the window open and prowled around the room, opening doors and cupboards and investigating every nook and cranny. In one cupboard there was a huge box of chocolates and I crammed three at once into my mouth. They tasted stale and musty, but I didn't care. I ate three more, then felt sick. Behind one door I found a bathroom and drank water from the tap. Behind another door was a vast wardrobe of my-size dresses of every colour of the rainbow, with matching shoes and hats and underwear. Hope flickered inside me. Perhaps I was to be allowed out every now and then.

The bed was a big four poster, with gold poles and a stiff white embroidered cover. I yanked it off the bed and threw it in a corner. Right then, I would have paid a million dollars for one of the soft quilts Mum had made for our beds. I tried to get out of my dress and discovered Madame Glissard had indeed sewn me into it. A search of the bathroom unearthed a rusty pair of nail scissors and I cut myself out of the bodice until I could pull the whole thing off me. The white sparkly shoes went far under the bed. But the crown I placed carefully on my bedside table. In spite of everything, it felt special, as if it was somehow connected to me.

I crawled into bed, under the pink blankets and pink sheets, and lay there, staring at the ceiling. All my plotting was a waste. I was a prisoner in a tower room, with no way out. Hundreds of feet below me, Boyo was in the dungeon, and Mum and Dad were on their way back to Sweet and Mellow. I'd failed before I'd even started.

Yeah, I sure outsmarted those FairyLanders, all right. I sighed and punched my pillow a few times but it didn't make me feel any better.

In the distance, a church bell tolled and I counted – twelve bongs. Midnight. I was now thirteen years old. *Yay, happy birthday to me.* I tried to feel excited and happy, tried to remember how just last week I'd been so looking forward to this day, planning to go camping with my parents and have a huge hummingbird cake with thirteen candles. And then Mum and Dad had arranged that amazing trip to Iceland instead.

Probably they knew someone would be coming to get me. They were trying to keep me safe again. Then I remembered yelling at them and insisting I would go to a normal school whether they liked it or not. Golly, I'd had no idea.

Scuttlebutt! How I wished he was cuddled up on the bed with me, his big claws curling, his purr rumbling through me. Was he safe with Mrs Swan? Oh, I hoped so. Tears filled my eyes and I tried to blink them back, but all I could think of was my terrified cat bolting for the back door, his tail straight up in the air like a warning signal. Maybe it was good he'd run out of the house, so the bogger didn't get him.

I rubbed my face hard. I had to stop feeling sorry for myself. I had to come up with a plan so as soon as I was allowed out of this room, I could escape. And none of these fake-os would be able to stop me.

Right now, I felt like dragons had been stomping on me. The lamps on the wall were still burning, and I was too tired to get out of bed. I'd leave them on all night then. No, I should put them out to be safe.

I fell asleep.

The next morning I woke with a start. I'd left the lamps burning all night! But now they were out. They must've run out of oil.

The room looked exactly the same. Somewhere deep inside I think I'd been secretly hoping I'd wake to find Mum had sneaked in while I was asleep, like she did every year, and decorated my room with birthday streamers, tinsel and balloons, and put a small cake with just one candle on my dresser. Scuttlebutt would be on my pillow, licking my nose and waiting for some cake and ...

Nothing. Nobody here cared it was my birthday, and Mum was on her way back to jail with Dad. I put the pillow over my face and bawled my eyes out. The tears made the pillow all wet and snotty. I felt so low that I could hardly crawl out of bed. Maybe a shower would make me feel better, but this bathroom only had a bath, so I turned the

taps on to fill it while I checked around the bedroom again. No way was I eating chocolates for breakfast. My stomach hadn't much liked the stale ones I ate last night. As I passed a lamp I noticed it was still full of oil. Hmm. Maybe a breeze from the open window had put them out.

In the wardrobe, I was faced with more than twenty dresses to choose from, and I didn't like any of them. I wanted my jeans back. I flicked through the hangers, rejecting them all – too many frills, too much lace, skirt too huge. One green one with tiny bows was barely tolerable. I pulled it out and threw it on the bed. In the mirror, my hair stood on end, worse than the stupid actor in the play last night. A dunking in the bath would fix that.

I jumped into the warm water and lay back, wondering what would happen next. Would someone come with food? Porridge, probably, or bread and water. If I was to be locked in this tower all the time, could I at least have some books? Maybe I should start practising lock picking.

'Hellooooo.' It was Soof. She put her head around the bathroom door. 'Excuse me, Your Majesty. Are you ready for today?'

'What does that mean?' I said suspiciously. I had an idea it wouldn't include birthday celebrations.

She flourished a scroll and read it to me. 'Breakfast with the King. Parade through the city for the common people. Lessons with Gilt. Dancing lessons. Dress fittings for royal dinner dresses. Dinner.'

Birthday party? Cake? I bit my lip hard for a moment, then said, 'I'm not doing any of that.'

She tittered nervously. 'But ... you have to. You're the Queen now.'

I splashed bath water around the room. 'It's my birthday. I get to do whatever I want on my birthday.'

'But ...' She didn't seem to care it was my birthday. She only wanted to make me follow that dumb schedule.

'Where are my own clothes? My jeans and runners?'

Her face was bright red. 'I ... I ... they were ... burned, I think.'

'What?' I screeched, sitting up and sloshing water everywhere. 'Please go and get them back. They were my favourite jeans. How could you throw them away?'

Soof burst into tears. 'I didn't,' she sobbed. 'I can't. Don't execute me, please.'

I gaped at her. 'Why would I execute you for that?'

‘Because ... the King does.’ She wiped her face but tears still trickled down.

‘That’s stupid,’ I said. ‘That’s like saying he’d execute someone for burning his dinner.’

‘That’s right.’

I was gobsmacked. This place truly was horrible. No wonder Mum had refused to be the Queen. ‘Don’t worry, from what I’ve seen so far, I have no power to do anything, let alone order an execution.’ All the same, I couldn’t keep picking on Soof. None of this was her fault. I sighed loudly. ‘So I get to leave this room then?’

‘Of course,’ she said, and tried a wobbly smile. ‘What’s your favourite colour, Your Majesty?’

‘Red. Or purple.’

‘We ... ladies don’t wear those colours here,’ she said. ‘Will pink do? Or mauve?’

‘Not pink,’ I said. ‘Anything but pink.’ No way I wanted Delight to think I was competing against her. ‘I put a green one on the bed.’

She brightened. ‘I’ll prepare your outfit. A little shoulder cloak would be nice, or feathers.’

‘No, thank you.’

Her face dropped.

‘I hate things that itch.’

She picked up a bath loofah. ‘Shall I scrub your back, your Majesty?’

‘No, thank you!’ As she backed out of the room, I shook my head and the door slammed behind her. The breeze again. Maybe I should ask her to close the window.

I climbed out of the bath and brushed my teeth with toothpaste that tasted like strawberry candy and made my mouth feel slimy. With a huge fluffy towel wrapped around me, I went out into the bedroom and found Soof waiting with the green dress. Its sleeves were so big and fluffy that I could have hidden two cats in each one.

‘No, I can’t wear that,’ I said.

‘I can fetch Madame Glissard to remodel it for you,’ she said. ‘It will only take a few minutes.’

‘Good idea.’

She ran out the door but, before it shut after her, I glimpsed a blue guard outside, who then turned a key in the lock. I wanted to kick the door down and then kick him down the stairs. Instead, I glared at the green shoes with fluffy pompoms on

the top. They were horrible. Scuttlebutt would have them in shreds in seconds. I picked one up and threw it across the room and, as it fell to the floor, it turned into a green kitten and squeaked a tiny miaow.

What the ...? I went all hot and cold and took a step back.

The kitten tottered across the floor to me and rubbed against my ankle. I picked it up and cuddled it; its tiny heart beat under my hand and it purred softly. It was like a tiny green Scuttlebutt.

Was everything here enchanted in some way? Or ... my heart lurched. Did I do that?

How did the lamps turn off? How did the bathroom door close?

I put the kitten down and pointed at it, thinking *Pompom shoe*. It turned back into the shoe.

‘Oh my stars!’

When Gilt had told me to try a spell, it hadn’t worked properly, but now I wasn’t even saying weird words. I was just ... using my hands. What had changed?

*I’d turned thirteen.*

I went over to the mirror and looked carefully into it, but I was just the same, only wetter. My hands were a bit wrinkly from the water. I’d better do some testing before Soof came back. I pointed at the window and it closed with a bang. I pointed at the bed and the covers pulled themselves up neatly and the pillow even puffed up. I pointed at a lamp and it burst into flame with a little *whoosh*.

Oh boy.

I had to try the door, but I didn’t want to give away what I was up to. I found a huge white fluffy bathrobe in the wardrobe, then knocked on my side and, after a few seconds, the lock clicked and the door opened. The blue guard peeped in. ‘Yes, Your Majesty?’

‘Where is my breakfast?’

‘I don’t know, Your Majesty.’ He was like a robot.

‘I am nearly fainting with hunger. Get down to the kitchen and find me some food. Now!’ I felt a bit mean yelling at him, but it worked. He mumbled obediently, shut the door and locked it and his footsteps thumped away from me down the stairs. I waited a few seconds and then pointed at the door. Nothing happened. I used both hands, pointing all my fingers and concentrated hard. *Snick*. The door had unlocked. I

tested it and it opened. Yay! But Soof and Madame were on their way up, their voices echoing up the stairwell, so I closed the door and locked it again.

Excellent! Now I had a way out. If I could figure out how to get rid of the guard.

One thing at a time, Dad always said. Procedure should be logical in order to work.

Did he and Mum stick to procedure when they ran away with me?

The door opened and Madame bustled in, pushing Soof out of the way.

‘What eez thees?’ she said. ‘You are complaining about my couture?’

She towered over me, scissors snipping in the air, but I was still mad about my jeans. ‘I cannot wear big, fluffy dresses. I’m not Delight.’

She sneered. ‘Obviously.’

‘Hey, I’m the Queen now,’ I said. ‘I can soon go and find another dressmaker. There must be more than you in FairyLand.’

‘Oh yes, there’s – ’ Soof said, but Madame cut her off with a ferocious glare.

‘I am ze royal dressmaker. I will ... manage. What do you require, s’il vous plait?’

I was about to wave at the green dress and pulled my hand back just in time. ‘Those things are far too hard to get around in. I want clothes that are useful, easy to wear, comfortable. How about some jeans and T-shirts?’

‘Sacre bleu!’ Madame gasped, fanning herself. ‘I could not possibly make *pants* for ze Queen.’

‘Then get me some dresses that won’t trip me up or strangle me. If you can’t do that, I’ll go and find someone who will.’

Behind Madame, Soof had a hand over her mouth, stifling a giggle.

Madame drew herself up as though I had just mortally insulted her, her face almost white, her mouth a thin line. But she wasn’t about to give up her Royal Dressmaker title. ‘Very well, Your Majesty. I shall return shortly.’ She snatched up the dress, wrenched the door open and almost bowled over the guard, who was standing there with a tray of food.

‘Breakfast!’ I said, and grabbed it from him.

The tray was filled with freshly baked bread, purple jam, butter, bright yellow cheese and some deep red cherries, and I wolfed everything down. Soof didn’t say

anything but she looked twitchy. ‘What’s the matter?’ I asked. ‘Have I got jam on my face?’

‘You were supposed to have breakfast with the King,’ she said.

‘I still can. I could eat a bit more.’ I could eat humming bird cake. That’d be nice.

‘He is expecting you ...’ The church bells rang out with a loud rolling peal. ‘Now.’

‘I can’t go down with no clothes on,’ I said. ‘He’ll have to wait.’ Her face twisted and I realised she was trying not to cry. ‘Don’t tell me – he’ll blame you.’

She nodded.

I heaved a sigh. ‘All right, I’ll wear one of these stupid dresses.’ I pulled on a mauve one with lace around the top, nearly ripping one sleeve, and told her not to tie it too tightly. She found me a pair of shoes and brushed my hair, and I set off down the stairs, the guard at my heels. I hardly thought about how I was walking, until I reached the first landing and something twisted in my leg, something hot and painful.

I stopped and had to lean against the wall, taking a few breaths until the pain dropped down a few degrees. The guard said nothing, just stared out of the landing window. Gilt’s spell hadn’t lasted long – not even twenty-four hours. One day of being normal, of walking straight, of feeling like I could do anything, go anywhere ... Could *I* fix this? Did I have enough magic in me? I closed my eyes and willed it with all my might. *Leg, mend yourself straight.* I tried and tried, for many long seconds. But nothing happened, not even a twinge. I ground my teeth together. So my magic was puny then.

*Don’t let this get the better of you. You’re the same as you always were. The last day was like a dream. Forget it.*

But I couldn’t forget how it had felt to be like everyone else, not limping and not being laughed at. I wanted that back so badly, I couldn’t bear it. Then I thought of Boyo down below me in the stinking darkness, and Mum and Dad trapped at Sweet and Mellow. The straightened leg was fake. It wasn’t what really mattered. They were what mattered, and they were counting on me. I stood upright and continued slowly down the stairs, but the ache in my leg speared all the way up to my heart.

## CHAPTER 12

The King was in his pigging-out room – what else could I call a room with a huge table of food just for one person, who tried to eat everything on it? He watched me limp in, his face stony, and barely grunted a greeting at me from behind a plate piled high with sausages and fried eggs and scones. Clearly, having breakfast together meant pigging out together.

I sighed, took a plate and checked out all the different dishes. Six different kinds of bright yellow eggs. Sausages, bacon *and* steak. A mountain of French toast. Apple pie with sparkling white cream.

I couldn't resist eating apple pie for my second breakfast, especially because it was my birthday and it was the only treat I was likely to get, and it was delicious. Halfway through it, I thought again of Mum and Dad, who were probably eating stale bread, or even snails or bugs, right now. Boyo would be lucky to get even that. The pie turned to crud in my mouth and I put down my spoon. Time to try out my first plan.

'I need a personal guard,' I said. 'Someone who I can trust. Someone who can be a bodyguard.'

'What on earth for?' said the King. 'Nobody's going to attack you here.'

*You might. Or Delight.* 'I want one anyway.' I paused for effect and added, 'Of course, with my terrible leg, I wouldn't be able to run if there was trouble.'

His eyes flickered but he didn't rise to my jab. 'I can find someone in the palace troops, I suppose.'

'No, I want the boy who came with me. He doesn't deserve to be in the dungeon.'

'Don't be stupid. You can't have a neerim as a guard.'

How did he know Boyo was a neerim? Gilt must've told him. 'Why not?' I jutted out my chin and glared at him. 'I want him as my bodyguard or I'm not leaving the palace.'

For once, the King looked up at me, and his gaze was flat and cold. 'Have him then. He has to wear a uniform and obey the sergeants, and if he gets in my way or causes trouble, he'll be executed. And it will be your fault.'

A chill slid over me. I could be getting Boyo in more trouble. But I couldn't leave him down there. 'That's fine. How do I get him?'

The King snapped his fingers and two guards emerged from the shadows behind him. The curtains in this room created big pockets of gloom that were like secret hiding

places. There was likely to be someone watching me in every room in the palace. I'd better remember that.

'Fetch the neerim from the dungeon,' the King said.

One guard went to do his bidding and the other returned to the shadows. The King kept eating, not bothering to look at me again. I took a napkin and a fork and reached for some sausages for Boyo.

'You don't need to steal food,' he snapped. The word *stupid* hung in the air. 'Just order it.'

Was this what having a grandfather was like? Surely not. He seemed so angry with me – but I'd done nothing! I pushed my plate away and stood.

'Be at the front door in an hour,' the King said. 'Dress in something fit for the Queen. White is best. You will need a parasol, too. The sun will be bright.'

Since he still hadn't looked at me, I didn't bother answering. I slowly climbed back up to my tower room and found Madame Glissard with six new white dresses draped over the bed and her needle flicking in and out of the sleeve of one.

'All white?' I asked, thinking of Mum trying to get the grass stains out of my shorts. Still, I wasn't likely to play softball or Frisbee in one of these.

'The King has ordered it,' she said. 'These are not at all fashionable, nearly twenty years old, but they are the best I can do at short notice.' She huffed and sniffed as she sewed. 'At least the shoes are not a problem. Soof, find her a suitable parasol.'

'I don't need ...' Oh, what was the use? It was only for a couple of days.

Someone knocked on the door and Soof opened it. On the threshold stood Boyo, blinking and staring around, a guard behind him. He saw me and grinned, his eyes sparkling under his mop of hair. 'Boyo!' I raced over to give him a hug but he smelled so bad that I stopped.

'Haven't had a chance to wash off that swamp mud yet,' he said with a grin.

'Are you hungry?'

'Am I ever!'

'Come in.' I put my head out and said to the guard, 'I need more breakfast. Lots of it. Now, please.' Instead of leaving, he shouted down to someone below. So I was still being closely watched.

Madame took one look at Boyo and screwed up her dainty French nose, pointing to the chair furthest away from her. 'Over there, boy.' Soof, on the other hand, smiled at Boyo and flicked her hair back. Boyo sat down and gazed around the room.

‘Very fancy,’ he said, and looked at the bars. ‘But a prison, too.’

I nodded. ‘They’re going to put you in a uniform. You’re going to be my bodyguard.’

‘What for?’ he said.

I frowned and jerked my head at Madame. ‘We’ll talk about it later. Right now, I need you to come on this parade with me, so you’ll have to bathe and get changed, fast.’ I said to Soof, ‘Can you run him a bath, please, and then go find him this uniform he has to wear. Hurry!’

She simpered at Boyo and ran off to do as I said, although I guessed she was doing it for him more than me. She liked him. For some reason, that made me mad.

While he was in my bathroom, splashing and humming loudly, Madame made me put on the white dress she had just finished adjusting for me. It was covered in circles of silver lace, and I felt like one of those crocheted mats that old ladies put on their dressing tables.

‘Stand still!’ Madame snapped. She poked at one sleeve, tugged at the neckline. ‘So unfashionable.’ A shrug. ‘Ze court ninnies, they might think you are setting a new style.’

‘Me?’ I thought of the court ladies, their low-cut, bright dresses, their jewels and towering hair dos. I was thirteen, hardly a style queen – in any sense. In this dress, anyone would think I was ready for one of those TV historical shows. I’d much rather have my jeans back.

Food arrived for Boyo, a plate of bread, onions and cheese. Soof returned with blue uniforms for Boyo, and I stopped her from barging into the bathroom, taking them off her and thrusting them past the door. ‘Here you are,’ I called. ‘Hurry up, the King will get mad with me – again – if I’m late.’ For now, I wanted to stay in his good books. My plan was growing in my head.

With my hair teased up, new slippers on my feet and a white parasol to carry, I was ready. Boyo emerged from the bathroom and I giggled. ‘You look ... strange.’

He didn’t even look like Boyo. His wet hair was combed back and the blue cap was pulled right down, and the powder-blue uniform made him look like a human-sized doll. Only his eyes were the same.

‘I look ridiculous,’ he said. ‘Why do I hafta wear this?’

‘It means you can stay with me,’ I said. ‘Have some food and then we have to go.’

Boyo ate fast and then grumbled about his uniform all the way down the stairs, but with the guard right behind us, I couldn't stop and explain. Outside, the King was waiting impatiently by a large gold carriage pulled by four white horses. The wheels were taller than me, and every inch of the carriage body was covered in curly carvings and paintings of birds. The King gave Boyo a contemptuous look and said, 'He sits at the back on the footboard.' It was a shelf barely wide enough for a book, let alone a person, with gold cherub statues on either side. At least Boyo could hang on to their heads. The King clambered into the carriage, with two guards giving him a surreptitious push from behind, and then I got in after him, squeezing into the space left on the padded seat.

'All you have to do is smile and wave,' the King said. 'Think you can manage that?'

'Certainly.'

'Where's your crown?'

'I ... in my room.'

He growled like a bear and shouted, 'Get her crown and the Queen's diamonds – NOW!'

After a couple of minutes, during which time he sat next to me snarling and gnashing his teeth, two guards ran to the carriage, one carrying my crown and the other holding a white box. The King almost flung the crown at me; I caught it and put it on my head where it settled immediately as it had the day before, as though it liked being there. From the box, the King lifted a diamond necklace that glittered in the sunlight and shot beams of light all around the courtyard. The gems were layered in rows, tapering down to a point – the necklace looked like a huge sparkling bib. 'Turn around,' he ordered. He put the necklace on me and latched it at the back. It was nothing like the crown. It weighed a tonne and sat like cold, heavy armour around my neck and over my chest.

'Come on, let's go,' the King shouted, and we were off, clattering out of the courtyard and down a cobbled street, between rows of trees trimmed to neat lollipop heads and gardens of brilliant pink and white flowers. The horses clattered under an archway and into a wide city street, lined with large houses with brightly painted shutters, lamp posts with carved flowers, and shops that seemed to only sell fancy clothes, hats, shoes and jewellery. Window after shop window was filled with displays but nowhere did I see real food or garden tools or children's toys. The streets were busy

with the same people I'd seen last night – the lords and ladies in fine clothes and hats, and others in not-so-fine outfits but still wearing dresses and coats of rich fabrics and ornate buttons and lace and jewels.

Nobody was smiling at us or cheering. Even in the windows above, faces were sour. Behind us was another open carriage with a string quartet in it that played furiously cheerful music, but everywhere I looked, people stared back stonily. The King poked me in the ribs. 'Smile and wave, for goodness sake.' I forced a smile onto my face and began a feeble waving motion, careful not to make it into something that might cause magic.

Here and there, we got a few smiles in return, but mostly the people hid their sour faces by bowing or curtsying low. 'They don't seem to like us much,' I said.

'You mean they don't like you. They think you're a peasant, that you don't deserve to be Queen.'

'They might be right.'

'Rubbish! They have no idea of the cur – what's at stake.' He ordered the carriage driver to go faster.

We swooped under another archway and suddenly we were in a different part of the city, a much poorer part, and in the distance I could see the city's outer wall. I sat up straighter, hoping we were going that way. 'No need to smile here,' the King said, 'but you have to wave and look like the Queen. Head up, girl!'

The people in this part of the city made the lords and ladies look positively radiant with happiness. Everywhere there were surly, scowling faces, a few people spat in our direction and some turned their backs. 'Ungrateful, miserable ...' The King wasn't waving at all.

'Why are we going this way then?'

'We have to show everyone that you are here, and that you are crowned.'

'Why would they care?'

He didn't answer. I kept waving and focused on the small children here and there who gazed open-mouthed at the gold carriage. I wondered how often the King came down here. My guess would be never. I craned my neck to see the wall and at last the gate came into view. My heart sank. It was huge, pocked with iron nails and barred with a length of wood so big that it would take four men to lift it. Up on the walls were soldiers, and some were archers with bows slung across their shoulders. There was no way we could sneak out through that. There had to be other ways in and out, surely, but

finding out what they were was going to take a miracle. I sagged back against the cushions.

We rolled into a large square where a busy market was taking place, and the King's carriage driver started using his whip to urge the horses through the crowd. Women screamed and children fell over, trying to get out of our way as the carriage circled the market stalls.

'Stop, stop!' I yelled. 'You'll run them over!'

'So what?' said the King. 'Drive on!'

A boy tried to run and fell right in front of us, not ten metres from the front horse. 'No!' I lunged out of my seat and grabbed the driver, pulling him back as I yanked the reins from his hands and hauled on them as hard as I could. The front horse tried to rear but I jerked harder, falling back against the King, still clinging tightly to the reins. Pain jagged up my leg and I cried out. The crown fell off my head and rolled under my seat; the diamonds slid back on my neck, nearly choking me.

But the carriage stopped.

Keeping hold of the reins, I struggled up and came face to face with the driver. His face was frozen with fear. He glanced from me to the King and back again. Who was going to order his execution first? That's what he was thinking.

'Is that boy OK?' I asked.

He risked a look over his shoulder, and I peered past him. The boy was on his feet, his mother hugging him and glaring at us. I didn't blame her, but I was glad he was safe. Boyo popped his head up over the back of the carriage and waved he was OK, too, so I gave the reins to the driver. 'We can go now. Slowly.'

'Don't listen to her,' the King snapped.

I ignored him. 'Slowly,' I repeated to the driver, then sat down. 'Unless you want me to vomit apple pie all over you,' I said to the King.

'You wouldn't dare,' he said.

'You can't stop vomit when it wants to come up,' I said. That was one of Mum's sayings. She always thought vomiting helped to get rid of whatever was upsetting you.

'Where's your crown?'

'Um ...' I was pretty sure it was under the seat, but my leg throbbed viciously from when I'd grabbed the reins and I wasn't sure if I tried to retrieve the crown that I could get up again. One look at the King's face and I knew I'd have to try. By now we

were almost at the archway back into the rich part of the city so I ducked down and felt around under the seat, flinching as I found dust bunnies, spider webs and what felt like mouldy sandwich crusts. Ugh. The diamond bib slid down over my chest so I could breathe again. At last I got my fingers on the edge of the crown and pulled it out, but sitting up again was a battle.

‘Help me up, please,’ I said. The King grabbed a sleeve of my dress and wrenched me up. I landed awkwardly on the seat and had to grip the side of the carriage to straighten up.

Bang! Something whacked me hard on the chest. I fell backwards, stunned, gasping for breath.

## CHAPTER 13

I felt my chest, gasping for breath, and held up a shaky hand. No blood. But I was still a bit winded. What had hit me? I lay against the cushion, and the houses above me sped past, swaying and lurching. Our carriage was bolting back up to the palace, the horses' hooves ringing on the cobblestones. I tried to sit up but couldn't, the carriage was pitching around so much. Goodness knows how Boyo was holding on. If he was. Maybe he was hanging on to a cherub. The driver whipped the horses again and we galloped through the final archway, past the sculptured trees and up the front doors, coming to a noisy halt.

The horses snorted and heaved, and then Boyo was leaning over me, clinging to the back of our seat.

'Are you all right? What happened?'

'I ... I don't know.' I struggled to sit up and screamed. There was blood, but it wasn't mine. Next to me, the King was spreadeagled, blood spreading and dripping from an arrow stuck into his huge stomach.

'Hush, girl,' he commanded, but his voice was raspy and faint.

'Fetch the doctors!' shouted the driver. 'The King is shot! The Queen is shot! All is lost!'

'Shut up, you stupid man,' said the King, but nobody heard. Everyone within fifty metres went into a panic, running back and forth and all ending up around the carriage. Any doctor on the way would never get through. I sat up straighter and shoved my crown onto my head.

'Make a path. Get back,' I shouted. 'Who's gone to get the doctor?'

'A guard,' said the driver. 'I think.'

'You.' I pointed at another guard. 'Go and check. Find the doctor.' I wanted to put something over the King's wound, but I didn't even have a handkerchief on me. Maybe I could take off my petticoat. But I'd have to pull the arrow out first. I bent to examine it and the King gasped, 'Don't touch it. Please.'

For the first time, I saw something in his eyes other than loathing. Fear, maybe. I could understand that.

Boyo clambered around the side and into the carriage in front of me. 'Are you hurt?' he asked. 'Did the arrow get you?'

'I don't know. Something hit me here.' I touched my chest and my fingers were spotted with blood.

‘Let me see,’ Boyo said. ‘I’ll be careful.’

I nodded and he bent forward, gently lifting the heavy necklace. ‘Can we take this off?’

‘Leave it alone,’ the King gasped. ‘You might steal it.’

‘Shut up,’ I said. I turned so Boyo could undo the catch. The necklace slid off me and fell into my lap where it lay like a pile of rocks. Boyo inspected my neck and chest, careful not to touch me.

‘You’re bleeding a little,’ he said, ‘but it’s little shallow cuts, made by the necklace being forced into your skin.’ He pointed at the arrow. ‘It hit you first, bounced off the necklace and into the King.’ He cocked his head. ‘I’d say whoever fired it was on an angle. Over to your left somewhere. If they’d been front-on ...’

‘I’d be dead.’

‘Rubbish,’ said the King. ‘They were aiming at me. They always do.’

I glared at him. ‘You’ve never had *me* sitting beside you before.’ Besides, he’d made it clear that he could get rid of me now I was crowned. Who was to say the arrow wasn’t arranged by him? If so, it served him right that he ended up with it. The blood had stopped leaking out of his wound, but the doctor had arrived and was trying to get into the carriage.

‘Your Majesty, Your Majesty!’ he cried. ‘We must get you inside.’

I was in the way now, so I climbed out of the carriage and Boyo and I went into the palace, leaving the King to be looked after by everyone else. They’d all crowded outside and the palace was empty. ‘I’m still hungry,’ Boyo said.

‘I bet I know where there’s food.’ I took him to the pigging-out room and sure enough the table was loaded with what was probably lunch. Boyo looked over the dishes, said, ‘Mm, roast balingo bird,’ and picked up a leg, munching on it happily. ‘So, why am I in this silly uniform?’ he asked.

‘Just ...’ A wave of dizziness swept over me and I staggered, the room spinning around me. The only chair was the King’s. I dropped the necklace on the table, sank into the enormous chair and put my hands over my eyes. Breakfast – both of them – was close to coming up. I swallowed hard a few times, breathed slowly and deeply, even though my chest hurt, and the dizzy feeling faded.

‘Sorry,’ I said.

‘You had a big fright,’ he said. He’d finished the balingo leg and was tucking into a huge slice of meat pie. ‘Anyone would be a bit shaken up. Now, what’s the plan?’

‘Wait.’ I eased myself up and walked around the room, checking every cupboard, curtain and alcove to make sure nobody was hiding and listening. Even when I was sure we were alone, I still whispered. ‘You’re kind of in disguise as my bodyguard – it got you out of the dungeon. But my parents are back in Sweet and Mellow. We need to find a way out of the city.’

He frowned. ‘We have to get outa this palace first.’

‘I might be able to fix that.’ I stretched out a hand and pointed at the rest of the roast balingo bird. It swooped up into the air and floated above Boyo’s head. He stared at it, open-mouthed, until I lowered it to the table again.

‘That might be useful, sure,’ he said. ‘What else can you do?’

‘I don’t know yet. It’s new. I haven’t tried it out much.’

‘Can you use it to find Diddy?’

I didn’t have the heart to say no. ‘Maybe. We won’t give up, I promise.’

‘Ah, never mind. Abellona probably has her.’

‘Do ... do you think this magic I have will work in Neither? Does hers work?’

‘Yeah, of course. But she’s a lot stronger than you. She can do ... lots of very big things.’

‘Like what?’

‘I’ve seen her stick a person to the floor like a bug with a pin through it. And make someone’s hair fall out. And I saw her go invisible once, only she didn’t know I saw her.’ He was pale and sweaty at the memories. ‘She’s a blue witch. She runs rings around the others in the club.’

‘Blue? What does that mean?’

‘Power. Only one beats her is red. Nobody I ever heard of is a red witch.’ He shivered. ‘Wouldn’t want to meet one, either.’

‘So if I can levitate stuff and unlock doors, what does that make me?’ I asked.

He shrugged. ‘White, probably. Or maybe yellow. Small stuff.’

‘Maybe if I practise ...’ But even as I said it, I thought how silly I sounded. Practise being a witch. Yeah, right.

‘I’m no wizard, that’s for sure. I was planning on being a forest guardian,’ Boyo said. ‘If I ever get back to the forest.’

‘You will. I promise.’ Here I was, making another promise, and I hadn’t even kept the first one about Mum and Dad. ‘Why does Abellona think you’re a wizard? Are you sure you don’t have magic?’ I peered at him. ‘You’ve got wings.’

His face went red. ‘I told you, they don’t work properly. I mostly keep ’em tucked up.’ He fidgeted. ‘And Abellona ... you have to be real careful with her. She’s always thinking about how things might work best for her. Not you. Not ever you.’

‘*Can* you do magic?’ Maybe he could teach me stuff.

‘I don’t want to,’ he said. ‘It only brings trouble.’ His shoulders hunched up. ‘You have to be careful of magic. It can ... get a strange grip on you. Make you do strange things.’

I nodded. ‘But it might be the only way we get out of here. I have no idea what to do really. I just have to keep working on my plans. The next step’s testing my magic.’ I made a face at him. ‘Who knows what might go wrong?’

I started small. I stood near the table and lifted dishes into the air, one at a time until I had six of them floating. Then I made them travel around the room and return to the table. Next I lifted the King’s enormous chair, made it touch the ceiling and lowered it again. I raised a large sausage and fired it at the wall. It hit with a squelch and stuck there. Remembering the shoe and kitten, I turned the ham into a tiny pig and back again. I turned the cherry pie into a small cherry tree dripping with ripe fruit, and back again. I had to admit it was all a lot of fun. Then I eyed Boyo but he said, ‘Oh no, don’t experiment on me.’

It would have to be me, then. I put my hands on the lace dress and closed my eyes, visualising my jeans and favourite red T-shirt and red runners. Nothing happened. Darn it! I tried harder. Nothing. I opened my eyes and thumped a fist on the table in frustration. A banana cream pie flew off into the air and smashed against the wall, cream dripping down the wooden panel and bananas splatting onto the floor. ‘Oops.’

‘Oops indeed.’ Gilt was standing in the doorway, a strange expression on his face.

Caught in the act. My face burned and I tried to lie. ‘Sorry. I was mad and I threw the first thing ...’

‘Threw?’ Gilt pursed his mouth. ‘Or used something else?’

‘Who’s this?’ Boyo asked.

‘Gilt. He’s the court magician.’

Boyo put down the cherry pie he was eating and tucked his hands behind his back.

‘He’s not going to punish you for eating,’ I said. ‘Only me for smashing up a pie.’

‘You’re the Queen now,’ Gilt said. ‘I can’t punish you for that.’ He walked around the table and sat in the King’s chair. ‘Mm, quite comfy. Bit saggy in the middle though.’

‘What are you doing here?’ I asked.

‘I heard about the assassination attempt. The whole city is in an uproar.’

‘Why? When we went out, they all looked like they couldn’t wait to see the back of us.’

‘The King sent soldiers out to interrogate witnesses. The citizens don’t like being accused and then beaten.’ Gilt examined his fingernails like they were the most fascinating things he’d seen all day, but I was getting suspicious. What was he up to? I glanced at Boyo but he was busy finishing the pie.

‘Never mind the assassination,’ I said. ‘It’s time you gave me some answers.’

‘What do you want to know?’

He was making it too easy, but I had questions all the same. ‘Why were Mum and Dad sent back to Sweet and Mellow?’

‘They’d served their purpose. Now you’re crowned, the King doesn’t need them anymore.’

‘Does he need me?’

‘It’s tricky.’

‘Tricky how?’ I said. ‘Explain.’

Gilt leaned forward and poured himself a glass of pee-yellow wine. He swallowed half of it before answering. ‘You had to be crowned Queen before you turned thirteen. Otherwise the curse would kick in.’

‘The Great Reversal of colours.’ Now it seemed that a curse was on me. Maybe next I’d turn into a pumpkin, or fall asleep for a hundred years.

‘That and more. Not only that colours would all turn to black or grey, but the nobles would become peasants, and it would rain all the time. Very depressing. And the door would open.’

‘What door?’ Boyo asked.

‘The door from Neither.’ Gilt grinned. ‘All of those in exile would be able to come back here. That’s what everyone here was most afraid of.’

Boyo paled. ‘You mean Abellona could’ve come here again?’

Gilt sat up with a jerk. ‘She’s still alive?’

‘Afraid so.’ Boyo stopped eating and wiped his mouth and hands with a pink table napkin. Gilt was shaking his head and picking at his fingernails again.

‘Yes, but now I’m the Queen,’ I said, ‘even though I don’t want to be. So the curse has run out.’

‘As long as you stay here and reign,’ Gilt said. ‘You can’t leave. On the other hand, your death makes the curse null and void.’

*My death.* Things were starting to add up. I picked up the necklace. It was incredibly big and heavy and very ugly, but it did make a great arrow-proof vest. As long as no one fired an arrow at my head, I’d be fine. ‘Who would try to kill me now?’

Gilt drank more wine and said, ‘Maybe Delight. She’s wanted to be Queen for ages. You coming back all of a sudden made her really mad. On the other hand, the peasants were waiting for the curse to make things better for them. They hate you now.’ He shrugged. ‘Really, the only thing that will save you is if you go back to Ordinary. I can help you with that.’

I stared at the banana pie mushed on the wall, thinking. ‘Why would you help me?’

‘For money. That necklace alone would set me up nicely.’ He steepled his fingers together and propped them under his chin. ‘And, look, I guess I feel sorry for you. You didn’t ask for any of this. Your grandmother’s curse wasn’t your fault, and neither was your mother’s ... what she did.’

My mouth dropped open. ‘My grandmother’s curse? The Great Reversal is hers? But ...’ That grumpy old lady with the grey hair and the jeep?

‘You didn’t know?’ Gilt’s eyebrows were up near his swished-back hair again.

‘I told you before.’ I wanted to snap at him but I was still trying to get to grips with what he’d said. ‘Nobody has properly explained anything.’

‘I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad tidings then,’ he said, but he didn’t actually look as sorry as he sounded.

‘You said if I left, the Great Reversal would begin,’ I said. ‘She made a curse that was all about me. What was the point of that? It doesn’t make sense.’ And it didn’t.

Did she want me here in FairyLand, or did she know I'd be hidden by my parents in Ordinary and then FairyLand would suffer the curse?

'When she was exiled, she was very angry,' Gilt said. 'I think she put the curse on purely as revenge.'

'Why was she exiled?' I hoped it wasn't for murder.

'Witchcraft. Only the Court Magician is allowed to use magic, and only in the King's service. She managed to hide her powers for a long time, but ... the King and the Grand Vizier agreed she had to go before she hurt someone. Someone like the King.' His smile had a twist to it now. 'Now, what's your decision? Don't worry about me. I won't be here. I've got places to go, too.'

I dropped the necklace onto a silver tray and looked at it while I thought about Gilt's offer. If I left FairyLand, things would change here – a lot. Maybe for the better, if it meant the poor people got a fairer share and the nobles had to live in the real world. But all the history reading and discussion I'd done with Mum suggested that massive revolutions could go very wrong, and lots of people could suffer. Only a short time ago, escaping was my big plan. I still didn't want to stay here, but for the first time, I thought about going back to Ordinary, back to our house (which we'd have to fix) and to school. I'd been desperate to return, to have our life back, and I'd thought I still wanted to go to school, too.

But all of a sudden, that life seemed distant and unreal, like another person other than me had been living it. It was such a weird feeling that I tried to shake it off. Of course I wanted to go home, and with Mum and Dad. That was still my goal, I was sure. That's what I told myself.

'It's a deal,' I said to Gilt. 'I'll give you the diamonds. And you help us get Mum and Dad out and then escape.' I glanced at Boyo: his face was a strange mix of fearful doubt and gladness.

'Excellent,' Gilt said.

'Do you know how to get us out of this palace?' I asked. 'What about Sweet and Mellow?'

He twirled his fingers. 'Of course. I know where the portals in FairyLand are.'

'Tonight?'

He nodded. 'Except ...'

'What?' I snapped.

‘Tonight is your birthday dinner,’ he said. ‘If you don’t attend, the King and the Grand Vizier will get suspicious and increase your guards, and take your friend Boyo away.’

‘Celebrate my birthday with people who hate me?’ I said. ‘Sit on that throne and wait for someone to take another shot at me? I don’t think so.’

‘Glory, he’s right,’ Boyo said. ‘If you skip the dinner, the King will be angry. He’ll track us down, and then who knows what he’ll do?’

‘He’s got an arrow in him,’ I said. ‘He won’t be there.’

‘It was a pinprick,’ Gilt said. ‘He’s up and about already.’

‘Crap!’ I said.

‘Just play along.’ Gilt got up and went to the window, pushing it open and pointing. ‘See those mountains over there? That’s where your parents are. That’s where Sweet and Mellow is.’

Far off, three peaks poked up into low pink clouds. ‘They’re days away!’ I said. ‘We’ll get captured on the road again.’

‘There’s a portal down below near the dungeons that goes to the King’s hunting lodge. It’s only a shortish trek up to Sweet and Mellow from there.’

‘So that’s how they got Mum and Dad here so fast,’ I said. ‘And back again.’

‘Yes. But once you leave, they will hunt you down.’

‘Because Glory has to reign,’ Boyo said. ‘Or be dead.’

‘Exactly,’ Gilt said.

We agreed to meet in my bedroom at midnight, after the birthday dinner, Gilt promising he could put my guards to sleep and sneak us down the stairs. ‘Now you have to go and see Madame about your birthday dress,’ Gilt said.

I could think of nothing worse right then, but we had to pretend everything was normal. I trudged up the stairs, Boyo at my heels, a new guard right behind us. Soof was waiting in my bedroom. ‘Madame has a special dress for tonight. She said you’re to wait here until she brings it. And I’m to do your hair and stuff.’ She smiled coyly at Boyo. ‘I can do his hair, too.’

‘No, thank you,’ I snapped before Boyo could say a word. ‘You can go now. Come back later.’

‘Yes, Your Majesty.’ She curtsied and left, but not before winking at Boyo, who blushed.

When the door was safely closed, I said, ‘Do you trust Gilt?’

‘Not really,’ Boyo said. ‘But what choice do we have? We have to get out of here somehow.’

I paced across the room and back, going over everything Gilt had said. ‘I think he’s up to something, but it’s all about him. We’re just ... extras. I think he really does want the diamonds so he can leave. The King must be terrible to work for. Once we get Mum and Dad out, we can leave, too.’

Boyo frowned again. ‘We have a huge problem though. Gilt might get us to Sweet and Mellow but he said the portal back to Neither is closed.’

I stared at him, dumbfounded. He was right.

## CHAPTER 14

I thought I'd worked out how to release Mum and Dad and make a run for it, but I'd forgotten we needed a portal out of FairyLand. Abellona had sent us through the fireplace, but where had we ended up? In the swamp, in two different places. The swamp was huge and I didn't remember seeing any kind of gateway. Besides, if Gilt was right about the portal to Neither being closed, how did we even get here? It didn't make sense.

Abellona knew about the fireplace portal in the Witches' Club, but it seemed Gilt didn't. Which meant she could come here if she wanted, and she would know how to get back. But she'd conveniently forgotten to tell us. Like that was an accident. Not.

Before I could say anything more, the door swung open and Madame Glissard glided in, followed by a powder-blue boy carrying a garment of gold material. She told him to put it on the bed and leave; she ignored us, poking at the dress and lifting bits of it, muttering to herself. I went over to the bed.

'This is my birthday dress?' It looked plain despite being gold.

'Non. Zat dress has been put back in my wardrobe. Zis is the dress you need to wear for your own safety.' She rubbed at a part of it with her sleeve. 'Eet needs a good clean but ...' She beckoned to Boyo. 'Come here and help me get eet on her.'

I frowned. 'I'm not getting undressed in front of him.'

'Pah! Put zis on in the bathroom first.' She handed me a long petticoat shift and I did as she said, wondering what monstrosity I had to wear this time. I soon found out. Madame and Boyo looked like they were trying to lift a stream of gold water over my head. It rippled and glittered and, as it fell onto me, I realised it was made out of cold metal that made my skin goosebump. The dress settled over my body, heavy and shining, sliding and tinkling every time I moved.

'Is this, er ... chain mail?'

'Exactement,' Madame said. 'Nothing will get through zis.'

'It's pretty heavy,' I said. My leg was starting to ache from the weight of it.

'Can I take it off now?'

'Non.' She shook her head emphatically. 'You need your hair made nicer, and then eet will be dinner. Early tonight.' She pulled a round gold watch and chain out of her bodice. 'In less than an hour.'

'Hope it finishes early then,' I grumbled.

'Non, it eez your birthday. Maybe midnight, eef you are lucky.'

Soof came back to do my hair, Madame left and Boyo sat in the corner, staring out the window while Soof alternately brushed my hair into a big boofy mess and simpered at him. He didn't notice her, though. He slumped in the chair, chin resting on his hand, his mouth grim. Finally, Soof finished and put my crown on my head. I made a face in the mirror. My hair looked like a bird's nest full of gold stars, but the crown, as always, sat there as light as a butterfly.

When the bells outside pealed, Soof said, 'It's the signal for dinner. You look beautiful, Your Majesty.' She opened the door for us. 'Have a wonderful birthday dinner.'

She was being nice to me and I was being a grump. 'Thank you,' I said. Boyo trailed after me and a guard followed us. Halfway down the stairs, I glanced at Boyo's sad face again. 'Are you OK?'

He sighed. 'I was just thinking about Diddy. I miss her. I'd feel a lot better if I knew where she was, if she was alive.'

'I bet Abellona knows,' I said. 'When we get –' I glanced back at the guard following us. 'We'll find her one day, I'm sure of it.' And one day soon I'd hopefully see Scuttlebutt again.

He didn't answer, and when we reached the great dining hall, he barely said a word as the guard told him to go inside and find a seat at the back out of the way. Just as I was about to follow, Gilt came racing down the stairs. 'Wait! I have to do ... something for you.'

He took me into a parlour room across the corridor and said, 'I have to cast a new spell on your leg. I hope you don't mind.'

To be honest, I didn't mind at all. It was the one thing about FairyLand that was any good. I thought of Mum and how she always said things like I was a beautiful person just as I was, and my crooked leg didn't matter, and actions spoke louder than words (although it'd seemed to me that people staring rudely said a lot!). Mum had always been my cheer leader and I loved her for it, but how could she know what it was truly like? And as for trying to explain how I felt when Gilt's spell made my leg straight and true again ... that was impossible.

'It's fine,' I said, trying not to show how happy I was about it.

This time it took two rounds of the spell. When the first one didn't work, he looked horrified.

'What happened?' I asked, my heart sinking. 'Is it not fixable anymore?'

‘I ... I must have said something wrong. I’ll try again. I’m sure it will be successful.’ The second time he walked more slowly and said the words louder, and my leg moved and clicked and suddenly there it was, as good as ... normal.

Gilt was flushed but relieved, I could tell.

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘I guess I’d better go and have a ... happy birthday.’ Out in the corridor, four powder-blue guards waited for me, two by two, and they bowed, then the first two pushed down on the door handles and the second two lined up to follow me in.

The huge doors swung open and it was like the coronation all over again, except this time I felt as if I had a huge target painted on me. Only the knowledge that the dress was secret armour and none of these people knew about it kept me walking. That and the spell on my leg, which helped me walk straight and true, all the way to the King’s dinner table on the dais. I didn’t look behind at the guards, or to see where Boyo was. I was too busy making sure I didn’t look at the lords and ladies, who were all standing by their tables, doing the required bows and curtsies as I went past. I could feel their scorn, like hot waves crashing over me, and I could hear their whispers and titters. I longed to wave my hands and turn them all into warty, ugly toads.

At last I made it to the end of the carpet. In front of the King’s table, the steps were piled high with brightly wrapped gifts of all shapes and sizes. There were enough parcels to give a birthday present to every child in FairyLand. It’d take me all night to open them. I stopped, not knowing what I was supposed to do.

‘What are you waiting for?’ the King said. ‘Come up here so we can start the festivities.’

I sighed and climbed the steps, sitting in the throne next to him, my dress pooling around me like gold water. He looked me up and down. ‘Sensible choice of dress. I didn’t know Madame Glissard still had that in her cupboard.’

‘How is your arrow wound?’

‘Fine, fine.’ He waved a hand. ‘I doubt anyone at court will try to kill you. They’re all too happy about you warding off the Great Reversal.’

I gazed around the hall. Boyo had been sent to stand by the wall, and his was the only friendly face. Everyone else’s showed sneering boredom or impatience or curiosity. Not one glimmer of happiness anywhere. For the first time, I wondered if any of these people had children. If they did, where were they? But I wasn’t about to ask tonight.

At the front table below, Lord Brilliant was watching me, his brow creased as if he were in deep thought. At least he wasn't sneering or scowling at me. Loud music began to play and everyone stood to sing 'Happy Birthday' to me. Somehow they managed to make it sound like a funeral dirge. I pressed my fingernails hard into my palms and kept my head up.

*I don't care.*

When the song finished, four girls in pink dresses ran forward and curtsied to me. I smiled and nodded, wondering what this was about. The King leaned sideways. 'They are here to open your gifts. They'll show you each one. You have to smile and say thank you.'

I didn't even get to open my own birthday presents! Still, I was curious as to what this crowd would give me. Poison? Bowls of rotten fruit? Voodoo dolls? The first pink girl unwrapped a box and opened it, then brought it to show me. A pink pearl necklace. I said thank you, but the girl whispered in my ear. 'Your Majesty, you have to thank the gift giver. Loudly. This is from Lord and Lady Pix.'

'Thank you, Lord and Lady Pix,' I said, forcing my lips into a smile. A tall, extremely thin couple in mauve nodded.

The next girl came up with a silver woven shawl, whispered, and I said, 'Thank you, Lord and Lady Raspet.' And on it went, gift after gift, most of them things I'd never wear or even look at again, even if I were staying here. I should be grateful, but it seemed such a waste. When I had a free moment, I reached for what looked like a meat pie decorated with pastry leaves and a small boy popped up right next to me, making me jump.

'What do you want?' I asked.

'I'm your taster, your Majesty,' he said. 'The King says you have to have one of your own now.'

'What?' I turned to the King. 'Are you serious?'

'After today, are you sure you want to trust anyone?'

'You said the lords and ladies were happy now.'

He grunted. 'They don't cook the food.'

'What about you, then? Who's tasting your food?'

He leaned back and, on his left stood another small boy who nodded to me and put a tiny slice of turkey in his mouth. The bruise on my chest from the arrow thumping into the necklace throbbed, as if reminding me I couldn't afford to be fussy about this.

‘OK,’ I said, and my taster cut through the meat pie and ate some, then passed it to me. I munched some of the pie while I did more gift thank yous. I was getting better at making them sound genuine, and some of the nobles actually smiled back at me. Lord and Lady Rubis for a ruby pendant, Lord and Lady Mish for a pair of pink sequined slippers with diamond buttons, Lord Stonker for a large bottle of whisky.

When he spotted the whisky, the King said, ‘You can pass that on to me later.’

Next to me, the King’s taster tasted and the King ate his way through half a roasted turkey, some pink fish, a lemon tart and two wobbling red jellies with cream. In between more gift thank-yous, my taster kindly offered me little plates of food and I managed to get some mouthfuls of crispy purple chips and blueberry strudel. Finally, the gift unwrapping was over and I sank back in my chair.

‘You’d better learn to smile better than that,’ the King said. ‘You’ll depress everyone if you keep that up.’

I shook my head. I thought I’d done a good job. ‘Why are you so mean to me? I’ve never heard of a grandfather who was so nasty.’

‘Huh!’ he replied. ‘Why should I be nice to you? Why should I care about you one tiny little bit? I know I can’t trust you an inch. You’ll be just like your mother and grandmother, plotting behind my back. They never cared about me. They couldn’t wait to leave. You’re sure to be as cruel as they were.’

His words were like miniature arrows stinging my skin. ‘I was fine until I got here. Maybe it’s you who’s the problem!’

‘Me? I’m just being the King.’ He slurped a mouthful of pungent purple wine.

‘You’re a mean king. You make everyone scared of you. You said the peasants hate you. If you shared some of your riches, maybe they’d like you better.’

He spluttered wine across the table cloth. ‘If they want money, they should work for it. Giving people something for nothing never works.’

‘But having super-rich and super-poor like this works even worse.’ I pointed at my birthday gifts. ‘What am I supposed to do with all that stuff? Can I give it to the poor?’

‘No, you cannot!’ he roared. ‘That’s all I need – a hall full of insulted nobles.’

‘But it’s not fair.’

His eyebrows furrowed down and his moustache bristled. ‘You want to talk about fair? Is it fair you have a crippled leg?’

‘I was born like this. That’s all.’ I tried to sound calm but my insides were churning.

‘Who told you that poppycock?’ he hooted. ‘Oh, I see.’ He smirked at me in a way I didn’t like at all. ‘Your mother. She always did tell a good story when she wanted to. Well, Glorious dear, you weren’t born like that. You were born perfectly perfect, as you were supposed to be. That leg was your mother’s fault.’

My breath stuck in my throat. ‘What do you mean?’ I could barely get the words out.

‘You were a year old. Bronze came to you in the nursery to test you for magical abilities, which was his job. An important one, too. Your mother came in and grabbed you, Bronze had you, too, there was a wrestling match, and ...’

‘And?’ I could imagine it way too clearly and I felt sick.

‘And your leg was hurt. Pulled. Twisted.’ The King had stopped eating and drinking, and stared off into the distance, his face sombre. ‘You could have been mended if you’d been taken to a healer straightaway. Even a hospital in Ordinary. But she didn’t do that. She kidnapped you and ran away, and my spies told me that by the time a doctor saw you two years later, it was too late.’

I was struck dumb, unable to argue with him or even tell him he was a liar. Something deep inside me knew that he was telling the truth. A sour taste filled my mouth. In all the fakery of FairyLand, there was the truly nasty bit, the real story of what happened to me, lying underneath the pink bows and silver frills like a black petticoat.

‘So you can give your gifts to the poor, if you like,’ the King said. ‘The nobles will hate you more, and the peasants will still hate you because you’re alive and the Great Reversal hasn’t happened.’

I barely heard him. My brain whirled with questions I desperately wanted to ask Mum and Dad right away. I needed to know if Mum was to blame, why she never took me to a doctor, why all these years she’d been lying to me. She and Dad both made out that I was born this way, that it was fate. The heck it was! The thought that I could have been fixed, that I could’ve walked straight and without pain forever – it burned me up so much I couldn’t handle it. I wanted to smash something. My hand reached for a crystal goblet and lifted it into the air.

‘Do you need something to drink?’ Lord Brilliant stood right in front of the table, balancing on the top step, smiling, gesturing at the glass in my hand. Up close,

not scowling, he looked almost angelic, with big long-lashed green eyes and long brown hair tied in a tail. Only his firm chin showed he was probably tougher than he appeared.

Heat rushed into my face and I put the glass down with a thump. ‘Yes, thank you,’ I muttered. ‘Not wine.’ I tried to take some calming breaths but it was hard.

He waved to a servant who rushed over and poured a pink liquid into my glass. My taster grabbed it and sipped, waited a few seconds and then nodded to me. I slurped down the whole lot and burped. Lord Brilliant’s perfectly shaped eyebrows rose.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘I’m a bit freaked out right now.’

‘It’s a big occasion,’ he said.

‘You’re very polite,’ I said. Actually, he sounded like a manners coach.

He pulled a small package out of his pocket with a big flourish and presented it to me. ‘I wanted my birthday gift to be special, not just one of a great pile.’

‘Oh. Thank you.’ I took it and put it on the table, looking around for the gift openers.

His face fell. ‘Aren’t you going to ...’

‘Um ... sure.’ I picked it up again. Uh-oh, it looked suspiciously like a ring box. I took my time opening it, picking at the bow and the tape, and I could see him fidgeting and trying not to lean over and open it for me. He reminded me of Dad when they gave me the boxed set of Harry Potters, that look of excited ‘I know she’s going to love this.’ My eyes filled with tears and I ducked my head, fumbling with the last bit of wrapping. Home seemed so impossibly far away.

Yes, it was a little box with a ring inside it. A gold and diamond ring, with a stone as big as my thumb nail. I knew there was some ‘betrothal’ thing here with Lord Brilliant, but ... The pink drink sloshed around in my stomach, and I remembered me in the kitchen on the day our house was wrecked, yelling about how I was going to school no matter what, and maybe even thinking a little about meeting some boys as well as making friends. That was a million times different from this.

*I won’t be here to worry about betrothals. Pretend it’s OK.*

I tried hard to smile but my mouth wasn’t working very well. ‘Th – thanks.’

Clearly, ‘Thanks’ wasn’t what he expected. Someone like Delight would probably have gushed all over him. ‘You’re welcome,’ he said stiffly, and turned away, almost tripping down the steps in his hurry to get back to his seat. Once there, he filled

his glass and spoke to the person next to him and wouldn't look at me again. I felt awful, insulting him like that, but there wasn't one ounce of gush in me.

Just then, the trumpets let out an almighty chorus that made me start so badly that I knocked my glass over. The doors opened and in came a procession of powder-blue boys, pulling and pushing a trolley on which sat the most enormous cake I had ever seen. It was at least ten tiers, covered in fluorescent pink frosting and studded with silver and gold decorations. Every tier had candles on it – there must have been at least a hundred of them. The cake came towards me like that big wooden horse trundling into Troy, and the nobles burst into applause. Even the King clapped and frowned at me so I had to clap, too.

When the cake stopped at the bottom of the steps, the top tier was level with me at the table. The frosting was so glossy that it shone under the lights like satin.

'Go and blow the candles out,' the King said. 'Hurry up.'

'They aren't lit,' I said.

Suddenly they were. Someone, probably Gilt, put a spell on them and they all burst into flame at once, causing a smoke haze to rise and the frosting to melt. I hurried down the steps, my dress jingling, wondering how the heck I could possibly blow all those candles out without running out of breath and fainting, but one of the boys said, 'Just blow the nearest ones, Your Majesty.'

'OK.' I bent forward, sure my hair would catch on fire any moment, and blew hard on the row of candles right in front of me. The flames wavered and then they all went out at once. Loud applause broke out again, and everyone sang 'Happy Birthday' – again. It still sounded like a funeral dirge, and I shivered.

Someone came to stand right behind me and I turned. It was Delight, dressed in black. Nothing like making a statement. Lots of the nobles sucked in a breath and whispering broke out all around us.

'Happy birthday, dear cousin.' She gave me a kiss that felt like a dead moth touching my face and handed me a long, skinny parcel wrapped in blood-red paper with a black bow. 'Something special. Just in case.' She smiled and curtsied and walked to her table. The whispering grew louder.

The King stood and shouted, 'Bring in the band and push the tables back!' He beckoned to me. 'Come back up here.'

When I was back beside him, he ordered the blue boys to take the cake to one side and cut it up for the guests. 'You get the top layer all to yourself,' he said to me.

‘That’s a lot of cake to eat.’ The glossy frosting made it look like plastic. Maybe it would taste like plastic, too.

‘You have to eat at least one piece,’ the King said, ‘or the cook will be insulted.’

I put Delight’s gift on the table – I’d unwrap it later. After the ring, I didn’t need another horrible surprise right now, if ever. The band played a noisy song with lots of jangling and bass thumping, and the chatter in the hall competed. I longed to put my hands over my ears. One of the blue boys brought over a large gold-edged plate on which was the cake, my name scrolled across it in white-and-gold icing. It didn’t look any more appetising close up. I picked up my spoon and dug into it. The inside sponge cake was pink, too. I bet pink food colouring was a really big industry here. Just as I was about to put the spoon into my mouth, the taster pulled at my arm. ‘Your Majesty, I have to ...’

‘Gladly,’ I said, passing him the spoon. More for him, less for me.

He ate the piece of frosted cake and smiled. ‘It’s delicious, Your ...’ His eyes rolled up and he dropped to the floor like he’d been hit on the head. I froze, staring down at his unmoving body.

## CHAPTER 15

I couldn't believe the boy was talking one minute and lying dead on the floor the next. Maybe he wasn't dead. 'Call an ambulance!' Nobody was listening, and no one had seen him fall behind the table. I grabbed the King's sleeve. 'Get help. He's been poisoned.'

The King looked over at the taster. 'Too late for help now. Aren't you glad I made you use him?' He signalled to some blue guards, who trotted over, lifted up the taster and carried him out. 'Don't eat anything else. We'll have to find you another taster.'

I couldn't have eaten even if I'd wanted to. My throat had closed up and I could barely breathe. I sat on my throne like a statue, the glossy cake still sitting in front of me. What was in it? Arsenic? Cyanide? Deadly nightshade? I leaned forward and pushed it off the table. The noise level meant I didn't hear the plate break on the steps, and I couldn't see the result, but no doubt pink cake was splattered everywhere. Lots of people nearby giggled and pretended to be shocked. A servant rushed over and cleaned it up. I leaned over the table again and shouted, 'Don't you eat any of that!'

The servant looked up, mouth gaping and nodded, then scuttled away.

A large area had been cleared for dancing but nobody was up yet. The King held out his hand. 'You have to go first. It's tradition.'

'I don't want to.'

'You have to.'

'No, I don't.'

'Do you want to spend your birthday in the dungeon?' he snapped. 'I could arrange it in a second.'

Then we couldn't escape. I stood up and stomped down the steps, meeting him at the bottom. 'Pick up your bottom lip,' he said. 'The Queen does not sulk or look foul-tempered. Otherwise, the dungeon ...'

'Yeah, yeah.' I pasted a smile onto my face that probably made me look like a gargoyle. 'I can't dance, you know.'

'Neither can I. Just follow my lead.'

He was right. All he could do was stand in one place or take a couple of steps in either direction, so he held my hand in the air and slowly twirled me around him. With the weight of my dress, it was hard work and I was so glad when the music stopped. He gave a little bow, I dipped into an easy curtsy that reminded me all over again how

great it was to have a normal leg, and then also reminded me how it wouldn't last past tomorrow.

The way things were going, I mightn't *live* past tomorrow.

I needed to escape before someone killed me, never mind rescuing Mum and Dad. The way every attempt on my life was dismissed by the King as 'nothing' showed he wasn't at all bothered if I died. How sad was that? I bit my lip hard. I'd found family I never knew I had, and both of them couldn't wait to see me gone. No wonder Mum couldn't stand to stay here.

As I sat down, I searched the hall and found Boyo now sitting in the farthest corner, all on his own, the lords and ladies making sure not to sit near him, although I doubted he would mind. I finally managed to catch his eye and mouthed, 'Soon.' He nodded and stood, but instead of leaving the hall, he leaned against the back wall, watching the crowd. Many of them had filled the dance floor and were waltzing in circles – in their bright clothes they looked like lollies rolling around on a plate. Lord Brilliant offered his arm to a pretty girl sitting near him and they danced, laughing merrily at each other. Hopefully, he'd fall in love with her and let me off the hook.

The King was tucking into a large piece of my birthday cake, after his taster had tried a piece with a nervous expression on his face. Nothing had happened and the King now had pink icing all around his mouth and in his moustache. 'Want some of this?' he asked.

I shook my head. 'How long before I can go to bed?'

He glared at me. 'You are very ungrateful. You may leave after the magic show.'

'When is that?'

'Soon.' He half-turned away as if he didn't want to talk to me anymore. Well, that was just fine with me. I scanned the hall again. The Grand Vizier was sitting to one side at a table that was filled with lords and ladies too old and feeble to dance. Most of them had white hair and wrinkled faces and hands and, while some were chatting, others gazed blankly off into the distance. The Grand Vizier was staring straight at me, his mouth pursed. When my eyes met his, he got up and came over to me, climbing the steps slowly and leaning on the table when he reached the top, panting a little.

'Your Majesty, are you enjoying your birthday?'

'It's very nice,' I said, trying to keep sarcasm out of my voice.

‘I have ...’ He fumbled in a pocket and then presented me with a small, wrapped gift. ‘Just something small. Open it later.’ He smiled and bowed. ‘Enjoy the rest of the evening.’ Instead of going back to his table, he left the hall. I picked up the gift and shook it.

The King said, ‘It’s your Royal Seal. For letters and such.’

‘Wonderful.’ *And pretty much useless to me.*

The music stopped and silence fell over the hall. Everyone’s faces were filled with excitement and they hurried to their seats. The gift openers came and took away the pile of gifts, leaving me with the ones on my table. I guessed the magic show was starting. It was weird – if I’d ever thought about FairyLand, I would’ve assumed everyone would be able to do magic and fly and stuff like that. But so far, only Gilt appeared to have magic talents.

And me.

And my mysterious grandmother.

Which possibly meant the King did, too, but I’d seen no sign of it.

Gilt entered the room, followed by two blue boys carrying a table, and I sat up straighter, watching his every move. The table held a top hat, two wands, some scarves, a rope and some big silver rings. He proceeded to perform a standard magic show, exactly like any magician in Ordinary would do. In fact, his show was pretty awful. I’d seen better on TV, by far.

But each trick he performed, from the dove out of the hat to the cut rope that joined together again to the scarves that disappeared and reappeared out of someone’s shirt, was greeted by thunderous applause. At the end, when he presented the girl next to Lord Brilliant with a large bouquet of flowers that he conjured out of his own sleeve, they gave him a standing ovation.

I didn’t get it. I was pretty sure he could have made any of them disappear, or turned their plates into snakes, or even started a fire out of a bowl of red jelly, but he did no real magic at all. As soon as he packed up and left, I stood.

‘I’m going to bed now,’ I told the King.

‘Good night.’ He didn’t even look at me, just reached for a large bowl of chocolates.

I picked up my three gifts and made my way down the steps, feeling the dress drag at me and threaten to trip me up. As I reached the door and the guard opened it for me, I took a handful of the gold mail skirt and lifted it so I could walk more easily.

Boyo was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs up to my room. We ascended in silence, a guard following us, and at the door he grabbed Boyo and held him back.

‘What are you doing?’ I snapped.

‘Nobody is allowed in the Queen’s rooms when she retires,’ he said.

Curses. Another rule. ‘I’m not retiring yet. Let him in.’

He bowed stiffly and let Boyo go, but when we were inside, the lock snicked as usual. I put the ring, the seal and Delight’s gift on the table.

‘Now what?’ said Boyo.

‘I guess we wait for Gilt. He said he would get rid of that guard.’ I didn’t want to show how worried I was. ‘If he’s not here by half after midnight ... maybe we’ll try on our own.’ I yawned. ‘I’m tired of waiting already.’

‘One of us has to stay awake,’ he said. ‘What if we both fall asleep and then suddenly it’s tomorrow and it’s too late?’

‘We’ll take turns.’ I sat back in one of the armchairs, closing my eyes, but straightaway I saw the taster in his blue shirt lying dead on the floor next to me. My eyes shot open and my heart thumped. That poor kid! And what if I’d eaten that cake? One bite would’ve done me in.

Bang! Bang! Bang! The door shuddered. I leapt out of the chair and tripped over my dress, falling flat on the floor and bumping my nose. ‘Ouch!’

Boyo had jumped up, too. ‘Can we open it?’

‘Your Majesty!’ someone shouted. ‘The King is ill. You must come!’

‘It might be a trick,’ Boyo said. ‘They’ve already tried twice to get rid of you.’

I staggered to my feet and went to the door. ‘Who is it?’

‘It’s the Grand Vizier. Open up!’

‘Where’s the guard?’

‘There’s no one here.’

That was strange. ‘Who sent you?’

‘Nobody! I was called to the King’s apartments. He’s in a terrible state. He asked for you, told me to come and get you.’ His voice sounded strained and panicky, but he didn’t sound like he was lying. I reached out my hand and wished the door to unlock, and it did. I pulled it open. The Grand Vizier stood right outside, his face whiter than his hair, his eyes wild.

‘Thank goodness!’ he said. ‘Hurry.’

Boyo pulled me back. ‘If it’s a trick, you won’t return alive.’

‘You’ll have to come with me,’ I said. ‘Watch my back.’

He shook his head but didn’t argue and followed me down the stairs. The Grand Vizier turned at the first landing and went down a short corridor, then up a wider set of stairs, with blue carpets and gold-embossed railings. He kept looking back at us, shouting, ‘Come on, hurry!’

It was hard to hurry in a dress that weighed so much.

The King’s apartment door was painted silver and gold, with a large gold handle in the shape of a heart. The Grand Vizier pushed open the door and ran through several sumptuously furnished rooms, with curtains and carpets and chair upholstery so glittering and sparkly that my eyes hurt. I kept my head down and followed the Grand Vizier’s footsteps, clearly visible in the thick soft carpet. In the last room, everything was pale turquoise. It was like walking into the sky.

Except in the middle, on a huge bed, lay the King, his head propped up on turquoise velvet pillows, his face such a dark shade of red that I thought his head might be about to explode. Then I thought he was already dead and it was too late. I stopped in the middle of the room while the Grand Vizier ran to the side of the bed and leaned over the King. ‘She’s here, Your Majesty.’

There was no response from the King.

As we waited, a dark, cold pain started in the middle of my chest and slowly spread. I didn’t know what it meant. This man had been no kind of grandfather to me. He’d been mean, nasty and uncaring. But it was horrible to stand there and ...

His chest heaved and he sucked in a shuddering, raspy breath.

‘Where ... is ... she?’

‘Here. Right here.’ The Grand Vizier gestured to me urgently, mouthing, ‘Come here.’

I walked around the side of the bed, dreading getting closer, but I couldn’t see how to refuse. The King still wore what he’d had on at dinner, the front stained with all kinds of different-coloured food and dribbles of red wine. Flecks of pink icing littered his moustache and beard, and his feet bulged out of his silver shoes. His huge stomach was a mountain in the middle of the bed.

He turned his head and his eyes opened, fixing on me. ‘You.’

‘Yes, it’s me,’ I said. Obviously it was me.

‘Are.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘My.’

I raised my eyebrows at the Grand Vizier. ‘Be patient,’ he said. ‘The King will say it all in time.’

Really? I was thinking we didn’t have much time, the way he looked. Where was the doctor? I wanted to hold the King’s hand, but I was worried he’d push me away.

‘Only. Grand. Child.’

‘I guess so,’ I said.

‘I. Am. Dying.’ A big raspy breath again. ‘You. Will. Reign. For. Me.’

No way. Not in a million years. I was panicking big-time. The King could not die. Not now. Not when I was about to escape.

‘You’re not dying,’ I said. ‘You’ll be fine.’

‘Am. So.’

He tried to take another breath and it sounded like he was choking. I had to do something. Mum’s words came back to me again. *Better out than in*. OK, let’s put it to the test, Mum. I looked around the room. In one corner was a large round vase with blue flowers arranged in it. I went over and tipped out the flowers, then told Boyo to come and help me drag the vase to the bed. ‘I need you, too,’ I said to the Grand Vizier. I made them both get on the other side of the bed, behind the King, while I held his head over the vase. This was going to be totally gross, but it was the only thing I could think of.

‘Push him over this way,’ I ordered. ‘Hurry. Onto his side. And keep him there, with those pillows.’ They did as I said, although it took a couple of minutes because the King was so heavy. ‘Right, let’s do it.’ It was *me* who had to do it, and my stomach lurched and rolled at the idea, but there was no way the King could do it himself.

I gritted my teeth, forced his mouth open and stuck my fingers in as far as they would go. All those episodes of *World’s Best Model* had come in useful after all. The King jerked, heaved and heaved again. I whipped my hand out and held the vase right up to his mouth. He started to vomit and it was a million times grosser than I had imagined. Make that ten million. The vomit was multicoloured and came in a huge gushing stream that more than half-filled the vase in a few seconds. The stench was worse than rotting vegetables, worse than a blocked-up drain, worse even than the dead stray cat under our house last summer. I started to retch myself and reeled back from the bed, almost dropping the vase. What a disaster that would’ve been!

Boyo and the Grand Vizier were staring at me, either in amazement or stunned revulsion. Probably the latter. The smell was overwhelming. It kept rising out like an animal trying to escape. I had to stopper the vase. I grabbed a large cushion off a nearby couch and stuffed it down the neck of the vase, and the smell died away.

*Oh, thank goodness!*

On the bed, the King was lying straight again, and they'd propped him back up on the pillows. His colour had died down to a mild red and he was breathing almost normally.

He saw me by the bed. 'I must've eaten something bad,' he said.

My mouth dropped open. Was he completely stupid? Everything he'd eaten was bad and to make things worse he'd eaten about five tonnes of it. 'You're a guts!' I said. 'You ate more food than a family of ten people, and ALL of it was rich or sweet or fatty. What did you think was going to happen?'

He pouted. 'I've eaten good food all my life. Nothing wrong with it.'

'Fine!' I snapped. 'Keep on with that, why don't you? But don't expect me to come and help you out next time your body decides it's had enough of you stuffing your face.'

To my surprise, he didn't answer back. His eyes filled with tears and two rolled down his round cheeks. 'But you did come and help. Nobody has ever ...' More tears rolled down and soaked into his jacket collar. 'Thank you.'

'Yeah, well ...' I wasn't used to seeing him sappy like this. He was talking kindly to me. But he seemed incredibly lonely.

In those moments of calm, I realised how deserted the King's apartment was. I said to the Grand Vizier, 'Where is everyone? Where's the doctor? Where are the King's servants, for goodness sake?'

The Grand Vizier stuttered and stammered. 'Er ... well ... he ...'

'They all ran away,' the King said.

'Even the doctor? You could've died!' I said.

'Nobody wanted to take responsibility,' the Grand Vizier said. 'They all thought they'd be blamed if he passed away, and that's an executable offence.'

'If he's dead, who's going to blame them?'

'Well ... you,' the Grand Vizier said.

That was when I totally lost it. 'You people are ridiculous! Stupid! How can you live like this?' I was shrieking so loudly that Boyo put his hands over his ears, but I

didn't care. 'You are all the most horrible people I have ever met.' I leaned over and poked the King on the shoulder. 'This is your fault! You run this place. And you nearly died because you have made everyone here too scared to help you. YOU SHOULD BE ASHAMED OF YOURSELF!'

A dark silence fell over the room. The King gaped at me, unable to speak, and the Grand Vizier looked as if he was about to faint. But Boyo smiled and nodded at me.

Finally, into the silence, the King spoke, his voice so tiny and soft that I almost didn't hear him. 'I'm sorry.' Then he burst into tears, water spurting from his eyes and howls echoing through the apartment. I was so flabbergasted that I didn't know what to do. Boyo mouthed at me, 'Help him,' but I wasn't sure how. In the end, I held his hand and patted it until he stopped sobbing. It was totally weird.

'Thank you,' the King finally managed to gasp out. He closed his eyes and within seconds, he was snoring loudly, like a busy chainsaw with too many trees to cut.

We moved into the next room and shut the doors, drowning out the noise a little, enough to speak at least. 'You were marvellous,' said the Grand Vizier. 'Such a life saver. Never seen anything like it.'

Boyo looked concerned and I knew why. He thought I might have changed my mind about escaping. I shook my head at him and focused on the Vizier. 'You have to make the servants and the doctor come back and look after him.'

'What about you?' he said, gripping my arms. 'You're his granddaughter.'

'Up until now, he's treated me like the worm in his happy apple,' I said.

'He's under a lot of pressure,' the Vizier said. 'You must understand ...'

'I need some sleep,' I said. 'I'll see what happens tomorrow. Good night.'

'But ...'

I nodded at Boyo and we left, walking fast so the Vizier couldn't argue anymore. Back in my bedroom, I fell onto my bed and groaned. 'That was disgusting. So disgusting that I may never eat again.'

'Colourful though,' he said with a grin.

'Don't remind me.' But I couldn't help remembering the vomit fountain, and a horrible taste rose up into my throat. Now I wanted to throw up, too. I sat up and changed the subject fast. 'What's the time? Gilt will be here soon.'

'So you're still going through with it.'

‘Of course.’ I went to the window and looked out over the city. At this time of night, it sparkled with coloured lights, and the gardens below were also lit up with glittering lamplights. It was so pretty, and yet underneath it was so nasty.

‘The King ... your grandfather ...’

I swung around. ‘What?’

Boyo grimaced. ‘He seemed so lonely.’

‘That’s what you get when you’re a bully and execute people for no reason.’

But I understood what he was trying to say. ‘I feel bad about him, too. I didn’t expect him to cry like that. Do ... do you think saving his life will mean he likes me better now?’ I heaved a sigh. ‘It doesn’t matter. I don’t feel sorry enough for him to stay here and be the Queen.’

Boyo’s eyes twinkled. ‘But think of what you could do for the place. You could start a revolution. Take away from the rich, help the poor ...’

‘Like Robin Hood?’

‘Robin who?’

‘Never mind. It wouldn’t work anyway. The lords and ladies here would probably band together and throw me in Sweet and Mellow. They’d never agree to losing their riches, and they’d especially object to sharing them with the peasants.’

I checked the clock – it was after midnight and no sign of Gilt – and started to pace the room, nearly tripping over my dress. ‘I have to get this thing off me, but I have no idea what else to wear. They took my jeans and T-shirt.’

‘I have a spare uniform,’ Boyo said. ‘We’re almost the same size.’

Me in powder blue? No way. Then I realised what a good disguise it would be.

‘OK. Where is it?’

‘In the bathroom cupboard. I tossed it in there when I saw Soof had given me two.’

I found the uniform and, after Boyo had unhooked my dress, I shut the bathroom door to get changed. When the gold mail dropped off me and onto the floor, it felt like I was floating. The dress had left big red marks on my shoulders and I was glad the uniform was soft velvet, but when I looked at myself in the mirror, I burst out laughing. Even though the uniform was a bit big, I’d turned into a blue guard clone, just like all the others. Only the crown on my head made me different.

I lifted it off and held it, running my fingers over the gold and diamond filigree designs. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever worn. I thought of what lay ahead, the danger in trying to escape. The King might be grateful now but if we were caught ...

Was it possible to change a place like this? To take from the rich and give to the poor? Robin Hood mightn't have been real but helping people to have a better life was. Maybe I could make a difference somehow.

I shook my head sharply. I couldn't be Queen. It was impossible. And I knew I couldn't take the crown with me. I went back to the bedroom and laid it on the pillow on my bed.

Boyo held up the two gifts I hadn't yet unwrapped. 'What are you going to do with these?'

I made a face. 'I don't want them.'

'At least open them. They might be something useful.'

'Ha! That one from Delight might be a snake. The other one is some kind of seal.' I took them and sat down, opening the Grand Vizier's gift first. As the King had said, it was my Royal Seal. A small stamp with an engraving of a bird flying up into a sun, with a large Q around it. I shoved it into a pocket and focused on Delight's gift. I pulled the ribbon undone and then the wrapping, unfolding the dark paper slowly, nervous about what it might be, until a long black stick sat on my lap. It was perfectly smooth, about forty centimetres long, capped at each end with silver.

Boyo leaned close and examined it. 'It's a wand.'

'A Harry Potter sort of wand?'

Boyo looked puzzled.

'Never mind. This looks ...' I was going to say evil, but actually it didn't. It was just a piece of wood.

'Are you going to pick it up?' he asked.

'Maybe.' I was scared of the thing, of what it might be, or what it might do to me. But I was already touching it since it was on my lap. I took one end of it between my fingers and picked it up. Nothing happened. I waved it up and down a little. Still nothing.

'Maybe you need to focus it more,' Boyo said.

'I think she's trying to trick me,' I said. 'She's probably having a good laugh about it right now.'

‘Who is?’ Gilt’s voice at the door made me jump. I’d never been this nervy in Ordinary, but now I was starting at everything. As he came in, I quickly hid the wand down the side of my chair.

‘Don’t do that! I hate people sneaking up on me.’ He was frowning at my blue uniform. ‘I’m wearing this because there isn’t anything else. I can’t make a run for it in a long dress.’

‘I suppose,’ he said. ‘But if we get caught, no one will believe you’re the Queen. You’ll both be thrown in the peasants’ prison at Decrepit. As will I. Maybe ...’

‘Take the crown,’ Boyo said. ‘That might get us out of trouble. Of course, we’re not going to get caught, but ...’

‘It’d be stealing,’ I said. But already I’d fetched it off the pillow. ‘I can’t wear it. I need a bag or something.’

‘Shove it down inside your uniform jacket,’ Boyo said. ‘It’ll look a bit lumpy but it doesn’t matter.’

Just as well it was a coronet and not a big boofy crown, but it did make me look lumpy. Gilt had a funny look on his face. ‘What’s wrong?’ I said.

‘Nothing.’ He opened the door a crack, peered out and then pulled it wide. ‘No guards.’

‘The palace has been empty all night,’ Boyo said. ‘It’s a bit suspicious, don’t you think?’

‘Like a trap,’ I added. ‘Is it a trap? Are you setting us up?’

‘Why would I do that?’ Gilt said. ‘If we get caught, I’ll be thrown in Sweet and Mellow, too.’

I studied him for a few moments, but he seemed as friendly and open as ever, and he was right about being blamed for my escape. He was a magician though, so maybe he could easily get out trouble with a spell of some kind. Again, I stopped myself from saying anything about my own magic. He’d seen me floating things in the air but even I wasn’t sure what I could do.

‘What’s the plan?’ I asked. ‘Where’s the portal?’

‘Down near the dungeons,’ Gilt said.

‘That’s a strange place for it,’ I said.

‘It’s well hidden, as it should be,’ he snapped. ‘Are you ready?’

We both nodded and he headed for the door. As we followed, I grabbed the wand from the chair and pushed it inside my jacket, next to the crown, hoping I

wouldn't trip and fall down on them. Outside the bedroom, the landing and stairs were empty and our footsteps echoed as we descended. It was as if the palace was booming, 'They're running away, stop them, stop them!'

Gilt hurried on, down more stairs, the corridors in between growing darker and darker. Near the dungeons, I recognised the smell, a mix of mouldy food, rats and damp. I still wondered why a portal would be down here, even if it was well disguised. Gilt said it was a portal to the King's hunting lodge. I couldn't imagine the King using it. I was betting he didn't know it existed.

'Here we are,' Gilt said, pulling open a door. 'It's at the back. We need to hurry.'

Boyo and I were both reluctant to go in. The room was dark and smelled like mice. I hesitated. Something wasn't right.

'We need to go through before the dungeon guards do their check of prisoners,' Gilt said. 'Surely you don't want to get caught just when we're about to get out of here.' He smiled encouragingly at me.

I peered into the blackness. 'I need a light,' I said. 'Or I'll trip on something.'

'Of course.' Gilt stuck out a finger and light sprayed around the small room. He nudged me forward and I bumped into Boyo, pushing him inside.

'I can't see a portal,' I said.

'Of course not,' Gilt said.

Suddenly, the door clanged shut. I was still standing in the entrance and the door hit me like a sledgehammer, knocking me into Boyo, and we both sprawled on the stone floor. The crown dug into my chest, but Boyo cushioned me from the floor. A muffled 'ooff' burst from his mouth and I hoped I hadn't hurt him.

We'd been tricked.

## CHAPTER 16

I forced myself up off the dungeon floor, cursing, using words Mum would've grounded me for, and helped Boyo up, then turned to the door. High up, it had one tiny barred window.

'Gilt! Are you still there, you double crosser?'

'Yes, Your Majesty.' This time I could hear the sneer in his voice. He made *Your Majesty* sound like the worst insult.

'Let me out! I command you!'

A snort of laughter. 'You can't command anything. I'm now going to go and report to the King that I caught you trying to escape. You'll conduct the rest of your reign in Sweet and Mellow. Won't it be nice to see your parents again?'

'You can't do this to us. Let us leave and we'll use the portal and never come back.' Too late, I realised that would bring down the curse.

'Oh, you'll never come back, all right. Nobody escapes from that prison.'

'Why are you doing this?' I shouted.

He hesitated, as if debating whether to tell me, but he couldn't help himself. He sneered again, 'You don't deserve to be Queen.'

'What about the curse?'

'It's rubbish. My uncle told me so. But he could never convince the King.'

'That doesn't explain why you set a trap for me.' I thought for a moment. 'Is someone paying you more than I am?'

'I didn't do this for money,' he scoffed. 'Once Delight is installed in your place, she will elevate me to Grand Vizier *and* Grand Magician, and I'll be able to use my magic however I want.'

Boyo stood right behind me, listening. I said, 'But ... when you did that magic show tonight, you didn't do magic. You did silly tricks that anyone can do.'

He heaved a huge sigh. 'Exactly. That's all the King will allow. He thinks too much magic is dangerous and he doesn't want the common people thinking they can try it.'

'Have you and Delight been behind everything? The arrow? The poison?'

'Of course not,' he said. 'Lots of people don't want you as Queen. Their attempts have been useful to deflect any suspicion from us, though.'

So probably nobody would come to help us. Gilt was right – I should never have come here. But what choice did I have, once I knew where Mum and Dad were? I

sagged forward against the solid wooden door, and a thought struck me. ‘Who sent that monster thing to kill us in Ordinary? The one that wrecked our house and followed me to the safe house?’

‘Oh, that was me. I made a bogger, a really big one. About four metres tall.’ He laughed nastily. ‘Not a bad effort. See what I can do when I try?’

‘How did you know where I was?’

‘Caarrkkk!’ He made a noise like a crow. ‘I had plenty of spies.’

I thought of the crows I’d seen, and how Scuttlebutt always chased them.

‘Portal,’ Boyo whispered in my ear.

‘I have to go now,’ Gilt said.

‘Wait ... if this was a trick to get us in the dungeon, where’s the real portal?’

Perhaps goading him would work. ‘Or did you just make that bit up, too? Maybe there are no portals in FairyLand at all. I guess that’s just a Neither thing, where there’s plenty of real magic.’

He snapped like a fish at bait. ‘Of course there’s a portal, you stupid girl! But it’s in the soldiers’ quarters where you’ll never get at it. And I closed the one into Neither long ago, so you can forget about that, too.’

He walked away and his sniggering echoed all through the dungeons, making me grind my teeth in fury as I stood there in the pitch black cell.

‘I should’ve known he was laying a trap,’ I said. I banged my fists against the door. It didn’t budge. ‘He lied about everything.’ I pointed my finger at the door and wished. Nothing.

‘Maybe not everything,’ Boyo said. ‘What are you trying to do?’

‘Open the stupid door, of course!’ An uncomfortable silence fell in the room. I heard the echo of my voice – I sounded like the King, and it made me cringe. ‘I’m sorry, that was rude.’ I sighed. ‘I just can’t believe I fell for his lies.’

‘It’s all right. I think he charmed you with a spell. It was a skilful one, too.’

Boyo shuffled past me, his arms out, whacking me in the head. ‘Oops. Can you do that light thing, like he did?’

‘I don’t know.’ Gilt had made light come out of the end of his finger. I held up my index finger and wished. Light spurted from the tip and flooded the room, and my mouth dropped open. Another amazing magic thing I could do. I gazed around at the dungeon room; its stone walls and floor, pile of disgusting, smelly straw in the corner

and one empty wooden bucket. The space was barely ten feet square. ‘My finger light worked. But it doesn’t open the door.’

‘Oh.’ Boyo was quiet for a little while. ‘You should keep trying, anyway. Just in case.’

‘But ...’ He was right. My magic was so new that I had little faith in it, especially not for important things like this. Making a ham float in the air didn’t really count. First, I used my finger light to inspect the door closely. It was made of thick planks of wood banded with iron. There was no key in the keyhole and the high-up window was too small for either of us to climb through. But time was running out fast. It wouldn’t take Gilt long to run up and tattle to the king.

But I had just saved the King’s life. And he’d cried. Surely that counted?

No, the King hated betrayal. He’d said himself he was just waiting for me to do something like this. He’d waste no time putting me in Sweet and Mellow with my parents. I hated to think what he’d do to Boyo. I suspected that executions here would attract a big audience.

A shudder rolled over me and I swallowed hard. Gilt was already upstairs tattling on us. I had to do whatever I could, try to dredge up whatever magic I had to save us, somehow. And fast. I reached out both hands, flexed and pointed all ten fingers, and wished at the door with all my might. There was a flash and a wave of heat, and Boyo and I were knocked to the floor again. This time I fell on my back, banging my head and losing my breath for a few seconds. I sat up gingerly, rubbing the lump on my skull, then tried my finger again. It worked, thank goodness, and the room lit up.

Boyo had a cut above his eye, blood dribbling down the side of his face, and he looked dazed. ‘I think Gilt put a spell on the door,’ he muttered. ‘Yours bounced back.’

‘Holy cow!’ I examined the door again, which now had black streaks down it. ‘Stand back in the furthest corner,’ I said. ‘I’ll try again.’

‘No! You might really hurt yourself.’ Boyo pointed at my front. ‘What about using that?’

I looked down – the black wand was sticking out of my jacket. ‘That’s from Delight. It might be hexed.’

I pulled the wand out and held it loosely, trying to feel what it was like, but it was just a black stick. Was it a trick? There was no way to tell. But I had to try it. I had no choice. ‘OK, take cover.’

‘Yes, this straw will make an excellent shield,’ he said with a grin.

‘All righty.’ I examined it closely with the light from my finger. The wand didn’t seem as straight as before, and then I noticed a crack right down its length. That was from falling on it, no doubt. I lifted the wand and pointed it at the door; it immediately grew warm and hummed quietly, and I almost dropped it.

‘Why’s it doing that?’ I asked.

‘Maybe it’s detecting Gilt’s door spell,’ Boyo said. ‘Be careful.’

‘I am!’ I gripped it more tightly and tried to tune in to the vibrations. The wand quivered and seemed to be struggling with something. Black mist leaked out of the crack in it and drifted upwards. Once the mist stopped, the wand felt lighter and springier, but I was still wary of it.

‘I should try it out on something else first. Move away from the straw and the bucket.’ Boyo scuttled back behind me. I pointed the wand at the straw and it burst into flames. Smoke began to fill the cell.

‘Put it out,’ Boyo shouted above the crackling.

I used the wand again and the straw was restored, the smoke gone. I tried the bucket instead, thinking I’d make its nails and iron circle drop so it fell apart. If I could do that, I might be able to do the same for the door. But the bucket exploded with a loud bang. Pieces of wood flew through the air, one narrowly missing us.

‘Golly,’ Boyo said behind me. ‘I thought you were new to this magic stuff.’

‘I am. I didn’t mean for the wand to do that at all. I was wishing for it to fall apart.’ I looked at the door again. ‘I’m a bit worried about what might happen if I try the door, especially with Gilt’s spell on it.’

‘We’re running outa time,’ Boyo said.

‘Let’s stand in the furthest corner then,’ I said. ‘I don’t want to be knocked to the floor again.’ We put our backs to the wall, and my heart thumped hard in my ears like a bass drum. ‘If this turns out to be a disaster, I just want to say thanks for trying to help me. And I’m really sorry I ...’

‘You don’t have to say sorry,’ Boyo said. He squeezed my shoulder.

I nodded and took a couple of deep breaths. ‘OK, I’m putting out my finger light, to save energy.’ In the total blackness, I closed my eyes, held the wand up and focused everything I had into it, imagining I was filling it with power, and then I pointed it at the door and wished with all my might. There was an enormous explosion, a wave of heat blasted over me and bits of debris sprayed around, some hitting me. My

face stung and when I brushed the dust and dirt off, it felt wet. Blood? I wished my finger light on again and gasped. ‘Look!’

The door no longer existed, neither did half the wall. I’d made a huge hole, and the floor was strewn with rocks and dust and little bits of wood. But next to me, Boyo was bent over, groaning.

I was too scared to even touch him. ‘What’s wrong?’

He straightened a little and showed me. Sticking out of his thigh was a piece of wood about six inches long. I’d done that. Guilt flooded through me. *Look what I’ve done now!* I knelt next to him, using my light up close to examine the wood shard.

‘Pull it out,’ he said. ‘Do it quick.’

I went cold all over. ‘I can’t,’ I said. ‘What if it’s in a big vein or artery, and pulling it out makes you bleed to death?’

‘I think it’s fine.’ He grimaced. ‘Just get a good grip on it and do it. Please. Or all this will be for nothing.’

I bit my lip, and wrapped my fingers around the wood. Even that tiny movement made Boyo cry out and I hesitated again.

‘Do it!’

I counted, one, two, three, and pulled hard. At first it resisted, and Boyo let out a shriek, then the wood slid out easily and I dropped it on the floor. Blood from the wound ran down Boyo’s leg, but I’d seen those forensic shows where a big vein was cut, and I was pretty sure this was OK. All the same, it needed a bandage and we had none.

‘Let’s go,’ I said. ‘I’ll look for something to bind it along the way.’

‘No time,’ he gasped. ‘We have to get ... to the portal right ... now. I know ... where the soldiers’ room is.’

I found the wand in the corner covered in gritty dust, and shoved it down my jacket again. Then I grabbed Boyo’s arm and put it around my shoulder, and held him up as we picked our way across the rubble. I couldn’t quite believe I had done that much damage. It had to be the wand. I wondered briefly what the spell on it had been – I bet if I’d tried to use it before it was cracked, it would have blown *me* up.

Voices called out from neighbouring cells, asking what had happened, but there was no way I could answer them. We staggered up the first stairs, Boyo using the wall as an extra support, and along a corridor. Left turn, another corridor, this one with two lamps a long way apart, creating a deep gloom in between. He was slowing down, and

it worried me. A disgusting smell drifted towards us and grew stronger as we hobbled along. ‘What’s that?’

‘Soldiers’ latrines.’ A few more steps. ‘We’re getting close. Next corner. Stop.’

I did as he said and he slid down the wall to rest on the floor. ‘Can you keep going?’ I whispered.

‘Have to. Getting a bit ... of strength back ... have to sneak past ... soldiers asleep.’

My mouth fell open. ‘You mean they’ll all be in there?’

‘Half. Rest are on ... patrol. When I was ... down here ... others told me.’ He laughed softly. ‘The ones here ... drink all evening and ... sleep like logs. As long as we don’t ... make a noise.’

I didn’t plan to. That’d see us back in a cell, quick smart.

‘Let’s go,’ Boyo said.

I helped him up and we rounded the last corner, passing a door where it was clear the stench originated, and on to another door further along where pairs of boots were lined up. Faint snores filtered through the wood and Boyo said, ‘Sounds promising.’

I lifted the latch on the door and pulled it open. A sickening smell of sweat, farts and dirty socks hit us in the face, and I put my free hand over my nose.

‘Put your light on,’ Boyo whispered, ‘but down really low. We need to see a path through.’

‘Through to where? We don’t actually know where the portal is.’ What if we got stuck in there somehow? What if ...

‘Come on.’ Boyo urged me forward and I stepped through the doorway, pausing a moment to light my finger with a faint glow. Ahead of me was a table surrounded by rough pews, which we edged past, then we stopped at the doorway to a large room with two rows of beds. Only half of them were occupied, and a chorus of snores filled the room.

‘You ... go and look.’ Boyo leaned heavily against the doorway, his face white. His pants leg was soaked with blood and it dripped onto the floor.

‘First, I’m going to bandage your leg.’ I ignored his protesting hand and rummaged through a pile of clothes on the floor near me. Most of it was soldiers’ jackets and trousers – unlike the guards, soldiers seemed to wear mostly dark green – but at the bottom I found a pair of long johns. I fetched a knife I’d seen on the table,

and sliced through the legs, making two decent bandages that I wrapped around Boyo's thigh as tightly as I could, tying the ends with a knot. It might not last. I wished on the bandage and it straightened and tightened nicely. I was good for some things then. I didn't dare try to heal the wound with my magic. I might accidentally blow his leg off. I shoved my hands into my jacket pockets.

One soldier snuffled and snorted, then turned over in his bed with a groan. We froze, waited and, after a short while, he snored again. Boyo followed slowly as I crept around the walls, searching for something like a portal. An engraving, a handle, a mark of some kind. There was nothing. Another Gilt trick. Hope was leaking out of me faster than the spell out of the cracked wand.

The wand. Could it detect the portal? It was worth a try.

I held it gently and swept it over the walls, up and down. In the furthest corner, the wand jumped in my hand and grew warm. I risked a little more light but it took close searching before I found it – a hole, just like the one in Grandma's cellar. I remembered the words she told me. If I said them here, would I end up back in Ordinary, back in my old house?

Or maybe I'd go, and Boyo would be left here, injured. And then executed, with Mum and Dad.

I shivered. *Someone walking on my grave*, Mum used to say. Well, this place wasn't going to be a grave for either of us. No, we absolutely had to go to Sweet and Mellow. I went back for him and helped him across to the portal. 'Where is it?' he asked.

I pointed to the hole and he frowned. 'Are you sure?'

'Oy, who are you?' a man shouted. It was one of the soldiers, sitting up in bed, glaring at us. 'Men, wake up, rally round! Intruders!'

There was no time to explain. I threw one arm around Boyo, hugging tightly, and pushed my finger into the hole, wishing as hard as I could. *Take us to Sweet and Mellow.*

## CHAPTER 17

There was a whoosh and a swirling around us; the soldiers' barracks room disappeared and Boyo was nearly wrenched away from me. I clutched tighter, even though my arm felt like it was being yanked out of my shoulder. We spun around through a silver swirl of lights and then once more into darkness, tipping over and over. I knew if we crashed like this, both of us would get hurt.

I threw out my free arm to balance and commanded ... *Slow down. Straighten up. Land softly.* It worked! We steadied in the maelstrom, upright, and a few seconds later we landed gently on our feet. As the darkness cleared, like fog blowing away, my heart plummeted. More stone walls, a barred window, a heavy wooden door. We'd ended up in another part of the dungeon.

Another Gilt trick.

Boyo groaned and sank to the cold slate floor. I bent to check his long-john bandage but it seemed to be holding. 'Where are we?' he muttered, his eyes closed.

'Still in the dungeon,' I said grimly.

Boyo opened his eyes. 'There're no windows in the palace dungeon.'

I went over to the barred opening. 'You're right. I can see lots of trees and ... lots more trees.'

A little voice squeaked from the far corner of the cell. 'You're in Sweet and Mellow.'

'Huh?' I spun around but no one was there.

'Didn't know we were getting more prisoners,' the voice said. 'This place is busier than a donkey station.'

'Who are you?' I asked. 'Where are you?'

'Down here, silly,' the voice squeaked. Two bright little eyes looked at me, topped by two round pink ears. Whiskers twitched, a pink nose double-twitched.

'You're a rat.'

'You noticed.'

A sarcastic rat. Great. But one that seemed to know its way around. 'Where are the other people here?'

'Two floors down.' The rat sniffed. 'They never leave me a single crumb. Don't suppose you've got any food on you?'

'You wouldn't want it if I did,' I said. 'Where I've been, they tried to poison me.'

‘Join the club,’ the rat said. It ran across the floor and inspected Boyo. ‘What’s wrong with him?’

‘I blew up a door, and he got hurt by flying wood.’

‘You blew up a door,’ the rat said, eyeing me for a long moment. ‘Oh. You’re *her*.’

‘Yeah, sorry.’ I didn’t like the cynical expression on its ratty little face but I thought I should be nice. ‘I won’t turn you into anything, I promise. We’re here to find my parents and then get out of FairyLand, before they catch us.’

The rat combed its whiskers with both paws. ‘Two floors down, as I said. I’d hurry if I were you. This portal’s been getting a fair bit of use lately.’

‘Does it go anywhere else but the palace?’ I asked.

Boyo said, ‘Told you – portals just take you from one place to another. That’s how Abellona makes them.’

I was betting Gilt made this one, but I didn’t argue. Boyo hauled himself to his feet and tested his leg, limping back and forth across the cell. I couldn’t help thinking that’s how I must look. Except so far, Gilt’s spell was still holding and my leg was fine. Who knew how long that would last?

‘We’d better get out of here,’ I said. ‘Gilt might follow us through.’

Boyo leaned down to the rat. ‘How many soldiers are there here?’

‘Eight,’ said the rat. It made a snuffly noise that could have been laughter.

‘Night shift sleeps more than day shift.’

I tried the door, expecting it to be locked, but it opened silently, as if the hinges had been oiled recently. Outside was a long, empty corridor lined with cell doors stretching into the distance. We walked along, our footsteps echoing, to a landing and stone steps that descended into gloom. On the next landing I peered along the corridor but it was the same, a row of closed doors.

‘Down one more,’ he whispered. ‘Quietly. There be guards somewhere.’

Sure enough, in the corridor below, beside the third cell door there was a chair, a pipe on its seat, an empty mug on the floor. No guard. Boyo was limping worse, and blood had seeped through the bandages. ‘Stay here,’ I whispered. ‘Whistle if you hear someone coming.’ He nodded. I crept along to the third cell door and knocked softly.

‘Who is it?’ That was Dad’s voice!

‘Dad? Mum?’

‘Glory?’ Mum said. ‘Is that you?’

‘Yes, Mum,’ I said. ‘Wait a moment.’ I went to pull out the wand but I only had the crown inside my jacket. Somehow the wand had fallen out while we were being whirled around. Maybe that was a good thing. It had never felt completely right. I put my hands on their cell door and wished hard. This one had no spell on it; the ancient lock creaked and clicked over, and the heavy door swung open. Mum and Dad peered out as if they couldn’t quite believe what they were seeing.

‘Glory!’ Mum rushed out and gave me a huge hug, squashing the crown into my chest. I held her away from me.

‘Mum, we have to get out of here. You can hug me later.’

She smiled. ‘That shade of blue suits you.’

I huffed in exasperation. Me – a blue boy? Not.

‘Are you on your own?’ Dad asked.

‘No, Boyo helped me.’ I beckoned to him to join us, then said to Mum, ‘So, where’s the portal out of here to Neither?’

Mum looked blankly at me. ‘There isn’t one.’

‘How did you escape with me all those years ago?’

‘That portal was in the palace but it was permanently closed,’ Mum said.

‘Surely there’s another one?’ Boyo asked.

Mum shook her head. ‘Not that I know of.’

So there really was no portal out of FairyLand anymore. Abellona must have known that when she sent us here.

Yet I couldn’t imagine *all* of them had been closed. Not every single one. Sneaky Gilt probably had a secret one for himself, just in case. I bet Abellona did. The problem was finding where it might be. I had a horrible suspicion it was back in the palace. I couldn’t go back there; I just couldn’t.

‘If we’re getting out of here,’ Dad said, ‘we’d better make a move.’

‘Where’s the exit?’

Dad pointed to the stairs. ‘There’s only one, down there. We’ll have to sneak past at least four guards.’

‘The stairwell is pitch dark,’ Mum said. ‘And we have no lamp.’

‘We do,’ Boyo said, nudging me. I held up my finger and made it glow, and Mum’s mouth dropped open with surprise. ‘You have magic?’ she asked. I nodded. ‘Since when?’

‘Since my birthday,’ I said.

She rubbed her face. ‘Goodness. How much?’

I shrugged but Boyo said, ‘Yellow. Maybe green.’

‘Can we talk about this later?’ I shut their door and locked it again, then led us all down more stairs to the bottom landing, keeping my light low. The wall was covered in a thick layer of grimy dust and sticky webs, and footprints tracked through the dust on the steps. It appeared that Sweet and Mellow hadn’t been used much at all before now. Apparently, the King’s nobles knew how to keep on the right side of him.

Flickering candle light spilled out into the corridor from the first room, along with the sounds of men murmuring and eating. I could smell toast. Then someone said, ‘Back to work for me, lads. Can’t stay here all day with you lazy lot.’

Laughter, and another voice: ‘Garn with you. You’ll take a book and sit on your fat bum all day up there like you always do.’

‘Never been an escape from here. Never will be,’ said a third. ‘I’m in the garden today. Hope it doesn’t rain.’

Footsteps. I gestured madly to everyone and we all scooted back into the corner at the back of the steps and crouched down, and I doused my finger. The guard was carrying a guttering candle that barely lit his feet; he climbed the steps, groaning and puffing all the way up, and then his steps died away.

‘Where’s the front door?’ I whispered to Dad.

‘Along there, past the guards’ rooms. They’ll all go out to work soon.’

The crown was jabbing into my chest, so I pulled it out and put it on. As always, it settled into my hair, light as a butterfly. One by one, chairs scraped back and dishes clanked, then footsteps clomped away from us. I straightened and took a few steps, peering around the door frame. Everything was quiet. I whispered, ‘Let’s go.’

We tiptoed past the empty meals room to high double doors that stood open. Sunlight streamed in but so did a cold breeze that made me shiver. ‘Some of them work in the gardens,’ Dad whispered. ‘One will be in the stables. They’ll give chase if they see us. If we escape, it’s on their heads.’

I sneaked a quick glance through the doorway. Stone steps led to a wide path and then a road that snaked away down the mountain into the forest. The outside of Sweet and Mellow was beautiful, with rows of huge rose bushes of all different colours, carved statues and patterns of coloured stones in the paths. It was as pretty as the palace. I caught sight of a guard busy digging at the far end of the rose bushes but nobody else was around. ‘If we go to the right out the door,’ I said softly, ‘and stay

down behind the roses, we might make it to the garden wall. From there, we can crouch behind it and follow it almost to where the trees start.’ I gestured to Mum and Dad. ‘You go first and help Boyo. I’ll be right behind you.’

Mum looked strangely at my crown, but they both gave me the thumbs up to my plan. Dad looked through the doorway and then he and Mum helped Boyo to run where I’d directed them. I waited until I saw them disappear behind the wall, then stepped out to follow. Just as I reached the path, a guard with a hoe popped up from behind the purple roses. He gaped at me in disbelief.

‘Where did you spring from?’

I said the first thing that came into my head. ‘The palace. I’m the Queen. Stand aside.’

He eyed me suspiciously, and for good reason. My blue velvet uniform was filthy, with dark streaks of dust, and my face was probably the same.

‘Where did you get that crown from?’ he asked. ‘You musta stole it.’ He took a menacing step towards me.

‘I ...’ My brain froze. Surely there was something magic I could do? Levitate him? Turn him into something? I was pretty sure I couldn’t make myself invisible.

He came towards me, brandishing the hoe. ‘Don’t you try to run now. This’ll cut you down in a jiffy.’

*Like heck it will.* I pointed at the hoe, ripping it out of his hand and into the air. Before he could grab at it, I whirled it around and smacked him on the head. He fell to the ground and lay there unmoving. For one sickening moment I thought I’d overdone it and killed him, but then he moved a little and I heaved a sigh of relief. Far off by the wall, Dad waved at me urgently and I ran as fast as I could, trying to stay behind the roses, praying no other guards would pop up and confront me.

I clambered over the wall and dropped down next to Mum. She was retying Boyo’s long john bandage, her mouth grim. ‘He needs medicine,’ she said. ‘It’s starting to get infected. Did you clean it first?’

‘Mum, we were in a stinky dungeon!’ I protested.

‘We have to get moving,’ Dad said. ‘It’s a long walk to the lodge and there’s a storm coming.’ The sun had disappeared and the sky was a dark grey, with black clouds racing in. A sudden icy gust of wind cut through my clothes. Over the far hills, lightning flashed and a couple of seconds later thunder rumbled. The forest around Sweet and Mellow spread below us in dark green waves.

Somewhere behind us, the portal on the top floor was probably already opening to disgorge Gilt and soldiers to capture us.

‘Follow me,’ I said. I crouched low and scooted along behind the wall, right to the end. From there, it was about fifty metres of open ground to get to the treeline. Mum and Dad arrived, Boyo between them. His face was pale, but he mustered a grin for me.

‘Back in a forest,’ he said.

I nodded. ‘Bet it’s not as nice as Nor though.’

I looked back at Sweet and Mellow. From here it was an ugly stone box with tiny square windows. No turrets or towers. Definitely a prison. A light drizzle began to fall, making the rainbow rose garden look like smeared bright paints on the bottom of a charcoal canvas. A guard emerged from another low building that was probably the stables and headed towards the front door. Any moment he’d find the guy I’d whacked with the hoe. ‘Let’s go,’ I said. I ran fast, hoping Mum and Dad and Boyo were right behind.

Drizzle misted around us as we entered the forest and Sweet and Mellow disappeared from sight. Mum caught up with me, and Dad helped Boyo along, one arm around his waist. We wove between the trees, dodging low branches and stepping over tree roots and holes. After a while, we came out onto a road that was barely more than a track.

‘It’s a fair way yet,’ Dad said. ‘How’s your leg?’

‘Fine.’ My face warmed. I hadn’t told them about the spell. It was complicated. I’d made lots of excuses to myself in the past couple of days about saving Mum and Dad, about being coerced, about Gilt tricking me, about doing what I thought was best. Despite all of that, it still felt both miraculous and incredibly amazing to have a normal leg. Had I made a deal with the devil? Or was the straightening spell a bonus? I couldn’t tell Mum and Dad about it. Not yet. Maybe never.

‘You’re not limping,’ Mum said.

It was as if she’d read my mind. I shivered as cold water dripped off my hair and down the back of my jacket. Time to change the subject.

‘You never told me you’re a witch,’ I said.

‘I’m not.’ Mum made a face. ‘Not really. I’m a white witch. Hardly any powers at all, apart from some healing. And not enough of that to help your friend.’

So that was why she grew and sold herbs and natural remedies in Ordinary.

The drizzle was gradually becoming a light rain and thunder rumbled again. The dark forest held deep, ominous shadows where things like bears and wolves might be hiding. Or giant spiders. I kept my eyes on the road and walked faster.

‘That crown suits you,’ Mum said softly. ‘But what comes with it ...’

My feet faltered. ‘You mean the giant pumpkin who’s supposed to be my grandfather. Your father. I can’t believe how mean he is. No wonder you ran away.’

‘Mmm.’ She sighed. ‘He didn’t used to be like that. My mother told me ... oh, what does it matter now?’

I thought maybe it mattered a lot, but we had more urgent things to deal with. Still, there was something I needed to say.

‘Mum, I ... I’m sorry I said awful things and ran away that day.’ That day seemed like months ago.

‘Oh, Glory, I was never happier about a hissy fit. If you’d been there when the bogger came ... after all we’d done to hide you and protect you.’

They’d done such a good job that I didn’t know how to protect myself when disaster struck. I’d been so weak and wussy. I still felt like I was flailing in the dark, not knowing who or what I’d hit. ‘Why did you fight over me? Gilt said that’s how my leg got twisted.’

Mum rubbed her temples as if she felt a sudden pain. ‘You don’t know how sorry I am for that. But I couldn’t let you go! Bronze grabbed you. He was going to take you away to test you and to train with him. You were only one year old! He and Daddy would never have given you back.’

‘But you lied to me about *all* of it.’ I flung out my arms. ‘*My whole life.*’

‘I’m so sorry, Glory,’ Mum whispered. ‘We were just trying to protect you.’

But I barely heard her. Dozens of memories tumbled around in my head. All the times we’d moved house. How lonely I’d been. The pain in my leg and the endless physical therapy. Scuttlebutt cuddling close to me, licking my nose, licking my tears away. Was he still under Mrs Swan’s house? Or was he in her kitchen, happily eating tuna, barely remembering me? My heart ached at the thought.

I wrapped my arms tighter around myself as icy drops trickled down my neck. ‘Why didn’t you take me to a hospital straightaway? Maybe my leg could have been fixed.’

‘We were on the run,’ Dad said behind me. ‘We were hiding in Neither then. We didn’t find a way into Ordinary for nearly a year. Your grandfather kept sending spies to hunt us down.’

I stopped and turned. ‘Where did you hide in Neither? In the forest?’

‘No,’ Mum said. ‘Abellona shielded us, even though the spies were watching her.’

‘Abellona?’ I stared at Mum. ‘Why would she help you?’

‘She’s your grandmother, that’s why.’

‘But ... my grandmother’s a short, plump woman with curly grey hair and a bad temper.’ I could still see her in my mind, driving that jeep like a maniac and shouting at me.

Mum smiled. ‘That’s one of her favourite disguises in Ordinary.’

I tried to match the short/curly grey hair/grumpy with Abellona’s tall/long black hair/meanness. ‘Disguise is right.’

‘She’s a blue witch,’ Mum said. ‘She’s very powerful.’

‘Told ya,’ Boyo said. ‘She made all them portals, too.’

‘Which Gilt has now closed.’ I shook my head. ‘He’s only left the ones he wants to use himself.’ I was turning into an icicle, standing there in the rain, so I started walking again.

Mum caught me up. ‘How did he know where they all were?’ Mum asked. ‘Did he tell you? Abellona made at least three, maybe more.’

‘Is there some kind of portal war going on?’ I asked.

‘Some kind of magic war,’ Mum muttered.

‘Why did Abellona put the reversal curse on FairyLand? Why is she in Neither instead of here as Queen?’

‘She was born in Neither,’ Mum said. ‘Her parents were witches, sent into exile there. But somehow she grew up believing FairyLand was her real home, and that’s why she put most of her power into building portals. To be able to come here whenever she wanted.’

‘Did her parents know?’ I tried to imagine a young Abellona, studying witchcraft and experimenting. Maybe I’d ask her about it, what it was like.

Mum grimaced. ‘No. And then after she built the portal to the hunting lodge, she met the king. He was there, hunting with his courtiers. They fell in love ...’ Mum

heaved a huge sigh. ‘He was handsome and trim in those days. She pretended to be a FairyLand noble, an orphan. And she hid her powers for many years.’

Her words were followed by thunder and a crackle of lightning, as if someone else was listening. I flinched and wiped the rain from my eyes. It was an unbelievable story, but it rang true, if only because it seemed that lying and pretending ran in our family. ‘Why does the King hate magic so much? Is that why Abellona ran away?’ I ran away, too, and I lied to him. I took the coronation vows, and here I was, on the run. He must really hate me now.

A huge fork of lightning lit up the sky, arcing down into the forest with a tremendous crash. We clung together as thunder roared around us, so loud that my ears rang. ‘Run!’ Dad said. ‘I’ll carry Boyo.’

Mum and I slogged along the slushy road as fast as we could. The mud clung to my shoes and almost sucked them off my feet. If Gilt was following us, he’d be caught in this, too. I looked back, past Dad and Boyo struggling along, but the rain fell like a grey curtain. It could be hiding anything. My clothes were so drenched that they hung off me like sacks of water, slapping my legs and arms.

Mum called back, ‘Zed, do you need help? We ...’

‘We’re here.’ I tugged her sleeve and pointed down the road. The lodge was just visible, sitting in a clearing surrounded by tall dark green pines. The lodge walls were made of logs, the roof of wooden shingles, and its doors and windows were painted green, but it still looked like a fortress, not a refuge. As I waded ahead through the mud, I was thinking. Maybe Mum was right. Maybe Gilt hadn’t closed every portal Abellona had made. Maybe if I really was her granddaughter, I could find one he’d missed. Even if it meant sneaking back into the palace.

As we got closer, the lodge looked more and more gloomy and ominous. As if it was the end of the road. I suddenly realised it was, for us. We had nowhere else to go. Both Gilt and the King would work out sooner or later this was where we were. And they’d come for us. It wasn’t a refuge. It was more like a trap.

But we were all wet and cold and hungry, and Boyo was injured. What choice did we have? Besides, the storm would hold them off, for a while at least.

‘Let’s get inside and dry off,’ Dad said. ‘There might be food stores, if we’re lucky.’

‘I’ll take a closer look at Boyo’s leg,’ Mum said. ‘I know there are medicinal herbs in this forest.’

They sounded like the same Mum and Dad I'd always known, making the best of things and finding solutions. Something tight and knotted inside me loosened. I wasn't alone anymore. I had them to lean on again. Together we'd work out a way to escape after all. We'd think up a plan, and we'd make it work.

I kicked off my mud-caked shoes and ran ahead, splashing through puddles right up to the front door of the lodge. It was green and twice as tall as me, with a wrought iron latch. I thought would be locked and got ready to use magic to open it. But the latch lifted and the door swung open easily.

From inside, a familiar voice cried, 'Welcome. Do come in.'

## CHAPTER 18

I knew that voice. Gilt. Somehow he'd beaten us here. My hand dropped like a stone from the latch and, for an instant, I nearly turned and ran again, but there was no point. It was all over. He'd beaten us, beaten me, and it'd be Sweet and Mellow now for all of us for a very long time.

Or maybe they would execute me.

I sagged against the door frame. That'd solve everything for them. How did they execute people? I'd never asked. The gallows or the guillotine?

I forced the question from my brain and squelched inside, into a huge room with stone floors and heavy wooden furniture. Gilt had lit oil lamps but the heavy brocade curtains stopped the light from leaking out. A small fire crackled in the grate and the room felt a lot warmer than outside. I glanced around, expecting to see blue guards, ropes, weapons – everything he'd need to capture us and take us all back to prison. But there was only him, sitting in a large upholstered armchair with a smug smile on his face. The devious wickedness of his betrayal hit me again with a sickening thud. All those smiles, all the offered help, all that sympathy. The lies about the portals. He'd been faking it. He was FairyLand's biggest fake of all.

Then something rustled in the far corner.

Seated in a chair, her beautiful face in shadow, was Delight. She was still wearing black and perfectly matched Gilt's black suit. A flash of lightning blasted into the room through the open door behind me and I jumped violently. I was glad that my leg didn't twinge with the usual pain, because I had much bigger problems right in front of me.

'Are you enjoying the weather, Glorious?' Gilt asked.

'Not much.'

'It's caused by you,' he said. 'The land knows you are trying to escape. This storm is the first stage of the Great Reversal. Like the burning East Star when you arrived. I should have guessed then. Apparently the curse is real after all.' He shrugged. 'Who knew?'

'Seems like everyone but you,' I said. 'So you're going to take me back to the palace and my throne, and all will be well again.'

'Not exactly.'

The others staggered in behind me and came to a stop, dripping on the floor. The rain hammered down outside, splashing through the doorway as if following them.

Gilt waved a hand and the door slammed shut behind them and the lock clicked. Mum gasped and called, 'Glory, come here.'

I ignored her. I needed all of my concentration for the two nasties in front of me. 'The only other solution to the curse is to kill me, right?' I said to Gilt. 'Then what?'

'Then my lovely Delight becomes Queen, and all returns to normal,' he said. 'Or should I say, *my* kind of normal.'

'Which is?'

'I will have all the magic,' he said. 'The King has spent years getting rid of it, exiling witches and magicians, punishing even the healers.' He snorted. 'The silly old coot thinks he can control me, make me do magic only for him. He has no idea what I am capable of. Then Delight and I will marry, and I will be King as well as Royal Magician.'

Delight said nothing, which I found odd. 'Is that what you want, Delight?' I asked.

'Of course.' She stood and the black dress shimmered around her like deep, sinister water. 'It should have been me all along. I told you you didn't deserve to be Queen.'

'I was never given a choice,' I protested. 'I knew nothing about all of this until Gilt grabbed my parents and brought them here, and I was forced to follow.'

'That wasn't my idea,' Gilt said. 'Your stupid grandfather had this fantasy that if he could just get you back and crowned before you turned thirteen, he'd stop the curse and you'd love the glitz and glamour so much that you'd never want to leave. He used your parents as bait, that's all.'

I heard Mum groan behind me. *Not your fault, Mum.*

'There were plenty of people trying to kill me,' I said. 'You could have just hung on until one of them was successful.'

Delight laughed. 'My archer. My poisoner. You kept being too lucky. I got tired of waiting.'

Tired of waiting after one day? That took impatience to a whole new level. 'And now you're taking me back to the King, and he'll execute me for treason, for escaping,' I said. 'Aren't you worried I'll talk him around?'

'Of course,' said Gilt. 'That's why you're going to have a little ... accident.'

‘Don’t you dare touch my daughter!’ Mum yelled, pushing past me and launching herself at Gilt. He pointed two fingers at her and said ‘Congelo, Radiance,’ and in an instant she was like a statue, her arms outstretched, her face in a horrible grimace.

‘Radiance!’ Dad rushed forward to help Mum and a second later, he was frozen, too.

I turned, hoping against hope that Boyo had been spared, but there he was, frozen as well, his face filled with astonishment. I spun back to Gilt. ‘Unfreeze them! I command you.’ But I knew even as the words left my mouth that he’d just laugh again.

And he did, a nasty chortle. ‘You can’t command me to do anything,’ he said. ‘And your magic is just as feeble as your mother’s.’

I kept my mouth shut tight. He didn’t need to know how much magic I had. Even I wasn’t sure. I’d hardly tried it at all, and what I did have, I couldn’t seem to control. But he could make huge bogger monsters, and close portals, and mend a person’s twisted leg, for goodness sake! I had no hope against him.

Then some words popped out that I didn’t even know I was thinking. ‘Aren’t you worried that Abellona will come back and get rid of you?’

‘Ha! Why would she bother, even if she could?’

‘She’s my grandmother,’ I said. ‘She won’t be happy at all if you kill me. That wasn’t her plan.’ A lie, but he wouldn’t know that. ‘She has her spies, too, you know.’

His face hardened and his eyes glittered. ‘She’ll be too late. And I believe I can beat her.’

‘I bet you – ’

‘Congelo, Glorious.’

Oh no! My legs were locked solid, my arms out from my sides, fists clenched, my mouth half open. Only my eyes could still move and blink. It was the most horrible feeling, as if I was encased in thick, cold concrete that was seeping through my skin and into my bones. I knew deep inside that soon I would be completely cold all the way through, unable to breathe, my heart slowing to a stop.

‘How peaceful it is now,’ Delight said with a giggle. ‘Get on with it then. I want to go back to the palace and throw a mourning ball, just for the hell of it. If the King eats enough, he might finally kill himself. Then the whole of FairyLand will be mine.’ Her tinkling laugh was pure evil.

‘It’ll be mine, too,’ Gilt said. ‘You will be Queen, I’ll be King, as we agreed.’

Delight flipped a hand. ‘Yes, of course. How are you going to get rid of her? Another bogger to eat her? A death spell of some kind? You could explode her from the inside out, perhaps.’

The horrible cold was creeping up my arms and circling my neck. I tried hard to talk, if only to plead for our lives, but it was impossible.

Gilt frowned. ‘If we wait a while, the frozen spell will deal with them all. It’ll suffocate them gently. When I’m sure they’re dead, I’ll call for soldiers to collect them.’

‘I can’t wait that long.’ There was another crackle of thunder, and the rain outside turned to hail, some of it even bouncing in through the still-open door. ‘Look, idiot,’ Delight said, ‘the storm is getting worse. If you don’t kill her now, you mightn’t be able to stop the Reversal. There’ll be no kingdom left.’

Gilt paled, and his face furrowed in thought. She was convincing him!

But inside my ice-cold casing, something moved. My leg. The spell Gilt had put on it to make it straight was wearing off. My hip began to ache and a tremor ran down my thigh. That spell had been very strong – it had taken him two tries to make it work this time. A glimmer of hope sprang up in me. If this spell was wearing off, maybe it would lessen or dissolve the frozen spell, too. If it did, I had to be absolutely ready to attack. That meant summoning every bit of magic inside me. I didn’t know what would happen, if I was strong enough to beat him, but I had to try. We’d all die for sure if I didn’t. And I *had* to keep pretending I was still frozen.

Thankfully, Gilt and Delight were arguing. ‘I can’t just ... blast them,’ Gilt said. ‘The frozen spell will do it peacefully. They’ll hardly know it’s happening.’

*Obviously he’s never had it done to him. Moron.*

‘No, you have to finish her off right now.’ Lightning arced past a gap in the curtains and the thunder was a boom that shook the lodge. ‘And we have to get out of here!’

The concrete casing was dissolving, but too slowly! I was so cold, and although my legs felt almost freeze-free, my arms were still stuck. Just as they began to ease, Delight looked straight at me and it took every bit of strength I had to keep completely motionless.

‘Wait a second,’ Delight said. ‘She’s still wearing MY crown.’ She stalked over to me and tried to get the crown off my head, but it stuck fast. I clamped my lips shut as she pulled my hair – it hurt!

‘This is ridiculous!’ Delight snapped. ‘Make her give it to me.’

‘You can get another crown, for goodness sake,’ Gilt said.

Delight pouted and stamped her foot. ‘I want *that* one.’

‘All right, stand back. I’ll double the freezing spell. When she’s dead you can have the crown.’ As Gilt stood, Delight backed away behind the huge leather couch, her face filled with glee. Anyone would think she was about to be crowned Miss Universe. Well, maybe she thought she was. But it was MY crown, darn it!

At that moment I felt the last of the freezing drop away. I took a breath, drew on everything inside me and thrust my hands out, my fingers pointed straight at Gilt. He stopped, and his mouth dropped open. Before he could move, I wished, the hardest I had ever wished, with every vein, cell and particle in me. Fire flowed through me, a surge of hot, shimmery gold, up from my feet, from my stomach, my head. Like a river it gathered from its streams and rushed out through my fingers. The magic rippled out in thick ribbons, gold and then bright red, hotter and hotter, pouring and surging and hitting Gilt. Too late, I realised that I might splatter blood and guts everywhere, but I didn’t dare stop and give him a chance to fight back.

As the red fire rippled from my fingers, Gilt lit up like a glittering Christmas tree, edged with yellow flames, crackling and hissing. His mouth opened, a dark hole, as if he was trying to speak. But the fire and glittering grew hotter and brighter, too bright to look at. A loud bang shook the room, and he completely disappeared, leaving just a drift of black smoke.

I whipped my hands back and tucked them under my arms. The skin on my face felt like a tight mask and my eyes stung. I ached all over as though someone had kicked me from head to toe.

‘You ...’ Delight was speechless. Her face drained of blood and she looked like a vampire without the teeth. She ran around the couch and dropped to her knees, clutching at my wet blue trousers. ‘Please forgive me, Your Majesty. It was Gilt. He led me astray, made me do what he said. Please, don’t kill me.’

I couldn’t stand to listen to any more of her lies. I pointed a shaking finger at her. ‘Congelo, Delight.’ She froze, her mouth gaping, her fake tears stuck on her face like bits of plastic. I’d work out what to do with her in a minute. First I had to save the others. I ran to Boyo, laying my hands on his shoulders and saying the only thing I could think of. ‘Uncongelo, Boyo.’

It worked and he sank to the floor, leaning his back against the wall with a groan. ‘Thanks, Glory. That was ...’ He shuddered.

I nodded – I knew. He didn’t look well, his skin clammy, but I went quickly to Mum and Dad and unfroze them. They hugged me tight and I hugged back hard, clinging like I did when I was little. When I finally let go, Dad had to help Mum to a chair and then he sat down himself. Coming out of a freezing spell took a bit of dealing with. My legs were trembling so much that they would no longer hold me up. I sat on the opposite side of the room, in the chair Delight had used, trying to gather my scrambled thoughts.

My eyes kept going to the black stain on the floor, the smudges of ash, the faint outlines of two shoes. I kept seeing the red fire from my fingers, the flames all over him, his agonised face. I’d see that every day and night of my life. It was scarred onto my brain. It was a terrible, terrible thing I’d done, a million times worse than my twisted leg. How I could stand the knowing of it?

I was a death dealer, a grim reaper, an executioner. I was as bad as my grandfather – wasn’t I? I wanted to cry but nothing happened. My face was a mask and my heart was numb. How could I fix this? I couldn’t.

And yet ... he had tried to kill all of us, and nearly succeeded. Did that justify what I did? Yes. No. I shook my head. It was too much for me.

A hand on my shoulder made me jump. It was Dad. ‘Glory? You need to do something about ...’ He pointed to Delight who was still frozen. And dying.

‘Oh. Oh heck!’ I whipped up my hand and pointed. ‘Uncongelo, Delight.’

She unfroze and toppled over, lying on the floor, moaning and crying. Dad helped her up onto the big couch where she huddled in a ball, sobbing. I almost felt sorry for her, until I remembered her screaming at Gilt to kill me. And then I remembered the sensation of cold, heavy concrete as I slowly suffocated to death. My fingers tingled in response and I jammed them under my arms, but I could taste black ash clogging the back of my throat. What had Gandalf said? ‘Do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends.’

Wise? That was the last thing I’d tried to be. And I sure hadn’t been eager, not one bit. All I’d wanted was to survive, to save my family and go home. I hadn’t asked for magic, and I certainly hadn’t asked for the power to kill someone. I shrank back in the chair. I just wanted to curl up and disappear. Or move time back so that none of this had ever happened. I wanted to wish myself back to my bedroom, with Aragorn on the

wall gripping his sword, Andúril, and me curled up with Scuttlebutt, reading *The Lord of the Rings* yet again.

But it was impossible. Even I knew that. At least we were alive. With some hope of getting home. There was no ring to cast into the fires of Mordor. Except ... maybe that's what my fingers were. Dangerous on the wrong hands. But these were my hands, and my fingers. I couldn't throw them in the fire. They *were* the fire. I shivered violently. Fire that I needed to learn how to control.

A voice stirred me from my dark thoughts. Delight. She was blinking up at my dad, fake tears still glistening on her face. 'He must have put a spell on me,' she cried. 'I didn't know what I was doing!'

She knew, all right. 'Shut up, Delight,' I snapped. 'Before I freeze you again.'

Dad gaped at me but I caught a flash of hatred in Delight's face before she simpered at me again. I didn't trust her a millimeter, no matter how much she bawled and said sorry. I got up, every bone and muscle of me aching, and went searching through the cupboards in the lodge. When I found some old rope, Dad reluctantly agreed we should tie her up and gag her, and we left her in one of the small bedrooms. She'd probably get free eventually or the soldiers from Sweet and Mellow would find her.

Mum was rebanding Boyo's makeshift bandage and shaking her head. 'What now?' I asked Dad. 'How do we get out of here?'

Before he could answer, someone banged hard on the door and shouted, 'King's Guards. Open up! You're under arrest, by order of the King!'

My heart banged in my chest and for a moment I couldn't think straight. I pointed at the door, but I was so drained that it took three goes to wish a double locking spell on it. That would hold them for a little while, but then what?

## CHAPTER 19

I knew I could hold off the soldiers, probably for quite a while, and they were out there getting pounded by rain and hail. The lightning probably scared them as much as it did me. But we couldn't stay in the lodge forever. There was no food, for a start. I tried to conjure some up but I couldn't even create a sandwich. The one thing I discovered I could do was dry our clothes, which cheered us all up. But we were still stuck in the lodge.

'There has to be another way out of here,' Mum said.

'Sure to be,' Dad added, but he didn't sound sure at all.

Boyo tried to sit up on the leather couch, wincing in pain. His wound was obviously troubling him a lot more than he let on. 'I reckon Gilt used a portal from the palace,' he said. 'We could go back through it if we had to.'

'That's definitely a last resort,' I said. All the same, it was tempting. I could go back and confront the King, tell him that Gilt and Delight had tried to kill us, that Gilt was a traitor to the land and the King, that I had magic and he'd better be nice to me.

I laughed to myself. What would be the point? He'd still believe I was lying and betraying him, and knowing I had the same magic as my grandmother would make him even angrier with me. Or afraid of me, which would boil down to the same thing. No, I had to leave FairyLand while I still had a chance.

Boyo put his hand on my arm and I hated how cold he felt. 'Glory, what you did to Gilt ...'

'It was wrong,' I said. 'I know that, but I didn't know what else to do!'

'No, not that.' He leaned close and whispered, 'Your magic. It was red. Do you know what that means?'

I didn't want to talk about it. I stood up fast and his hand fell away. 'I'm going to see if I can find anything useful,' I said. I lit an almost-empty oil lamp that smoked and flickered, and walked through the lodge from end to end. It clearly hadn't been used for even longer than the jail. Stone floors, huge dark rugs, dark wooden furniture. The kitchen held an ancient wood stove, a big wooden table and two stools. Everything was covered in thick, greasy dust. I peeped out through a gap in a shutter; the rain was pelting down and lightning slashed continually through the blackness. The soldiers still thumped on the door and rattled the latch every now and then, and I tried to ignore them as I searched but they weren't going away. I wondered desperately if I could make a portal myself, but I had no idea even how to start.

I ran my fingers over the walls in each room – wooden panels with carved picture rails and paintings of gloomy woods and dark rivers. One room was lined with old books that smelled damp and mouldy, and the thick fog made me sneeze. Another room with dark leather armchairs had half a dozen stag’s heads mounted on the walls. Their beady glass eyes watched every step I took. Near the door, I found a hole in the stone – this was Gilt’s portal. Under my fingers, it felt icy and hostile, too dangerous to use, and I made sure I shut the door when I left.

Finally, in a large bedroom with a four-poster bed missing its mattress and covers, I found something I recognised. It was a fireplace surrounded by carved leaves and flowers, and my fingers tingled when I touched the middle rose in the centre of the mantel. It matched the one in the witches’ club and I was sure it would zing us back to Abellona and Neither. I drew in a breath. This was our escape, Abellona’s portal from this land of fakery and glitz. I put both hands on the rose and felt the stirring of the portal’s whirling. Something else changed, too, and it took me a few seconds to work it out. The storm was dying away; the rain had suddenly stopped. Perhaps the curse was fading now I’d found a way out.

I remembered the King, beetroot-faced and vomiting, and his tears. That one time he’d been nice, and had appreciated me. The softer look in his eyes. Would he cry when he discovered I was gone?

Probably not. He’d probably put a price on my head. *Wanted – dead or alive. Preferably dead.* After all, I’d agreed to those coronation vows. But he’d be alone again. I shook myself. Why should I feel sorry for him? He’d still have Delight.

As for me, I’d be taking Boyo back and handing him over to Abellona, and I realised that made me feel almost as bad as incinerating Gilt. Instead of being a forest guardian as he’d always wanted, Boyo would be forced to be Abellona’s apprentice, something he dreaded and hated. How could I do that to him? There had to be another way. The banging and shouting started at the front door again, even louder than before. It was time to use the portal.

In the main room Mum and Dad were deep in conversation. They both looked guilty when they saw me, and I guessed they’d been talking about me. ‘I’ve found a portal,’ I said, and they both sighed with relief. ‘It’ll take us to the fireplace where Abellona is.’

Boyo made a face at my news, but he looked flushed and feverish and could hardly sit up on the couch. Dad said, 'We have to use it, Glory. Boyo's leg is getting worse. An infection's setting in. We have to take him to where he can get help.'

'It's a no-brainer then,' I said. 'Let's go.'

We trooped to the bedroom, Dad helping to support Boyo, who was limping badly. I wanted to stop, clean the wound, find a new bandage, but I knew Dad was right. None of that would help. As we passed the room where we'd put Delight, I heard her banging on the door. She'd untied herself then, but she was too late to stop us. That's if she wanted to – she'd probably be glad to see the back of me. As I set the lamp on the mantel, I noticed a painting above it. Another portrait of the King, this time in a pale green suit and gold and emerald crown. I told myself he wouldn't miss me.

I took my crown off my head and went to place it on the bed, but I couldn't do it, I couldn't unclench my fingers. I didn't need a crown. It symbolised being Queen, and I didn't want that. But I couldn't make myself let the crown go. Instead I shoved it down the front of my jacket again. The banging at the door had stopped but now they were trying to break through the window shutters. We had to go.

The fireplace was awfully cramped with four of us in it. 'We have to hold on to each other tightly,' I said. 'If anyone lets go, who knows where you'll end up.'

Mum and Dad nodded, and Dad's arm around Boyo tightened. Mum wrapped her arm around Dad's waist on the other side, and grabbed hold of my arm while I leant out and pushed on the stone flower, wishing hard for the fireplace in the witches' club.

This time, when everything went dark, instead of spinning, there was a huge whooshing noise and we were swept along by a gale-force wind. My hair stood on end and felt like it was being pulled up from the roots. As Mum's grip on my arm loosened, I found her hand and held on as tightly as I could.

Then we landed in a heap in the witches' club fireplace and spilled out into the room. I sat up, wincing at the familiar ache in my leg. Too bad about that. It was nothing compared to poor Boyo. Mum got to her feet and helped Dad up. Boyo stayed on the floor, his face glistening with sweat, and I knelt next to him, holding his hand.

'Hey, we're back in Neither,' he whispered.

A sound of clapping spun me around. In a deep chair in the corner, Abellona sat, smacking her hands together, a triumphant smile on her face. Next to her, in a small blue cage hanging from a hook, was Diddy. Diddy ignored me, her bright eyes on Boyo, and peeped a sad, little chirp.

‘Boyo, Diddy’s here!’ I told him, and he smiled.

‘Well done, Glorious,’ Abellona said. ‘I knew you had it in you. And Radiance – you and Zed returned safely.’

‘No thanks to you,’ Mum said.

Abellona looked hurt. ‘Excuse me? It was all thanks to me. If I hadn’t saved Glorious in Ordinary and sent her through to FairyLand, you’d be in Sweet and Mellow for the next hundred years.’

‘You put her in danger,’ Mum spluttered. ‘And she had to go through that ridiculous coronation.’

I was hardly listening. I’d seen something I could hardly believe. ‘Scuttlebutt!’ I got up and ran to where my cat sat on a low couch, his eyes gleaming, his tail wrapped around his feet. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Waiting for you,’ he said with a purr.

‘You talk?’ I spluttered.

‘I’ve always talked,’ he said. ‘But you can’t understand me in Ordinary.’

Abellona raised her eyebrows at Boyo. ‘What have you done to my apprentice?’

‘He’s sick,’ Dad said. ‘He’s had a piece of wood stuck in his leg. He needs something for the infection.’

Abellona waved a hand. ‘Riddlebat will fix him in no time. Radiance, dear, Riddlebat’s sitting in the bar with Bashup and Coldpepper. Go and fetch her, would you? Zed, you can take him into the next room where there’s hot water and soap.’

Mum and Dad whispered to each other, and Mum frowned, but they did as Abellona suggested. Dad carried Boyo in his arms and I leaned across and opened the cage door. Diddy flew out, hovered in the air for a moment and then perched on Dad’s shoulder as he carried Boyo out of the room.

Abellona focused on me and her voice hardened. ‘You were supposed to look after him.’

I’d had enough of Abellona and her machinations. ‘Listen here, *Grandma*,’ I said. ‘All I have to do is take him back to Ordinary and get some antibiotics,’ I said. ‘Don’t you have such things here?’

She sniffed. ‘More or less. You and he promised me ...’

‘Things have changed since then,’ I said. ‘I’ve worked out how much of all this has been your fault.’ I sat next to Scuttlebutt and stroked his head. He climbed into my lap and licked my nose, and I wrapped my arms around him. I’d missed him so much.

‘Keep going,’ he murmured. ‘Stand up to her.’

I sat up straighter and glared at Abellona. ‘The curse was your fault, for a start. And sending me to Neither. And pretending you didn’t know me when I came in here. I think all this was just about you punishing the King. Or fighting with Gilt. Or both.’

Her gaze slid away from me and I knew I was right. ‘I had my reasons,’ she said. ‘And I have always looked out for you. I sent the cat to watch over you.’

That was probably the best thing she’d done for me, but against everything else? ‘That was in Ordinary. FairyLand was a totally dangerous place with people plotting against us. We all could have died. Gilt could have easily killed us all, and where were you then? Nowhere to be seen.’ I sucked in a breath and glared harder. ‘So I’m going to change the deal we made.’

I thought she’d object immediately, but I’d underestimated her. Her eyes gleamed and I realised she knew everything that had happened to us. Maybe she even knew what I was going to say.

‘Do explain,’ she said.

‘Boyo’s not your best option for an apprentice. He doesn’t want to be, for a start. He’ll resist you all the time, and he’s not really into magic that much.’

‘Go on.’

I’d been thinking about this for a while, only I hadn’t really worked it out until I’d been alone in the lodge, searching for the portal. I’d done Boyo enough harm, and he belonged in the forest. But more than that, the picture I had in my brain of Gilt burning and disintegrating would haunt me forever. Boyo was right. I had red magic and no idea how to control it. I needed to find out before I hurt someone. Or killed them. Again. I glanced at Scuttlebutt, and his luminous eyes were fixed on me, giving me extra courage.

‘I’ll be your apprentice in his place.’ There, I’d said it. ‘For seven years, not twenty.’

‘Oh, you are in no position to bargain,’ she said.

‘Yes, I am.’ I lifted my chin and looked at her straight. ‘You know what I’ve done. I’m sure you’ve seen it all. I’ll be the perfect apprentice for you.’ I smiled. ‘You might even learn something from me.’

Her eyes flickered. ‘I doubt that.’

I didn’t. With the red magic I had, anything might happen.

There was more, though, that I could never explain to her. I couldn't go back to Ordinary. All my dreams of going to a normal school and being just like every other kid had vanished – they seemed ridiculous now. Ordinary was no longer my world. And I was no longer ... ordinary. I never had been. People staring at my limping, being mean about it – I'd hated that in both worlds, but that was about them. This decision was about me and what I could do, not what I couldn't do. That's what made me feel strong and brave. Mum and Dad were going to be really mad with me, but it was too late. One more thing and it was done.

'Can you fix Boyo's broken wing?' I asked. 'Truthfully?'

She smirked. 'Of course. I was planning to anyway.'

'Sure you were. I want that as part of the deal.'

'Fine. Not a problem.'

I went over to Abellona, my hand out. 'I guess we shake on it, then.'

'I guess we do.' Her hand in mine was surprisingly warm, not icy as I'd expected. Her smile was warm, too, which surprised me even more. When she smiled like that, she looked just like Mum. My heart lifted and I gave her hand an extra little shake.

Yes, I'd made the right decision. Especially because Boyo could go back to the forest, where he belonged. I would miss him, but he was a true friend, the one thing I had been longing for so badly, and I knew I'd see him often. I'd make sure of it.

Mum burst into the room just as I let go Abellona's hand. 'Glory? What's going on?'

'Glorious is going to be my new apprentice,' Abellona said. 'Isn't that lovely? My own grand-daughter.'

Mum went almost white and grabbed both my arms, shaking me. 'You stupid girl!'

'Whoa, Mum, please don't call me stupid,' I said. 'It's what I need to do.'

Dad came in behind her, his dark eyes serious, but he said nothing and I sensed he at least understood.

'You have no idea what you're talking about,' Mum said. 'You're just thirteen. Your father and I talked – once we're back in Ordinary, we'll set our house to rights and you can go to school, just as you wanted.'

I shook my head. I felt sorry for Mum but ... 'I can't go back. You saw what I did to Gilt. I don't belong in Ordinary anymore.'

‘You can’t stay here,’ Mum shouted. ‘We can’t stay here. I hate Neither. We’re all going back to Ordinary and that’s that.’

I threw a pleading glance at Dad and he said, ‘Rina, who knows what Glory’s capable of? You saw her power. And it’s something you can’t help her with.’

‘But I can,’ Abellona said softly. She took Mum’s hand. ‘I’ll take good care of her, I promise. You can live in Ordinary, and you can see her any time. I’ll make you a portal. It’ll be fine.’

Abellona was being way too nice, and I didn’t totally trust her, but she was my only real option. I could tell Mum finally accepted that by the way her body sagged and tears filled her eyes. I was already missing her and Dad, an ache growing in my chest, but I told myself it was for the best. The best for everyone, even me.

The door opened again and there was Boyo, standing straight, free of pain, his colour returned to almost normal. For a moment I felt a stab of envy that he could be so easily mended, then it faded to nothing. I had my magic, and I would learn how to use it. Perfection wasn’t all it was cracked up to be, that was for sure. All those nobles had nothing inside them worth wanting. What I made of me and my leg now was up to me.

What I wanted at that moment, though, was to get out of my blue-boy suit, like Boyo had, although he looked like he was wearing baggy black witch’s pants. But my crown was still nestled down the front of my jacket. I went to pull it out, and stopped. No, it could stay my secret, for now anyway.

‘I’m starving,’ Boyo said. ‘I could eat a great big bowl of costly stew.’

Diddy chirped from his shoulder, ‘Stickleberry seeds for me.’

‘Mouse pie,’ Scuttlebutt purred, licking his lips.

Boyo laughed, then he caught sight of Abellona and his face fell. ‘Huh, maybe I’m not so hungry after all.’

‘I am,’ I said. ‘Come on, let’s go and find something to eat. I’m in the mood for a chocolate thickshake, if they have such a thing here.’ I gave him a hug. ‘On the way, I’ve got something to tell you.’

Together, with Scuttlebutt in my arms and Diddy on his shoulder, we went out into the bright sunlit streets of Nor.

## **EXEGESIS**

**Cadence, resonance and endurance: writing new fairy tales**

## **Introduction: Once upon a time**

*Once there was a children's writer who wanted to write new, original fairy tales. But where could she find the magic ingredients? She searched high and low without success until finally she realised that she would have to venture out on a long journey ...*

The central research question for my thesis is: how can a creative writer write new, original fairy tales that have the same resonance and endurance as the traditional tales?

Along with this came two further questions. Why have fairy tales endured for hundreds of years? How would discovering the reasons for their endurance assist me to write my own fairy tales? As I answered these questions from the point of view of a writer, so my creative works developed and grew.

A key work that has acted as a beacon throughout both my writing and my research is a collection of essays, *Dreams and wishes* (1996), by children's writer Susan Cooper who says about the writing of fantasy:

You have to go further inside. You have to make so close a connection with the unconscious that the unbiddable door will open and the images fly out, like birds ... The writer takes the images, themes, characters which come bubbling up from his – or her – unconscious mind (the ultimate world apart) and puts them into his story. There they stay, part of the fabric, and like radioactive elements they give off signals about the meaning of the story, the nature of its metaphor. But because they come from the unconscious, the writer himself generally doesn't know what these signals are (p. 115 and p. 113).

Often the reader doesn't know either, but she or he 'picks up these signals from the story and takes them in, without ... having consciously recognized them at all' (p. 113). I return to her words many times in the exegesis that follows, as well as those of other writers whose experiences of drawing on the unconscious to create their works validates my own processes and conclusions.

Chapter 1 focuses on my own creative process and the outcomes: four fairy tales and a novel for 10-13 year old readers. I describe the development of my experimental writing process, based on free writing that aims to draw on my unconscious, which has played a significant role in the genesis and first drafts of all of these creative works. I discuss each of these creative works and detail their influences and outcomes. It is not my aim to psychoanalyse my own creative works, or those of other writers, as this is beyond the scope of this project.

Chapter 2 examines three picture books and three novels that I consider to be new, original fairy tale works. Each author has described their initial inspirations in writing these texts, and their various and varied processes. As practising writers, they explore the role of their unconscious in drawing out the deep themes common to fairy tales, and their works are discussed with this in mind.

Chapter 3 addresses the question of endurance, or persistence, of fairy tales by first giving a brief history and an overview of fairy tale scholarship, then continues with a close examination of the work of those scholars who have tried to answer this key question. The work of Professor Jack Zipes figures prominently in this section.

Chapter 4 provides the evidence of my own answer to the question of endurance by focusing on aspects of psychoanalysis and child psychology that relate to fairy tales, with particular reference to *The uses of enchantment* by Bruno Bettelheim (1976) and its influence. I have concluded that it is our unconscious responses to fairy tales that have assured their endurance, and that we need these stories in our lives. The deep themes embedded in the traditional tales, which have led to their being used in therapeutic situations for more than a hundred years, are ones that are at the heart of our lives.

I have repeatedly used three terms in this thesis that I define as follows: endurance, referring to the significantly long period of time over which fairy tales have continued to be told and retold; resonance, meaning the unconscious associations and responses that occur when reading or listening to fairy tales; and cadence, meaning the particular rhythm, repetition and sound of the language and sentence construction of traditional tales.

This creative doctoral thesis is ordered so that readers begin with the creative works and follow with the exegesis. This ordering reflects the way in which my scholarly research has consistently underpinned my creative writing, as well as inspiring and expanding it. It follows the theory of practice-led research which is well-established in the field of creative writing at a doctoral level.

## Chapter 1: Reflections on writing

Writers have long been interested in reading and hearing about other writers' experiences, their problems and finding of solutions in creative writing projects. Each new project brings with it new problems, no matter how skilled a writer may be or how many stories they may have previously successfully, or unsuccessfully, undertaken.

The writing of new fairy tales has presented me with ongoing challenges of voice, originality, language, structure, authenticity and motifs. Even before beginning the creative writing part of my thesis, my key challenge was to answer the question of how to write new fairy tales that have the same resonance and endurance as traditional tales. This required a wide range of research in order to determine the answers for myself.

I concluded from my research that their endurance is due to the ways in which we respond to them on an unconscious level, and that this response can transform and empower us. I use the term 'unconscious' in the way that Susan Cooper does (see p. 183), not in a psychoanalytic or clinical way. In tandem with the research, I developed a writing process for myself that would help to open my 'unbiddable door', as Cooper terms it, so that my own original tales might emerge, or 'fly out like birds' (1996, p. 115). This process would hopefully bring forth stories that would inspire both conscious and unconscious responses from my readers.

Australian novelist Charlotte Wood discusses in her PhD thesis (2015) how writers both find and solve their own writing problems. Generally the 'finding' involves ways of searching for or creating opportunities for ideas to emerge. As a children's writer, I am often asked by my readers where I get my ideas from. I talk about notebooks and writing on the backs of old envelopes and serviettes, about pen and paper by the bed in case an idea comes in those moments before sleep. But what I'm really saying is – an idea can come at any time, sparked by almost anything. The notebooks and scraps of paper are to ensure these ideas don't escape, and that I write them down as soon as possible.

An important example of this occurred during my Master of Fine Arts studies at Hamline University (2011-2013), when I researched and wrote an essay on original fairy tale picture books. One of the books I analysed was *Fox* by Margaret Wild (2000) and, at the time, I hoped that one day I could write such a powerful story. Three days after sending my essay to my supervisor, I was standing in the shower that morning, and the first lines of a story came to me. I wrote them down as soon as I could and continued writing throughout the morning until I had a story called *The grab-me*. This was the genesis of my first original fairy tale.

When I thought about what had happened and how, I decided it had likely been the close examination of fairy tales, thinking and reading about them, reading Susan Cooper's essay, and then my own consciously expressed desire to write something similar that had led to the door opening and 'a bird flying out'. (I also recognised elements of *Beowulf* in the story, which I have used in my classes.) I reasoned that if it had happened once, perhaps it could happen again, if I repeated the process. This 'setting up' seemed similar to the way in which Neil Gaiman prepared himself through his fairy tale props (Schnelbach 2013). It can also be correlated with Wood's explanation of a writer's 'problem finding' in that I was creating a problem-finding situation, which was necessary before moving onto the writing part of the process.

Once an idea struck, or a 'problem' was found, it was important to determine a writing process that would continue to make the best possible use of what might lie in my unconscious and draw out further fairy tale elements and themes. Natalie Goldberg talks about writing as practice, 'composting' experiences and learning to trust your own mind (1986, pp. 11-13). Although it sounds paradoxical, free writing works best using her methods and her rules. She suggests writing for at least twenty minutes and her rules include 'Keep your hand moving', 'Don't think', 'Lose control' and 'Go for the jugular' (1991 pp. 2-4). Over the past twenty-five years, I have used these free writing rules successfully many times, for myself and with hundreds of writing students of all ages. I know from my own experience and practice that I am able to direct my free writing to particular topics.

How might I best use this knowledge for writing fairy tales in the context of a creative thesis without the constraints of a publisher's commercial demands?

Drawing on my experience of writing *The grab-me*, I thought that the key to the process was seizing the idea and exploring it as far as possible via fast free writing in *one sitting*. This would make it more likely and possible for me to access ideas and material from my unconscious. This laid the foundation of my practice-led research, but it was important to resist becoming circular, and ensure that my research questions regarding endurance and resonance both stimulated the creative works and also led to the discovery of new knowledge and the development of sound theoretical answers. These cautions are sounded in scholarly articles about practice-led research, such as those by Jen Webb (2012), Scott Brook (2012) and Andrew MacNamara (2012).

Over the following months, as I wrote both new fairy tales and my novel, I also continued to read traditional fairy tales, particularly those of the Brothers Grimm. As well, I discovered that my research in academic texts was playing a significant part in informing my process. For example, one idea sprang in a few seconds from reading about the use of tablecloths in Warner's book, *Once upon a time* (2014b), and led to my tale, 'The magic tablecloth'. It is not included here but it was published in late 2017 in *A Christmas menagerie* (ed. Alvarez 2017). Other ideas have come from paintings and installations, symbols of personal interest and, as with Libby Gleeson's experience in writing *The great bear* (see below pp. 211-213), current political issues of concern to me. In all, I have written seven fairy tales during this project, and selected four for inclusion in this thesis. Further analysis of the genesis and writing of these four stories is included later in this chapter.

At this point I am able to make several important observations on what emerged from my process. The ongoing reading of fairy tales, mainly from translations of the Brothers Grimm collections (Zipes 1992, Tatar 2002, Pullman 2012) and online versions, seemed to unconsciously influence me to use similar language, cadence and patterns in all of my free writing of fairy tales. These elements have emerged without conscious effort. For example, my tales begin 'Once there was ...' and use more formal language and sentence constructions than in my normal prose writing. I have adhered to the traditional use of third person, past tense and the fairy tale use of specific numbers (Lüthi 1976, p. 53; Whitford Paul 2009, p. 90), as well as repetitions of actions, phrases and words.

To illustrate some of these elements in action, I include here this short excerpt from a Grimms' tale, 'The musicians of Bremen', translated by D Ashliman:

Then the animals discussed how they might drive the robbers away, and at last they came upon a plan. The donkey was to stand with his front feet on the window, the dog to jump on the donkey's back, the cat to climb onto the dog, and finally the rooster would fly up and sit on the cat's head. When they had done that, at a signal they began to make their music all together. The donkey brayed, the dog barked, the cat meowed and the rooster crowed. Then they crashed through the window into the room, shattering the panes.

The robbers jumped up at the terrible bellowing, thinking that a ghost was coming in, and fled in great fear out into the woods. Then the four companions seated themselves at the table and freely partook of the leftovers, eating as if they would get nothing more for four weeks (Grimm & Grimm 1857, n.p.).

This excerpt also has old-fashioned expressions such as 'came upon a plan', 'freely partook' and 'terrible bellowing'. No character has a personal name, only its generic animal name (cat, dog, donkey, rooster); each plays out its role and none are missed. The combination of flowing phrases, rhythm and repetitions creates a cadence suited to an oral storytelling voice. Descriptive verbs, nouns and adjectives are used, but sparsely for immediate sensory effect – 'shattering', 'brayed' 'bellowing'. This language and cadence is common to all of the translations and retellings that I read.

The tales I have written make similar use of these constructions and expressions, as well as drawing on a range of common motifs such as the young person who gives up food to a hungry elder, duality in theme and character, and instrumental 'helper' animals and birds. All of these appeared in the free writing process, along with the language, as if I were taking on that traditional story teller's voice. At no time did I deliberately try to create this kind of voice.

In subsequent revisions of my tales, I worked to keep this voice, rather than amend the language to modern usage and terminology because in endeavouring to create the same resonance as the Grimms' tales, language and cadence were important. While there have been criticisms of Wilhelm Grimm's continuing embellishments and alterations in the Grimms' various editions between 1812 and 1857 (Ellis 1985), it is his later

versions that have mostly been retold and republished. This indicates to me that his revised choices of language and construction, and the resulting cadence and rhythm, have played a significant part in their continuing popularity and in readers' and listeners' responses to them.

As part of the conscious revision process, I made use of a writing guide, *Writing picture books* (Whitford Paul 2009), particularly the chapters on structure and musical prose. I also re-read Grimms' and other fairy tale collections to keep the voice active in my mind.

It was at this point that I sought feedback from readers, because although I was confident of the voice and structure, one of my key aims in writing the tales was to achieve the same resonance and responses as the Grimms' tales. Therefore I needed to test mine on an audience. I received feedback from my supervisors, and from two peer reviewers when submitting *The handkerchief of tears* to TEXT journal. Some feedback from other readers was not useful; for example, a fellow student who read *The tattered coat* insisted I should be using Australian animals. After some consideration, I decided not to change my chosen animals as they have different symbolic meanings in different countries. For example, a fox in Australia is considered to be vermin, but in the Western European fairy tale tradition, a fox is symbolic of cunning or slyness, and sometimes can be a helper (Zipes 2014, pp. 430-431). I also understand that writing an Australian fairy tale may bring with it issues of cultural appropriation, which I wanted to avoid. While it was useful to get feedback on my work, I did learn to be selective and evaluate what was offered in the context of my primary aim: for my tales to sit within in the Western European tradition.

In the context of my creative writing research, I chose to then explore and analyse the genesis and content of my tales in order to discern what had been successful and if there were common discoveries and outcomes that would be useful for other writers. Through this analysis I could define my contribution to knowledge in the creative writing field. My analysis was confined to the outcomes of the writing process and whether the themes that emerged would carry the resonance I was seeking. It was beyond the scope of this project to psychoanalyse my tales as Bettelheim did (1976). I held back from beginning this analysis until I had written at least four tales, so as not to disrupt what was happening with the free writing process. Instead, I kept a writing

journal to record how and where ideas emerged, and any relevant reflections on the writing and revisions. Keeping a reflective writing journal is a common research and methodology tool in practice-led research (Bacon 2014).

The final stage involved reading some of my tales to a wider audience in order to gain objective responses from audiences who were previously unaware of my research and the stories I had written. My first presentation was at the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) conference in Auckland, New Zealand, in August 2016, to around 30 participants. The response was very positive and led to one audience member asking me to read and record two tales for a children's radio show, *Catch it by the tail* (Clark 2017). Later, Sophie Masson asked me to contribute a story to a fairy tale collection, *A Christmas menagerie*, published in late 2017 by Christmas Press in Sydney (ed. Alvarez).

I then responded to a Call for Papers for the III International Seminar on Fairy-tale and Storytelling Therapy in Sintra, Portugal, in April 2017, and was accepted. I attended presentations at this conference by therapists working currently in the fields of educational psychotherapy, drama therapy and play therapy, where fairy tales are used therapeutically with children who are dealing with a range of traumas and behavioural issues. The case studies and experiences presented reinforced the results of my research into the unconscious responses to and therapeutic value of fairy tales (Bettelheim 1976, Hours 2014, Mills & Crowley 2014). This research is discussed in Chapter 4.

During the presentation and workshop I gave at the Sintra Seminar, I was able to introduce my process to an audience of more than forty participants. None of them was a professional fiction writer; most were storytellers of traditional tales, child therapists, drama teachers and educational therapists. After explaining my project and reading aloud two of my tales, I provided them with the list of Goldberg's rules and a range of fairy tale writing prompts: written exercises of my own devising or adapted from Mellon's 1992 text (Appendix 1) and a variety of images. I then invited them to select whichever prompt immediately appealed and free write for twenty minutes.

At the end of the session, seven participants spontaneously read their stories or talked about the experience. Later, several other participants told me how well the process had worked for them and how much they had gained from it. One person emailed me her

story after the conference. I have since received a request from a participant, an educational psychotherapist, for permission to use my workshop and process in a training session she is running with others in her field.

From all of these responses, I concluded that my process could be used successfully with a wider audience than just fiction writers. I will now move on to descriptions of the genesis, development and revisions of the novel and picture book texts that are the creative writing component of my thesis. **Fairy tales**

I chose to write four tales in the tradition of the Grimms' fairy tales as part of the creative writing component. It was an important part of the process that I developed: that I produce short tales in the Western European tradition, using free writing and my unconscious associations, to try to generate both the strong resonances and themes of the Grimms' tales and Cooper's 'signals' (1996, p. 113). I aimed to write original, new tales, and not draw on or replicate any of the Grimms' tales.

I wrote the four fairy tales with a view to them possibly being illustrated in the future. While I am aware that fairy tales can stand on their own, I also think the very nature of a fairy tale – generic names, symbols, metaphors, allegories, an unspecified 'other' world – lends itself to illustration, providing the gaps into which the illustrator can step. As Melrose suggests, the picture book format is also particularly conducive to sharing, to being the 'space in-between' for the child and adult, in which they can participate in exploring and finding out (Melrose 2012, pp. 47-48), and this supports my aim for fairy tales to be a place where courage and resilience can grow. I hope my tales provide these important places.

Many of the Grimms' fairy tales, with their shorter length, have been published successfully as picture books. The best illustrations convey the emotions and themes of a story in a particularly affecting way that moves beyond words, and children are adept at reading both text and illustrations and interpreting elements such as irony and subtext (Kidd 2017). The three original fairy tales I discuss in Chapter 2 have all been published as picture books, and I note that the text in each is relatively sparse compared to a Grimms' tale. This is the nature of many contemporary picture books, some of which have no text at all (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). However, the spectrum between

‘a text without pictures and a wordless picturebook’ (p. 8) is wide, and longer fairy tales still have a place on it.

### ***The wolf and the boy***

While in Brisbane in May 2014, I took my notebook and went to see ‘Falling back to earth’ by Cai Guo-Chiang, an installation at the Gallery of Modern Art (Guo-Chiang 2014). I have often been to art galleries and museums before with the intention of writing poetry based on artworks (a form known as ekphrasis), but this time I was hoping for something fairy tale-related. My journal notes say: ‘Clearly, I had “primed” myself. This doesn’t at all guarantee anything will come out. I have been to other exhibitions where I have written nothing that I have been satisfied with.’

The installation of ninety-nine life-sized wolves leaping into the air and hitting a glass wall and then falling back to earth was spectacular, as was the experience of being able to walk around the whole installation and get close to it from different angles (see Appendix 2 for photographs).

After spending more than half an hour in the installation room, I knew I wanted to write something. I went to the far end of the gallery spaces and found a quiet seat where I sat and free-wrote *The wolf and the boy* in one sitting. My journal says: ‘I just wrote, and I kept writing until I had finished. I certainly sensed that if I stopped and went away somewhere else, the outside world would dilute or destroy the connection, the impulse and the flow.’

Later, in trying to analyse how the story emerged, I wrote:

If I try to explain where this story came from, I could logically point to several things: I love wolves and am interested in them as animals in nature and in their symbolism; I was perhaps drawing unconsciously on Wild’s story, *Fox*, although it would be the loyal Dog that was the influence; the wolves in the installation that seemed to touch something in me, especially their dedication to the leap and their persistence. Yet none of these things really explain how the story emerged. It just did.

This was the first fairy tale I wrote after devising my particular spontaneous free-writing process. I had managed to open my ‘unbiddable door’ again, as I had in writing

*The Grab-me* two years earlier. The success of this attempt showed me that I should continue to follow this process in future, while staying aware of any ways in which I could further improve it.

### ***The handkerchief of tears***

This story developed out of a writing exercise in Nancy Mellon's book, *Storytelling & the art of imagination* (1992). The exercise was in a section titled 'Other mothers' and was quite lengthy. It began: 'Think of a specific incident in your childhood when you experienced the rejection of your lovingly eager little self.' I skimmed the rest of the exercise and noted her words 'ogress' and 'exaggerate the opposition'. From this, I remembered an incident where I was allowed to brush my mother's hair and put it in ponytails, something she rarely permitted.

From these small sparks, ignoring the rest of the exercise, I immediately began to write about a girl who was captured by an ogress and made to brush all manner of bugs from her hair. I would not call my mother an ogress in any way, but I know she was reluctant to allow the hair brushing. The rest of my story centres on a king who is unable to cry or grieve, and the effect this has on him. My mother died when I was fourteen, and the circumstances meant I was unable to grieve for a long time. That this theme emerged as I was writing this story surprised me, but later analysis of the content and the 'sparks' that started it has provided me with this insight. I do not think this story could have emerged as it did with any deliberate or conscious efforts to write about this theme of unexpressed grief.

In the revision of this story, there were a number of changes I could have made. I have been aware during the revision of all of my tales that there is a substantial body of feminist critique of fairy tales, particularly of gender roles and stereotypes. For example, in 'Feminism and fairy tales' (1979), Karen E Rowe points to particular issues of 'archetypal female dilemmas and socially acceptable resolutions' (p. 240), such as adolescent females expected to marry the hero or prince, nasty stepmothers and bad fairies, and story outcomes that serve as 'warnings to rebellious females' (p. 247). My decision in these picture book fairy tales was to keep the characters as children and avoid sexualisation. I am more interested in writing subversively about the powerlessness and disempowerment of children, as examined by Alison Lurie in *Don't*

*tell the grown-ups* (1990), and I will discuss rebellious females further in the section on my novel, *Red magic*.

For each tale, in revising I have questioned the gender of my characters and the roles they play, asking whether changing gender would change the theme of the story, strengthen it, or perhaps politicise it. Knowledge of feminist criticism, as well as of other commentaries on socio-cultural aspects such as those by Zipes and Bottigheimer, had to be weighed against my own intentions for each fairy tale. Ultimately, as for most writers, my own intentions and desired outcomes determined the decisions I made.

When I submitted *The handkerchief of tears* to TEXT journal, peer reviewers questioned my depiction of the villain as a female ogre, with the suggestion this is a fairy tale stereotype that demonises women and the maternal. However, to change the character into an ogre would detract from the power of the story originating in the unconscious association with my own mother. Further, given that the girl remains a child throughout, it could introduce unintended contemporary associations with paedophilia that have no thematic or emotional relevance to the tale. My decision was to leave the character as an ogress.

### ***The girl and the ancient trees***

I spend many weekends writing at a bush property near Melbourne that is conserved under Trust for Nature. The area was greatly damaged by a bush fire in October 2015, which was caused by a Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning controlled burn that went out of control (Gray 2015). I have a strong personal interest in issues of conservation and the environment.

This fairy tale was written at the bush property before the fire. The devastation was so great that I doubt a story like this could have emerged afterwards or since, given that the bush area was reduced to black sticks and no longer looked like a growing forest. Like the other tales, it was written in one sitting, and I did not have any idea how it might end. I remember feeling focused on the positive and negative relationships between nature and humans, epitomised by the trees and the girl, and the men demanding the wood. In the revisions, a major concern was the violence of the trees killing the men, but as this kind of retributive violence is common in fairy tales, and

remained constant even in Wilhelm Grimm's revisions for children, I decided to leave it as I wrote it.

I also wrote in my journal:

What was interesting was that in the redrafting and typing up, I constantly felt the urge to 'explain' things, and expand bits of the story. By explain, I mean put in things like character motivations, in particular, and expanded actions that implied the 'why' of things. I kept reminding myself that in a fairy tale, these things don't appear, that the core of the tale operates on its lack of explanations. The tale is what it is – it tells what happened, it uses repetition and cadence, language and certain tropes and symbols (here it is forest, trees, secrets). The more you add to explain it, the further away it gets from what it should or needs to be in the telling.

In each revision, I had to resist adding more and the final draft is very close to the first draft. The writing process was producing tightly focused tales that drew on unconscious themes, and this was a further indication to me that my process was successful in producing the kinds of tales I was aiming for.

### ***The tattered coat***

As with *The girl and the ancient trees*, I believe this story came from my weekends spent in the bush, but also from the native animals I see. These have included many different species of birds, especially tiny wrens, robins and finches; wombats; kangaroos and wallabies; as well as fox cubs (or kits), which are hunted as vermin. This story was written not long after *The girl and the ancient trees* and before the bushfire.

A key feature in fairy tales is the generosity and kindness shown to the elderly or impoverished, and the subsequent unexpected (but earned) reward. It is a feature that appeals to me and has appeared in several of the stories I have written, including this one. The principle of unselfishness, sharing what one has, however little, and caring for others is something I seem to feel compelled to write about.

I also like the idea of a coat with many pockets, although I am not sure where this originates. There is a Grimms' tale called 'Bearskin' (1857) which is about a green

jacket with pockets always filled with gold, but this story involves a deal with the devil. My journal records no correlation that I made at the time with any other story.

Although, like the others, the first draft of this tale came quickly in one sitting, I was not happy with either the beginning or ending. As with *The handkerchief of tears*, I wanted the characters of the boy and girl to be children, not teenagers, so the tale would be more suitable as a contemporary fairy tale. Therefore there would be no marriage at the end to create my 'happily ever after', nor, given the parents' deaths, a happy return home. Instead I wrestled with what the boy's reward might be.

I realised that the forest was an important element in the story, both as initially a frightening place for the boy to journey through (venturing into the forest is regarded in many stories as a symbol of facing one's fears (Cooper 1983)) and as a natural environment that is now under threat in our world. I have endeavoured to tie these aspects of the forest together to create a stronger ending.

### **The novel: *Red Magic***

This longer work is intended for an audience of middle grade readers, 10-13 years old. It would be classified as a fantasy novel (Gooderham 1995).

I began by using a similar process of periods of free writing, aware that this was to be a 'fairy tale novel', with fairy tale elements, but not a retelling or adaptation of any kind. I did not prepare any outlines or plot diagrams as I would usually do. I wanted to attempt as much of the novel as I could using the free writing process in order to see what might be released from my unconscious. Pre-planning and outlining would have undermined this.

I wrote around 16,000 words, not attempting to deliberately insert fairy tale elements, or examining where the ideas were coming from. However, I realised at that point that the novel was becoming unwieldy and rambling, and I risked running out of plot ideas. I include here some extracts from my writing journal and provide commentary on where the reflections about process led me:

On returning to the FT [fairy tale] novel, I find several things. 1. I have no villain. ... 2. I have no real idea of what will happen in the other 25-30,000 words of the novel. I have some vague possibilities and aims. (I am also feeling overly critical and grumpy at this point.)

These realisations led me to stop writing and use my preferred method of plotting via structural diagrams in order to work out the rest of the storyline. My own experience of writing novels over the past twenty years has led to this diagramming method. While other writers may write their first draft without plotting of any kind, this does not work for me. Neither does a detailed outline. I work best somewhere between the two. At no point was I trying to write a novel based on a particular fairy tale. I also resort to writing guides when I think they might assist with particular problems:

So I make a decision. I go to James Scott Bell's *Write your novel from the middle* and decide, after reading it a couple of times, that I will use it to try and pull the novel into shape and plot more, even though plotting seems to go now against my original experiment.

Bell's book required me to do a lot more character work and develop a backstory, then to use his Golden Triangle theory with a 'looking in the mirror moment' in the middle of the novel. From this mirror moment, the writer can more effectively create the 'before' and 'after' of the character and how they see their world. It should be a deeply affecting moment of realisation (Bell 2014). Using this book led to changing my main character, Glory, so that she has a disability – a twisted leg. This is her physical flaw that is also both her internal strength and weakness. In her 'mirror moment', Glory has her disability removed through magic, which throws all of her beliefs about herself into turmoil. It emerges in the second half of the novel that Glory's twisted leg was caused in a fight between her mother and the court magician, Bronze, described to her by the King:

'Your mother came in and grabbed you, Bronze had you, too, there was a wrestling match, and ...'

'And?' The word filled my throat like a lump of coal.

'And your leg was hurt. Pulled. Twisted.' (*Red magic*, p. 135)

Later, after the novel draft was completed, I realised that the contest that damaged her leg echoes the biblical story of 'The judgement of Solomon' (1 Kings 3:16-28) where two women claim a child, and Solomon says that the solution is to cut the child in two. Although I have no specific memory of it, I imagine that I may have heard this story when I was a child. While I had abandoned using the free writing process to complete the whole novel, I nevertheless returned to it many times in order to explore characters and ideas, and to ensure I was keeping the voice of Glory consistent with the first 16,000 words.

Further personal themes emerged as I worked on the novel. I completed several free writing character exercises that required me to write about Glory's flaws and where her fear comes from. My writing revealed that Glory was afraid of not knowing, of being lied to or having knowledge hidden from her that she needed to survive. In my journal, I wrote, '... this takes me straight back to my own childhood, when my eldest sister had a breakdown and disappeared ... nobody told me why she was acting so weird, and nobody told me that she'd run away.'

Both the novel writing process and the supplementary free writing exercises opened up a deeper emotional level in the novel through my own childhood experiences, which I had not consciously accessed. This is a discovery process that is clearly documented in texts dealing with the use of story and metaphor in psychotherapy with children, such as *Therapeutic metaphors for children and the child within* (Mills & Crowley 2014) and in the studies referred to in Chapter 4 (Hours 2014, Adamo et al 2008, Feuerverger 2010). Where, for children, fantasy stories open up an ‘internal space for play’ (Hours 2014, p. 144), it seems free writing opens up this same mental and emotional space for me and, as I have discussed before, also paves the way to open my ‘unbiddable door’.

The ideas, language and characters that have emerged in *Red magic* are appropriate for my target reading audience of 10-13 year olds. While there can be substantial differences between the maturity and world view of ten-year-olds compared to thirteen-year-olds, studies have shown that issues of body image and perfection, one of my key themes, arise for children across this age range (Smolak 2004, Tatangelo & Ricciardelli 2017). I believe the metaphors and allegorical elements, as well as the themes, are also suitably aimed at this audience, with added elements of humour. For example, the King who eats to fill an emotional hole, the use of clothing and colour to create gender roles and parody fashion obsession and the pursuit of perfection and beauty, and the kick-boxing witch as an antidote to the stereotypical evil, ugly witch. Witches have been typically portrayed in fairy tales as malevolent crones, a one-dimensional approach, although Caroline Webb’s analysis of Terry Pratchett’s Tiffany in *The wee free men* (2008 (2003)) and Diana Wynne Jones’s Sophie in *Howl’s moving castle* (1986) shows the possibilities of characters (as witches) who resist cultural conventions (Webb 2006).

Certain scholars in the field of children’s literature question whether an adult writer can ever truly create a child’s perspective in a novel for children (Rose 1984, 1994, Hollindale 1997), and this question did arise for me as I revised *Red magic*. However, I believe that the free writing process I used tapped into my childhood experiences and memories and helped to create a more authentic voice for Glory. Glory’s first person point of view, and the use of past tense, are commonly used in middle grade fiction today, a growing trend (Brock 2013). By employing first person point of view and

drawing on emotional resonances from childhood, as a writer I grew closer to my protagonist.

In my journal I wrote:

It seemed to me that in writing [the novel] the way that I did, I was able to access more of the way I felt and thought at that age. The free-wheeling process took away the adult editor in my brain and let forth more of the child ‘speaker’ in me. For example, the talking duck ... I wonder if this is why the descriptions in this book are more detailed than I might normally write.

Another question that arose in the course of my research and had to be considered during my revision of the novel, is whether children’s literature has a colonising or socialising intent (Nodelman 1996). *Red magic*, rather than colonising or socialising children into a prescribed way of thinking or being, is intended to provoke them into rejecting unquestioning conformity and encouraging both individual critical thinking and wider discussion about themes such as the cost of perfection, body image in our society, the meaning of truth and the consequences of lies, the role of adults in their lives and, indeed, whether they are being socialised through avenues such as movies, advertising, toys and educational institutions (Lurie 1990, Zipes 2009).

I realise it could be argued that I am merely attempting to colonise or socialise young readers in a different way. It becomes a circular argument – the more I express my hopes for what the novel might achieve, the more I could be accused of a different form of colonising, socialising or didacticism. Yet I don’t believe that children are so malleable: they will put down a book that is didactic or boring or disengaging, as do we all. Are these themes too complex or difficult for the child reader? Perhaps, but I take heart from Andrew Melrose’s words: ‘the reading child addressed by the book can already understand more than she or he can articulate’ (2012a, p. 25). It is through complex characters that stories feel real, and themes are ‘shown not told’, to repeat that much-used writer’s admonition. I think a child reader, once engaged with a story, will take from it whatever they need or want, an entirely individual response that cannot be forced upon them.

Glory’s gradual realisation and coming to terms with being a red witch also requires her to take responsibility for the havoc her magic has caused and might still cause,

similar to the character Tiffany in Terry Pratchett's *The wee free men*. As Webb says of Tiffany and Sophie, both of whom are witches, 'their destinies are not determined by fairy tale conventions but by their own decisions and desires (2006, p. 158).

In changing Glory physically so that she has a disability with her injured leg, I was aware that it is possible to veer into didacticism or misrepresentation or even sentimentality in depicting characters who are disabled. I researched personal experiences of disability and found most media coverage is of people who do miraculous things rather than ordinary people living with their disability (for example, Sameen 2015), which tends to reflect the way society perceives disability – disabled people are valued only if they achieve amazing outcomes, and disability tends to be expressed in stereotypes (Cologon 2013). I aimed to make Glory's disability part of who she is, but not a definition of her.

I also researched the depiction of disability in children's literature (Saunders 2004, Sayers Adomat 2004), and read an excellent middle grade novel that depicts disability in a way that was a model. This novel, *The war that saved my life* (Brubaker Bradley 2015), features a girl with a club foot. Despite the pain she suffers, the negative treatment from those around her, especially her mother, is more debilitating.

*Red magic* is intended to be subversive, to suggest, as Alison Lurie says, 'there are other views of human life besides those of the shopping mall and the corporation' (1990, p. xi). Jack Zipes echoes this when he says 'the fantastic can foster alternative thinking and viewing and negate spectacle and delusion' (2009, p. 83). I hope that child readers can find inspiration for agency and resistance to society's conventions, as Caroline Webb ascribes to Pratchett's Tiffany (2006). I also intend Glory to be a character who grows in strength, but also grows more rebellious against the adults in her life and the ways in which they strive to keep her powerless – she ignores all traditional warnings about the consequences of non-conformity versus the rewards of passivity, a concern of many feminist critics of traditional fairy tales such as Rowe (1979) and others in the 1970s (Wanning Harries 2004, pp. 99-100).

I see Glory as being on a journey away from her over-protective parents, despite their good intentions, and facing the truth about her origins and disability. Perhaps in one sense, I have followed JK Rowling's lead in her fiction that 'implicitly takes issue with

those who advocate protecting children from the knowledge of violence or pain' (Webb 2008), but a stronger inspiration for me, as well as Bruno Bettelheim's *The uses of enchantment* (1976), is Neil Gaiman when he says:

I think if you are protected from dark things then you have no protection of, knowledge of, or understanding of dark things when they show up. I think it is *really important* to show dark things to kids — and, in the showing, to also show that dark things can be beaten, that you have power. Tell them you can fight back, tell them you can win. Because you can — but you have to know that (Popova 2014).

As with my picture book fairy tales, these themes were not deliberately chosen before writing *Red magic*. They have emerged from my own deep concerns about these issues and their impact on contemporary children's lives. I also acknowledge the influence of Juliet B Schor's *Born to buy* (2004), which details the appalling influence of marketing and corporate money-making on our society, and the construction of children as unwitting, indoctrinated consumers. As Melrose says, the culture of merchandising around children's books, television and movies today is 'created by those in power for the powerless' (2012b, p. 7), and Zipes puts it even more forcefully: 'we have reconfigured our children to act and to behave as commodities and agents of consumerism' (2008, p. 27).

I suspect I am, like many children's writers, caught in the conundrum of wanting to write stories that expose the worst aspects of our capitalist society to children and that hopefully provoke them into thinking about my themes, yet simply by wanting my books to be published, I am adding to consumerism. The best I can do, I think, is try to write for children as 'a radical force for good' (Melrose 2012a, p. 29), while staying aware of the attendant issues involved.

Both the novel and the picture book tales are influenced by Bettelheim's theory that it is through fairy tales that children learn to acknowledge there is evil in the world, that it can be confronted and addressed, and that they can grow in courage and resilience through this process. In the past, with many of the children's books I have written, I have been constricted by publishers' and educators' ideas of what might be deemed suitable for children to read, especially where death, family conflict or depictions of sorcery are concerned. My free writing process here has allowed me to avoid conscious

self-censorship and to go wherever the ideas in my unconscious led me, both in the early stages and then in the development exercises, in order to be authentic and resonant, without holding back.

In the revision process for the novel, I drew on James Scott Bell's writing guide (2014), and considered the feedback of my supervisors as well as of writer friends who read the manuscripts. Comments they provided on problems with structure and the narrative trajectory of the novel led me to use *Save the cat* (Snyder 2005) and its list of plot beats as a checklist for action and forward movement, as well as its advice on constructing what Snyder calls the B story, the secondary narrative (in *Red magic* this is focused on Boyo). I also used *The writer's journey* (Vogler 2007), which discusses the use of the mythical hero's journey as a story structure. However, this structure proved to be problematic in *Red magic*, as the novel has three thresholds to cross and no real refusal of the call to adventure, although I kept certain elements of the hero's journey in mind, such as the mentor, the approach to the innermost cave and the road home.

As with the fairy tale picture books, the novel finally reached a point where I was ready to seek feedback from an objective reader who would be approaching the manuscript with no preconceptions of it, or knowledge of my research. I requested this feedback from a colleague, Davina Bell, who had previously worked for some years as a children's editor. She suggested I increase the references to other well-known texts in the story and remarked that, in her experience, children enjoyed recognising these connections to other stories.

This led me to reading more about intertextuality and its resonances for readers (Allen 2000), and in particular the ways in which it enriches reading for children (Cairney 1992, Sipe 2000). Sipe's study shows that children are capable of making intertextual connections to interpret the story but also to understand the story's meaning, enter into it, 'talk back' to it and create their own stories (p. 84).

Thus in the next revision I included further references to books that Glory loves such as *Lord of the rings* and the Harry Potter series. I was careful not to make these confusing in any way, in case a child reader was not familiar with them. For example, where Glory remembers Gandalf's words from *Lord of the rings*, I include them as a direct

quote: ‘What had Gandalf said? “Do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends.”’ (*Red magic*, p. 173).

The writing process I developed in order to create my original fairy tales and novel was based on the principles and my experience of free writing and guided by my research into the endurance of fairy tales. Through the reflective journaling, the analysis of my creative works and the development and enactment of the free writing method, I conclude this writing process has been successful. It allowed me to tap into unconscious fairy tale ideas, symbols and motifs as well as generating a storytelling voice that effectively echoes the Grimms’ tales. I am satisfied that the deeper themes of my fairy tales are present and resonant.

In the next chapter I further explore the creative writing process for other writers of new fairy tales and, in particular, the role of the unconscious. In Chapters 3 and 4, I expand on the research and reading on the continuing endurance of the fairy tale and the role of the unconscious that has been an important focus and directing influence on this thesis.

## Chapter 2: The writer of new fairy tales

In the previous chapter, I explained some of the processes of my own writing of the creative component of this thesis and foreshadowed the importance of ideas of endurance and the unconscious for the persistent and continuing appeal of fairy tales. I now move into examining the ways in which the unconscious contributes to the work of creative writers, particularly those who write fairy tales and fantasy/fairy tale novels, by drawing on both their published works and their accounts of how these came to be written.

Fairy tales belong within the genre of fantasy, according to Gooderham (1995), although Maria Nikolajeva makes a clear division between them according to how time and space is organised in each (2003, p. 141). The fantasy genre has expanded greatly over the past seventy years, with many fantasy writers consciously echoing the work of JRR Tolkien and/or created works based on the hero's journey that Joseph Campbell, eminent scholar of mythology, detailed in *The hero with a thousand faces* (1968). In contrast, writers of new versions of fairy tales, such as adaptations, feminist versions and revisionings, and fracturings, have taken the narrative content of traditional stories and reworked them according to their own ideologies and intentions. Indeed, Zipes says storytellers have always done this, as well as adapting stories for their audiences and contemporary contexts (2002, p. 8).

In writing new fairy tales, however, writers have recognised the need to move away from recycling characters and storylines and focus on other aspects of storytelling in order to create original works. For many, it is the symbolism of certain objects or motifs, or the significance of certain archetypes, for example, Marissa Meyer's transformation of Cinderella's shoe into a cyborg's foot in *Cinder* (2012), or Neil Gaiman's use of the doppelganger or double in *Coraline* (2002), that provides deeper psychological inspiration than simple fairy tale plot elements or generic characters.

Susan Cooper, the well-known writer for children, suggests a writer of fantasy has to go further inside themselves than a writer of realistic fiction: 'You have to make so close a connection with the unconscious that the unbiddable door will open and the images fly out, like birds' (1996, p. 115). Writers are used to this process, although

they may describe it in different ways. Many are loath to try to pin it down for fear that it will cease working for them or create what is called ‘writer’s block’. I recognise, through the reflection and analysis described in Chapter 1, that a number of my ideas emerge from my unconscious, from random, often surprising, associations that create the core of a creative work, whether it be a poem, a picture book, a character or a fairy tale.

This kind of unconscious creative writing process runs parallel to the reading experience. Cooper talks about the way certain ‘radioactive’ signals are given off by the writer leading to a kind of unspoken and unacknowledged recognition of meanings that is shared between writer and reader: ‘But because they come from the unconscious, the writer himself [sic] generally doesn’t know what these signals are. He may not even know they are there’ (1996, p. 113). She goes on to suggest that the reader receives the signals in the same way and ‘takes them in, without ... having consciously recognized them at all’ (1996, p. 113). In this way, she makes the connection between storyteller and reader one of creation and response via the unconscious.

Cooper makes it clear that ‘opening the unbiddable door’ is not an easy task. While many writing guides refer to the unconscious as a resource to be deliberately tapped in some way, as though it is easily accessible and able to be manipulated by writers, this is a theory disputed by English academic Abi Curtis (2009), who leans towards the psychoanalytic view that the unconscious cannot be controlled at will. Indeed, it is common for writers to refer to their unconscious as something uncontrollable when talking about their processes. Poet and academic Wendy Morgan (2006) calls it the ‘undermind’ and uses the same metaphor as Cooper: ‘opening the door’ (p. 25). She talks about the outer world providing her undermind with materials, and the undermind then performing ‘alchemy’ (p. 26).

Others who have explored the ways in which the unconscious contributes or influences the creative process include novelist Charlotte Wood (2015), poet and academic Kevin Brophy (1998) and psychoanalyst Althea Horner (2006). Wood takes up the idea of writer-as-problem-finder (from the research of Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi 1976) to show that creativity requires the ability to first find or create the problem before experimenting with how to solve it, and that the problem needs to come from within the writer. Wood also discusses the necessary circularity of the problem-solving, moving

from idea and problem to creative work and back again in order to achieve a successful outcome. Morgan echoes this, saying that writing students have to look for their own ‘puzzle, conflict, tension, need or problem’ (p. 21) and then be given time to explore for answers. She suggests free writing as a method of exploration – a method which I have used myself many times – in which they can ‘tap into the resources of the undermind that one couldn’t otherwise get at’ (p. 25).

This deliberate set of movements into creativity can be useful, and experienced writers have the advantage of internalised skills and knowledge so that ‘crafting becomes intuitive’ (Morgan 2006, p. 27). Probably they are also more adept at finding ways to open the ‘unbiddable door’. There are many quotes from well-published writers that describe this process. Stephen King talks about a story as ‘one day the damn thing’s just there’ (Horner 2006, p. 464) and Ray Bradbury describes writing his stories as getting rid of ‘a hairball in his throat’ (Horner 2006, p. 466).

Many writers keep process journals or are able to reflect on the creation of their stories in retrospect. Sometimes they talk about the novel ‘going its own way’. Neil Gaiman, for example, began *The ocean at the end of the lane* (2013) as a short story for his partner, but it kept growing. He says that when it was finished he counted the words and realised ‘I just wrote a novel by accident! ... It wasn’t plotted. Things kept taking me by surprise’ (Schnelbach 2013). Alan Garner, writer of myth-based novels such as *The owl service* (1967) and *The weirdstone of Brisingamen* (1976), describes in an essay in *The voice that thunders* having ‘a magpie’s mind that sees, finds or makes connections and patterns where others do not’ (1997, p. 225) and adds ‘the magpie is gratified by the collecting; and the writer is enthralled as the unconnected themes begin to converge, apparently of their own accord’ (p. 226).

Even writers of more complex, lengthy novels acknowledge the role of the unconscious in their novel writing. Kate Atkinson, author of *Life after life*, a book that plays innovatively with time and alternate plots, says in her notes in the novel’s sequel, *A god in ruins*, ‘So much ... is only semi-deliberate, as if there is a part of the writing brain that knows what it’s doing and another part that is woefully ignorant’ (2015, p. 387). In her novel *The children’s book* (2009), AS Byatt depicts a writer of fairy tales who believes her story began with her own ‘childish fear of Thumbelina’s mole-tunnel’ (p.

83), a realisation that comes to the protagonist long after the writing of the tales is completed.

If one wants to write fairy tales, is it possible to take what seems to be an uncontrollable process and ‘corral’ it? Gaiman thought so in his writing of *Stardust* (2007), a novel he intended to be a fairy tale. He began by setting himself up with old props: ‘All I was certain of was that nobody had written books on computers back in the 1920s, so I bought a large book of unlined pages, the first fountain pen I had owned since my schooldays and a copy of Katharine Briggs' *Dictionary of Fairies*. I filled the pen and began’ (Gaiman 2007). In this way he deliberately created an environment that encapsulated his perception of how a fairy tale should feel.

In *Wild mind* (1991), Natalie Goldberg uses the term ‘wild mind’ to describe how free writing releases imagination and words onto the page. Paradoxically, she provides a list of rules for free writing, but it is the rules that create the place in which to explore and create spontaneously, and from where the writer can learn to trust their own mind (p. 1). It is a similar method to that of Gaiman’s – hers is mental and his is through physical props, but they both provide a place from which to leap into writing. This is the same process that Morgan (2006) suggests should be used with students.

Goldberg also provides a wide range of prompts: for example, a simple starting line such as ‘I remember’, or a more structured exercise such as writing about your home or about dying. All are designed to stop the conscious mind from hesitating, blocking or editing. I have used these in writing classes with students many times, and I myself have found them to be valuable in freeing up my writing. One could say that free writing is Goldberg’s way of cracking open Susan Cooper’s ‘unbiddable door’.

As a writer, I agree with Cooper that the unconscious response to deeper themes creates a vital connection between writer and reader. My research has reinforced this, but the challenge for me was to develop a more directed practice that focused specifically on the creation of original fairy tales.

To explore how a writer uses the unconscious to draw on themes and resonances in order to create new fairy tales, I examined three picture books and three fairy tale novels for children and/or teenagers: *Fox* by Margaret Wild, illustrated by Ron Brooks (2000); *The great bear* by Libby Gleeson, illustrated by Armin Greder (1999); *The red*

*tree*, written and illustrated by Shaun Tan (2001); *A monster calls* by Patrick Ness (2011); *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman (2002); and *Cinder* by Marissa Meyer (2012).

In order to classify these texts as fairy tales, I am using definitions provided by Andrew Teverson in his book *Fairy Tale* (2013). Teverson acknowledges the problems with the term ‘fairy tale’ and suggests instead the use of *Volksmärchen* (people’s tales), *Buchmärchen* (book tales) and *Kunstmärchen* (art tales) (p. 31). It is *Kunstmärchen* that opens up the genre more to modern tales because, according to Teverson, they are:

fictions in which an author has either (a) used a *märchen* and/or *volksmärchen* as a basis for literary invention . . . , (b) invented a narrative that is designed to resemble a traditional tale in some respects but that is in fact entirely original, or (c) created an original tale but made substantial use of ‘motifs’ common in traditional tales (2012, p. 31).

I note however that in the course of interviews, my chosen authors use the terms ‘fairy tale’, ‘myth’ and ‘folk tale’ interchangeably, and Teverson himself suggests that the boundaries between categories are ‘fluid’ (p. 15).

In addition to meeting Teverson’s criteria, I would add that these texts all include, to some degree, other fairy tale elements that are important in terms of resonance and storytelling: language, repetition, images and symbols, motifs, animal helpers and patterns.

I chose books that have all been published in the last twenty years because I also wanted to examine how they sit within and reflect the concerns of contemporary Western society. I agree with Zipes’s assertion that fairy tales do change according to the time and society in which they are told, and I think this is no less true for new original tales. By looking at these texts and what their authors say about their genesis, I hoped to make links between the writing processes and the deeper psychological material in their texts, and how these might relate to contemporary society.

In discussing the following chosen picture books and novels, I am interested in several aspects: how each work uses fairy tale elements; whether their themes resonate in the same way as traditional fairy tales; what ‘signals’ may be present, most likely in the form of metaphor; what comments their authors have made in regards to the creation of their work and references to the unconscious as part of their process; how their themes

might relate to contemporary society. I have drawn on some interviews with authors conducted by myself and others.

Over the centuries, many fairy tale collections have included pictures, but these three picture books are illustrated in such a way that the illustrations add further layers and resonances to the tales rather than simply adding a complementary picture. In Nikolajeva's spectrum of 'picturebooks' that ranges from word to image, or verbal narrative to pictures without words, I would say that all three are 'complementary', words and pictures filling each other's gaps (2006, p. 12). Thus in this part of my discussion, both the illustrations and their creators' processes are as relevant as those of the authors'.

It must be said that the selected picture books are not sentimental or comforting; those kinds of books are the choice of protective parents, who understandably want stories that soothe, particularly at bedtime. There is a place for soothing stories, but there is also a great need for stories that help children to face and work through their mostly unnameable and unspoken fears, and the picture books I have chosen are in this category.

*Fox* by Margaret Wild (2000), illustrated by Ron Brooks, aligns with Teverson's categories (b) and (c) in that it has animal characters that talk, and uses motifs such as fire, blindness, the forest and the cave (Zipes 1998, pp. 4-5). It is the story of Dog and Magpie, who live in the charred forest. Dog has only one eye, and Magpie's wing is burned so that she cannot fly. Dog puts Magpie on his back and races as fast as he can to give Magpie the sensation of flying again. Joseph Campbell, in *The power of myth* (1988, p. 58), writes about the important symbolism of duality, and here Dog and Magpie are two broken halves that make a whole. Duality also appears in fairy tales such as 'Snow White and Rose Red' and 'The dog and the sparrow' (Zipes 1992). This duality is corrupted when Fox arrives 'with his haunted eyes and rich red coat' (n.p.).

*Fox* is an extremely powerful story on several levels. The text itself uses highly evocative language: 'Through the charred forest, over hot ash, runs Dog, with a bird clamped in his big, gentle mouth' (n.p.), 'He flickers through the trees like a tongue of fire' (n.p.). This language can be compared to that of 'The musicians of Bremen'; it has carefully constructed sentences with a particular rhythm, and evocative verbs, nouns

and adjectives. It is also enhanced by the illustrator's decision to write the text with his left hand to make it look raw and jagged (Anderson 2000).

Animals are an important recurring element in fairy tales, as discussed by many scholars from Lüthi (1976) to Warner (2014b). Margaret Wild said she chose these animals because for her their names have particular connotations. For example, she chose a dog 'because of all the positive qualities a dog has, such as loyalty and faithfulness' (Email interview, 28 March 2012). I would argue that for Wild 'connotation' has the same resonance that 'signal' has for Cooper.

Wild went on:

In one respect Dog's missing eye and Magpie's damaged wing is a plot device so that the two of them will join forces to make one complete animal. But the missing eye is also symbolic of Dog's blindness to the true nature of others, whereas Magpie is acutely aware right from the start that Fox represents danger. The damaged wing keeps Magpie earthbound which is why Fox is able to tempt her to go away with him.

As with many fairy tales, readers can see themselves in every character, even if they might not wish to. Fox is the quintessential trickster, only out for himself, but in this story his motivations are not simple greed, as is seen, for example, in many of Aesop's Fables, but the far more complicated 'rage and envy and loneliness'. He is so much more than merely sly and cunning that readers weep for him as much as for Dog and Magpie.

Wild is clearly conscious of the power of symbols in a story and chose her animals in order to create deeper and more complex meanings than a simple animal story. She said that she didn't consciously set out to write a myth, but was aware of the folktale 'three pattern' and used that. When her publisher described the story as archetypal, Wild was 'astonished to realise that it had so many themes – friendship, loyalty, temptation, envy, betrayal, love, loss, cruelty and possible redemption'. It was her publisher who identified the deeper meanings of the story, an example of how it took a reader to recognise what 'signals' had emerged from behind Wild's own 'unbiddable door'.

This is not an uncommon experience for a writer: for others to see meanings the writer is unaware of. From where such 'signals' might have emerged leads to the question of

what might lie in the writer's unconscious to inform the writing of the story but which is only identifiable once the story is written and read.

When I asked Wild about her reading in childhood, she said:

As a child I loved myths, folktales and fairy tales. *The snow queen*, *The little mermaid*, *The selfish giant* and *Beauty and the beast* still haunt me – they are such powerful stories that engage the reader at a deep emotional level. Who can forget the glass in the boy's eye, the mermaid walking as if on knives? We go on a journey with these characters, identify with them and their situations, and find out about ourselves at the same time' (2012).

Wild, in identifying the elements of fairy tales that continued to haunt her, inadvertently describes the signals in her own work, *Fox*, that readers respond to. Friendship, loyalty and betrayal are depicted darkly and unflinchingly, as are blindness and pain, just as acute pain is a central element of *The little mermaid* and *The snow queen*. It seems that physical pain in these stories signals, or stands in for, emotional pain, and thereby reaches down to deeper levels in the reader. Bruno Bettelheim talks about this deep pain as 'the monster [a child] feels or fears himself to be' (1976, p. 117) and how fairy tales allow the child to talk about the monster and gain mastery over it. Bettelheim's theories and use of fairy tales in therapy are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

There is evidence that children both instinctively understand metaphor and engage with it on a deeper, therapeutic level (Mills & Crowley 2014). Children's writers such as Cooper and Jane Yolen (2000) know this, too, and they also know that it is unnecessary to explain a metaphor to a child. As Yolen says, 'Symbolic language is something that a young child seems to understand almost viscerally' (2000, p. 17). Symbolic images can work in the same visceral way, as in the next picture book selected for discussion.

Pain and despair in a captive bear form the heart of the *The great bear* by Libby Gleeson (1999), illustrated by Armin Greder. Like *Fox*, this picture book fits Teverson's categories of *Kunstmärchen*, resembling a traditional tale with an animal character. It is the story of a bear forced by her owner to dance for humans and, while some of the crowd clapped and cheered to the music as she danced, 'others poked her with sticks and threw stones at her ragged coat'. This continues for years until one night she is led into the square of a village high in the mountains. The crowd calls to

her to dance, but she stands very still. The more they shout, the more she refuses. ‘Sticks poke. Sticks prod. Chains yank. Stones strike, strike, strike. [page turn] ROAR!’(n.p.). From here on, there are no more words. The illustrator shows the bear’s vast shadow, the villagers running, and then the bear climbing the pole, higher and higher, until at last she escapes up into a sky full of stars.

Gleeson says the story emerged from a dream of a dancing bear in a medieval village that escapes and climbs to the top of a pole. ‘Then she launched herself into the stars and I thought of Ursa Major, the Great Bear constellation. It felt very satisfying’ (Gleeson 2000, p. 1).

In Gleeson’s dream, the torment suffered by the bear leads to escape and a happy ending, a key feature of a fairy tale. Like Wild, Gleeson was aware of the power of symbols in language and illustration, and describes the process of working with illustrator Armin Greder:

I wanted the levels of psychological and mythological insight to be available to very young readers. I talked at length with Armin and then went back to my desk and struggled with the ideas, with the structure of the story, with the language – every word, every nuance of meaning (2000, p. 1).

Greder worked on the illustrations and then came back to her, asking that her text finish with the ROAR! and the rest of the book be only the illustrations, to which she immediately agreed. Having seen much of the work he had already done, she knew that he was trying to achieve the deeper meanings through his dark and perspective-shifting illustrations. As a result, readers ‘cannot read this work without feeling as the bear feels, identifying with her suffering, celebrating her liberation’ (2000, p. 2).

Both author and illustrator are connecting symbolic resonance to psychological depth – together these create signals for the reader that include abuse, pain and freedom. In an email interview, Gleeson added:

People kept saying to us it was a story about the bad treatment of bears and all I could think of was how narrow that reading was. He [Greder] and I discussed the writing at every stage and a few times he got back to me saying it needed to be more poetic but more than that it needed a psychological depth. I think that is the mythological element’ (Email interview, 25 March 2012).

Here, Gleeson is clearly making the connection between the psychological and the mythological, and vice versa. When I asked her what might have sparked the initial dream, she mentioned reading about the invasion of East Timor, and that '*The great bear* is about man's inhumanity to man' (2012). In 'The power of literature', she states 'the best of our literature is stories that help us to understand ourselves' (2008, p. 5). She added in our interview, when I asked how children responded to the story, 'I know that *The great bear* invokes in children long conversations about the way one ought to treat others' (2012).

Another picture book that creates questions from and conversations with children is *The red tree* (2001) by Shaun Tan (Tan n.d.). Of the three I have chosen, this one is perhaps most controversial as an example of a new fairy tale but I consider this to be a fairy tale because it fits closely with Teverson's third category of *Kunstmärchen*. *The red tree* is entirely original but uses motifs such as clocks, dead leaves, water and the colour red. It has sparse, unpunctuated text and many strange and mysterious illustrations featuring a red-haired girl. It begins with: 'Sometimes the day begins with nothing to look forward to' and continues through 'the world is a deaf machine' and 'sometimes you just don't know what you are supposed to do' to the last line 'just as you imagined it would be' (2001, n.p.).

*The red tree* operates throughout as metaphor, with both images and text open to interpretation by the reader. Tan says on his website, 'illustration is a powerful way of expressing of feeling [sic] as well as ideas, partly because it is outside of verbal language, as many emotions can be hard to articulate in words' (Tan n.d.). He refers to *The red tree* as 'a series of imaginary landscapes connected only by a minimal thread of text and the silent figure of a young girl at the centre of each one, with whom the reader is invited to identify' (n.d.).

The signals in *The red tree* are mostly visual, the most powerful being the dead, brown-black leaves that re-emerge as red and alive at the end. There are many other symbolic objects throughout the illustrations: leaves, aeroplanes and wings, a spiral shell, a cave, red birds and the red tree in her bedroom on the last page. Tan does not prescribe – his aim is that the book 'not only endures variable interpretations, it almost demands them' (Tan n.d.). A reader may sense or connect with signals about emotional pain,

depression, dying and hope. The collective recognisable/universal symbols prompt the individual subjective response.

Tan is both author and illustrator, so the book is entirely dependent on his vision of what he is trying to achieve. He seems aware that whatever emerges comes from a deeper place inside him. In an interview for the *Financial Times*, he said, 'I don't see a huge difference between painting a landscape *plein air* and sitting at a desk drawing something from a speculative subconscious ... They are both ways of making an image that ultimately resides in the mind' (Kite 2016). Tan has also illustrated seventy-five Grimms' fairy tales through the use of small sculptures (*The singing bones* 2015), a challenge he initially thought could not be done, saying, 'I've often found the peculiar tone and illogical twists and meandering of traditional fairy tales difficult to relate to, particularly as a non-European suburban boy from Western Australia' (Tan n.d.). He says the tales are 'closer to dreams than stories. I love inexplicable stuff but this was almost too inexplicable' (Kite 2016). It is as if he were drawn to the deeper themes, resonances or 'signals' in spite of himself, and in spite of what he saw as his cultural heritage.

In terms of children's responses, academics such as Andrea Schwenke Wyile acknowledge that the confronting themes of *The red tree* – 'alienation, despair, environmental degradation, existential crisis, loss, perception, power, vision, and voicelessness' – create a reluctance among adults to share it with children (Wyile 2010, p. 132). Nevertheless, she says, 'The emotions of fear, anxiety, loss, uncertainty, determination, and quiet watchfulness provide common ground among all children' (p. 133). In this way, *The red tree* acts on its readers in the way traditional fairy tales do by drawing the individual in through the power of the images, whether in language or illustration.

Each of these picture books has in some way come from its writer's and illustrator's heart and mind and unconscious, whether drawing on a dream, childhood reading or personal preoccupations. Children's writer Jane Yolen says, 'the best new stories have something serious to say about the writer and his or her particular world. All writers write about themselves ... The world of which they write is like a mirror that reflects the inside of their hearts, often more truly than they know' (2000, pp. 24-5). This applies to fantasy even more so than realistic fiction. Susan Cooper says fantasy uses

the ‘buried metaphor’ (1996, p. 10) and comes from the ‘shadowy part of the mind ... where the creative imagination hides’ (p. 9).

In realism, the author draws greatly on the world they already know and which they can research further for factual details to inform the story. In fantasy, the world of the story must be created from the imagination. The writer still draws on things they know in the real world, even historical material, but the fantasy world may require new maps and place names, new races of people, even new animals. JRR Tolkien’s world of Middle Earth is inhabited by hobbits, elves and dwarves, and creatures such as Gollum and the orcs (*The lord of the rings* 1954-1955). While Tolkien drew on his vast knowledge of Old English literature and Norse sagas to create Middle Earth, it is his imagination that produced much of the fictional world of Beleriand and its backstory (Robbins 2015).

While the picture books discussed offer a highly condensed symbolic resonance, novels using fairy tales or their elements, by virtue of their word length, must draw on many different ideas and themes and then weave them into longer, more complex narratives. The story will have multiple characters, subplots and often several interlocking themes. The major characters are clearly individualised with names and complex motivations, unlike short fairy tales where a character may be presented without a specific name, and the descriptions and settings are provided in greater detail. The reader is encouraged to identify with the main protagonist, and first person point of view may be used for this purpose (Elphin, p. 85). Even in middle grade fiction, first person is now becoming more common (Brock 2013).

What then allows certain novels to be identified as ‘fairy tale’ novels? Many are simply retellings that use the plot of an existing fairy tale as a basis. I have chosen to discuss *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman (2002), *A monster calls* by Patrick Ness (2011) and *Cinder* by Marissa Meyer (2012). *A monster calls* and *Coraline* are original stories, not retellings. While *Cinder* relies somewhat on elements of the Cinderella tale, its author takes the characters and plot far beyond a basic retelling, creating a science fiction novel with deep issues of alienation and technology.

A central question for the writer of new fairy tales is how can a fairy tale novel achieve the resonance and unconscious signals of a traditional fairy tale? The three novels I have chosen to discuss use fairy tale motifs and symbols. For example, *Cinder* uses the special slipper (her mechanical foot), the nasty stepmother and the prince at the royal

ball, which are identifiable elements from the original tale of Cinderella. *Coraline* uses the doppelganger motif and mirrors in various ways, has a door as a portal to another world and an animal helper. *A monster calls* uses the yew tree, which has long been a potent symbol in Britain, and the monster recalls elements of the Green Man, a folkloric icon that has been more recently connected to nature and the land (Larrington 2015). Ness said about the Green Man, ‘in some ways, he is the land, while also an individual, and that kind of duality fits so perfectly with Conor’s struggle’ (Book Trust 2011).

Beyond this use of stock elements however, these novels achieve their deep resonances by drawing on dark themes that are vitally important to today’s audience of children and teen readers. Each of the novels deals with abandonment, loss and rejection, and works through the emotions of grief, rage and courage. *Cinder* works with the theme of alienation by embodying it – as a cyborg, Cinder is rejected by almost every human as being ‘less’. *Coraline* faces the universal fear of children, that of parents being taken away or dying, embodied in the form of monster-like replacements with buttons for eyes. *A monster calls* delves deeply into death and grief, and the importance of speaking the truth about them. In this technological age, it is assumed that technology allows us to communicate instantly and globally across our ‘one world’, yet isolation and alienation are seen as common social issues for teenagers (Margalit 2010, Turkle 2011). They are also common themes in realist children’s fiction, but they are at the heart of each of these fairy tale novels in which the main characters are isolated and/or alienated by trauma or situations out of their control, presented in fantasy or science fiction settings that take the reader to an ‘other’ world in the same way that fairy tales do with ‘once upon a time’.

In *Coraline* by Neil Gaiman, Coraline and her parents move into an old house with an attic, cellar and overgrown garden. Coraline is an explorer and finds a mysterious door and a key (the portal); she goes through and discovers an identical flat with similar parents to her own – except the other mother and other father have button eyes. When her real parents go missing, Coraline realises the other parents have kidnapped them, and she embarks on a scary quest to save them. At one point the other mother refuses to let her leave and locks Coraline behind a mirror where she finds three ghost children. It takes all of Coraline’s courage and wits to rescue all of those entrapped by the other mother.

Gaiman is well known in the children's literature world for his lectures on children and stories as well as on writing in general. With *Coraline*, he said he wanted to write about bravery, adding, 'You can't write about bravery without having something that's worth being scared of' (Gamble 2014). He says to child readers, 'She's just like you and she's going to fight this thing and she's going to win' (Gaiman, cited in Wehler 2014, p. 112).

Gaiman's most powerful stories seem to emerge when he draws on his own childhood. In *Coraline* he based the house on one he lived in as a child, because it was semi-detached and had a door to the other half that was bricked up. *Coraline* includes fairy tale symbols such as mirrors and keys. Although the novel includes parts of a story he originally told his daughter Holly, it took him ten years to write: 'I stopped writing when I didn't know what happened next. Sometimes it would take four years, then I'd know what happened next and I'd go away and write it' (Gaiman 2015). This suggests that he relied on his unconscious to provide the next part of the story when it was ready to emerge, as he did with *The ocean at the end of the lane*, simply writing until it was done (Schnelbach 2013).

It takes a great deal of faith in one's own processes to write like this, to accept whatever 'signals' the unconscious provides and allow the story to proceed as it will. How to craft a story, what structure will work and how to deepen characterisation: all these elements of story writing start to work at a less overtly conscious level after long experience. This is not the technique called 'pantsing' where inexperienced writers often end up with a mess (Cron 2016, pp. 25-6). For writers such as Gaiman, with many years of crafting experience, lack of technique no longer hinders the flow of ideas, but like him other writers may need to give time for the connections with the unconscious to emerge.

Patrick Ness, as an experienced writer, was able to take on the writing of *A monster calls* when the original idea (by Siobhan Dowd, who died before she could write the story) connected with something in his unconscious. Ness only had a small part of Dowd's early drafted beginning – which he didn't end up using – and was initially reluctant to take on the writing, but when he was given Dowd's material, he says he felt a 'pull' and started to get ideas. He was able to begin writing when he had a powerful image in his head: 'I got a visual of Conor coming out of a destructive story and turning

around to discover he has destroyed the sitting room. That was the first real image I had, and something was right, and it went from there' (N Jones 2012). Ness added, 'I wouldn't have taken it on if I didn't have complete freedom to go wherever I needed to go with it.'

In *A monster calls*, Conor's mother is dying of cancer, and he is gradually forced into the care of his seemingly unfeeling grandmother. He has a recurring nightmare that he can't talk about, and he is being bullied at school. One night a monster comes to visit, a monster that is the embodiment of the ancient yew tree on the hill near his house. The monster tells Conor three tales, and instead of the tales making him feel better, they make him angry and upset. But the monster says, 'Stories are the wildest things of all. Stories chase and bite and hunt' (Ness, p. 45). With each story, Conor's anger bursts out uncontrollably, and we see how much pain he is trying to hold inside himself. He destroys his grandmother's sitting room, he attacks the boy who has been bullying him, and yet the adults don't punish him. Following this, the monster insists that the fourth tale is one that Conor must tell, but at first he refuses because this is the story of his nightmare.

Conor's mother worsens and, as a last resort, the doctors give her a new medicine made from yew, but still this doesn't save her. Then the monster returns and forces Conor to tell the fourth story, in which he cannot save his mother from the worst monster of all and lets her hand go. He finally admits that the cause is his guilt: he must tell the truth and say that he wants it all to be over. Only then can he go to his mother in the hospital and say goodbye and grieve.

Ness uses the monster with its resonance with the folklore of the Green Man to show the reader many things: how little adults understand about children faced with terminal illness of a parent; how children feel as deeply as adults but often don't have the ability to speak; how much power stories have to show the way through the darkest times and thus how important they are. This will be discussed further in Chapter 4. The stories the monster tells are not didactic, nor even about death and cancer. They show Conor there is good and bad in everyone, including him, and that humans are 'complicated beasts' (Ness, p. 201). The monster encourages Conor to externalise his anger and grief so that finally he can go inside himself and face his fear.

*A monster calls* uses the device of stories within a story to illustrate and deepen its themes. The adults in Conor's life lie to him over and over, often with good intentions or simply to avoid confronting their own feelings. The monster tells Conor that stories, which are thought of as fiction and therefore not true, 'can be more important than anything. If they carry the truth' (p. 151). In this way the monster is making it clear that stories tell the truth more than people do. Although this correlates with the way in which traditional fairy tales deal with fundamental human traits such as honesty, greed, fear and courage, the monster tells stories which show humans are capable of both good and evil. The monster laughs at the idea that the stories are 'lessons': they operate in terms of deeper meanings, drawing on universal and collective images that impel the reader or listener to make their own response and divine what the story means to them. In this novel, it could be argued that the monster is using stories in the way that child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim did (1976), trusting the listener to take from the stories what they need (further discussed in Chapter 4).

*Coraline* and *A monster calls* are original stories that use fairy tale elements, unlike retellings that use the plot and some key motifs of an existing fairy tale as a basis. In contrast to the two original novels I have discussed, *Cinder* by Marissa Meyer could be classified as a retelling: it appears on an infographic of 162 young adult novels defined as retellings of fairy tales (TeamEpicReads 2014). However, Meyer takes the Cinderella fairy tale into new territory by writing it as science fiction, set in the distant future after a fourth world war. Earth is suffering from a plague called letumosis and is in danger of an invasion from Lunars, who live on the moon. Lunars have the ability to distort humans' perceptions and make them see what they want them to. The main character, Cinder, is a cyborg, who has no memory of the accident that led to her being given metal parts and advanced technological implants. Her stepmother hates her, and the prince, Kai, is being forced to consider marriage with Lunar queen Levana to avert war.

Cinder's key trait is her mechanical ability to fix things, including an ancient car and an android that Kai is secretly using to search for the missing Princess Selene. It is clear from their first meeting that Cinder and Kai are attracted to each other, but Cinder is desperate to keep her cyborg identity a secret from him, fearing rejection. Naturally the story reaches its climax at the ball, where Cinder's secrets are revealed, and she tries to kill Levana to save the prince and the world.

While there are recognisable elements of the traditional Cinderella fairy tale in this novel, Meyer creates a mostly original story with its futuristic New Beijing setting, Cinder as a cyborg, and Lunars as the villains, rather than focusing on the fairy godmother and magic as modern versions of the old tale do. Readers who attempt to match all the fairy tale elements of the novel to the tale will be disappointed. However, some motifs are obvious – the ball, the handsome prince, the slipper (mechanical foot) and the stepmother.

As she describes on her website, Meyer's inspiration for the book came after a period of working on the idea and then time where the idea 'hibernated' in her mind. She entered a contest to write a fairy tale-type story, and says she then 'brainstormed what futuristic twists I could give to some of my favorite fairy tales. A couple of months later I was drifting off to sleep when the lightning bolt struck: Cinderella ... as a cyborg!' (Meyer n.d.). This could be interpreted as her 'unbiddable door' springing open (Cooper 1996, p. 115). Meyer set the story in New Beijing because 'some scholars believe that the earliest Cinderella tale came from 9<sup>th</sup> century China' (Meyer n.d.). Her catalytic idea for the novel was clearly not consciously devised, but it could be said that she 'primed' herself (as I did with my process by reading fairy tales) with the brainstorming, even though it took two months for the idea to emerge. When it did, she wrote the first draft very quickly, in two weeks – again, in a similar way to my own process.

As in the original fairy tale, Cinder is depicted in the novel as 'other', but this is strengthened and embodied more materially in the science fiction setting. Her cyborgness serves to make her alien in both practical and symbolic ways. Meyer subverts the original fairy tale ending, where Cinderella becomes a princess and 'belongs' with the prince, by revealing that Cinder is a Lunar, which makes her even more alien than before. At a time in their lives when teenagers struggle with identity and belonging, the theme of 'otherness' in *Cinder* speaks strongly to these readers (Margalit 2010). As one young Guardian reviewer says, the story lets you 'see what it's like to be different from everyone else' (Hotcocoa 2015).

While, as in traditional fairy tales, Cinder does have helpers, usually androids, she is independent and resourceful. Her mechanical abilities are those usually ascribed to

male characters, so again the writer is using the ‘othering’ capacity of the science fiction genre to be subversive and undermine stereotypes.

In traditional fairy tales, there are constant themes of ‘the smallest against the world’, the quest for a stronger, braver self, the cost of dishonesty and deceit. There are also many tales where parents die or are lost in some way, leaving the children to fend for themselves. All three novels in their very different genres embrace these themes and imaginatively invoke and address these fears. Their success in doing this is evident in their reception.

*A monster calls* has not only won major literary awards in the UK (N Jones 2012) but also won Britain’s biggest children’s choice award, The Red House Award, in 2012 (C Jones 2012). *Cinder*, with over 45,000 reviews and 445,000 ratings on Goodreads (2017), and *Coraline*, with over a million sales (Hooton 2017), have been hugely popular with children and teens, who have not been at all dissuaded from reading them because of their dark themes, a continuing, identifiable aspect of fairy tales. In writing and talking about their own processes, these writers, in varying degrees and using different metaphors and descriptions, return to a common identification of something ‘unbidden’, or ‘unconscious’ that cannot, whatever their technical experience, be summoned although it may be encouraged. Each recognised that the flow of the story needed to be allowed to make its own way onto the page rather than be immediately manipulated or ‘constructed’.

In the second part of this exegesis I will bring together the two main areas of my research into fairy tales that have informed my own writing and persuaded me of the value of new (old) fairy tales for today’s children.

### Chapter 3: Endurance, persistence and ‘stickiness’ – how new can a fairy tale be?

Creative writers today feel the weighty influence of the literary works that have gone before them, but perhaps none more so than the writer of new fairy tales who knows they are contributing to a tradition with a long history. The tales heard and read in childhood echo in the back of the writer’s mind raising the question: is it possible to write an original new tale?

According to TS Eliot (1921), everything we write is influenced by what we have read, heard, seen, written and experienced. Taken to an extreme, this can lead to plagiarism, and writers can fear the influence of one particular writer or style on their own work and thus avoid reading the other’s. In trying to write new original fairy tales for this thesis, however, rather than deliberately ignore the vast canon of Western European fairy tales, I chose to embrace it, believing that the more I ‘fed’ my conscious and unconscious mind, the more I would eventually have to draw on. Reading many different tales, both in collections and other formats, was an important part of both my methodology and process.

Core components of fairy tales have been traced back to Asia and more particularly China, and tracked across the continents to Europe in the fifteenth century, and to the present day (Warner 2014b). So I was not entirely surprised when a recent article described the tracing of a fairy tale back to the Bronze Age, using phylogenetic methods (Graça da Silva and Tehrani 2016). Locating the exact paths of tales through the centuries using literary-historical methods has been made more difficult for scholars due to the tales’ orality. It is only in cultures where they have been written down that evidential proof of their existence in a particular version is available.

Giovanni Straparola (*The pleasant nights*, first published 1550) and Giambattista Basile (*The tale of tales*, first published 1634), in Italy, are considered the first to record literary collections of oral tales. However, it was a French writer, Catherine D’Aulnoy (1697), who coined the term *Les contes des fées* – fairy tales – as the title of her book, and it has been in common use since that time (Zipes 1989).

D'Aulnoy was one of several women in the literary salons of the French court of Louis XIV who wrote tales for performance, bringing the subversive possibilities of fairy tales to the fore. Restricted by the rules of the court, which brooked no criticism of the King or the church, their stories portrayed women with minds of their own and poked fun at both institutions. When Frenchman Charles Perrault published his own collection in 1697, *Tales and stories of the past with morals (Histoires ou contes du temps passé)*, his focus was more on the moral lessons to be learned. This was, in a way, a portent of the cautionary tales that emerged in the Victorian era, such as *Struwwelpeter* (Hoffman 1845).

The collections of the Brothers Grimm, *Kinder- und hausmarchen*, which spanned seven editions between 1812 and 1857, brought fairy tales into greater prominence than any other collections of the time. After the first edition published in two volumes in 1812 and 1815, followed by the second edition in three volumes in 1819 and 1822, the Grimms responded to comments that the stories should be made more suitable for children. In 1825 *Kleine ausgabe* or 'small edition' appeared, a selection of fifty tales designed for child readers. It was this edition that sold well, eventually published in ten editions between 1825 and 1858, and made the Grimms a household name (Zipes 1988).

The seventh full edition in 1857 contained 211 tales, and the versions in this collection are the ones most widely known. Over the seven editions, the Grimms (mostly Wilhelm) made fundamental changes, it is believed in homage or deference to the cherished memory of their dead mother; for example, in many tales the wicked mother was changed to the stepmother, and more Christian references were included (Zipes 2014). It was also thought that Wilhelm wanted to make the tales 'more artistic to appeal to middle-class reading audiences' (2014, p. x). It is noteworthy, however, and problematic now in our own time, that much of the violence was not removed or decreased.

The Grimms were regarded as collectors and recorders, rather than original writers, despite the changes they made, as was Scottish writer Andrew Lang, whose twelve coloured fairy tale books (starting with *The blue fairy book* 1889) were collections of tales including those from the Grimms and D'Aulnoy, among many others. Later

similar collectors were Joseph Jacobs, Thomas Keightly and Clifton Johnson (Kready 1916).

The nineteenth century also saw a number of writers of new fairy tales emerge and become widely published. Perhaps the best known writer of original fairy tales at that time was the Danish Hans Christian Andersen, who published his first volume, *Fairy tales told for children*, in 1835. Some of his tales have become classics, such as ‘The little mermaid’, ‘The tinderbox’, ‘The ugly duckling’ and ‘The princess and the pea’, inspiring films, radio plays, novels, poems and short stories. Unlike the traditional tales though, many of Andersen’s have tragic or unhappy endings. Anecdotal evidence I have collected shows that his tales are those most often remembered from childhood as frightening or sad because of their endings. This is a point I will address further in Chapter 4.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a number of writers produced original fairy tales that are still in print today. George MacDonald’s best known book is *The princess and the goblin* (1872); Oscar Wilde wrote *The happy prince and other tales* (1888) which included ‘The selfish giant’; and in America, L Frank Baum published *The wonderful wizard of Oz* (1900).

In the twentieth century, JRR Tolkien (*The hobbit* 1937, *The lord of the rings* 1954-1955) is perhaps our foremost writer of original works drawing on fairy tale elements and motifs, and his essay, ‘On fairy-stories’, first published in 1947, discusses the functions of fantasy, escape, recovery and consolation. He dismisses the notion that fairy stories are only for children and says, of the stories that affect us the most, ‘they open a door on Other Time, and if we pass through, though only for a moment, we stand outside our own time, outside Time itself...’ (1983, p. 129).

To Tolkien, I would add Antoine Saint-Exupéry with *The little prince* (*Le petit prince* 1943), C.S. Lewis and his Narnia series beginning with *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe* (1950), Susan Cooper with her series *The dark is rising* that starts with *Over sea, under stone* (1965), Neil Gaiman with *Stardust* (1999) and *Coraline* (2002) and, of course, JK Rowling with her Harry Potter series, the first being *Harry Potter and the philosopher’s stone* (1997). Other writers, such as Angela Carter (*The bloody chamber* 1979) and Margaret Atwood (*The robber bride* 1993), as well as poet Anne Sexton

(1971), Jane Yolen (1992), and Barbara Walker (1996), have rewritten tales for adult readers to reflect different perspectives, in particular strongly feminist interpretations that seek to redress the patriarchal elements of the tales (Zipes 2001, p. 113). There has been a recent flurry of Australian writers who have published fairy tale-themed novels for adults and young adults: Danielle Wood with *Mothers Grimm* (2014), Kate Forsyth with *Bitter greens* (2013) and *The wild girl* (2014) and others, and Sophie Masson with *Hunter's moon* (2015).

New editions of the old tales have continued to be produced. Professor Jack Zipes, the eminent fairy tale scholar, has provided several highly-regarded translations, most recently of the first edition of the Grimms' tales published in 1812 and 1815 (2014). Philip Pullman, a fiction writer best known for his trilogy that begins with *Northern lights* (1995), has also published a collection of fifty of his favourite Grimms' tales, retold in his own voice – *Grimm tales for young and old* (2013). Pullman in his introduction echoes Tolkien's comment that they are not just for children.

While the rewritings and the retellings are of interest to my research, my focus is on the creation of new works. In Chapter 2, I examined several picture books and novels written in the last twenty years whose writers use motifs, symbols and elements to create fairy tale works that I consider are new and original, with the aim of examining both the process and outcomes to assist my own creative endeavours.

It is clear that writers' and readers' fascination with fairy tales continues to the present day. The movement in the nineteenth century from recording and retelling to imaginative new works continued apace in the twentieth, and it could be said that Tolkien's works stimulated the huge growth in fantasy writing of the past fifty years. There has also been a burgeoning of film versions of various fairy tales as well as operas, ballets and music. Regardless of the media used or the manipulations of the culture and marketing industries, the fairy tale lives on.

## Scholarship in the field of fairy tales

Much of the study in the field has focused initially on the history of fairy tales and then moved on to the question of why traditional fairy tales have endured. The two areas of research have inevitably been intertwined, and there have been numerous publications by scholars, academics and theorists from several different schools of thought.

Formalist Vladimir Propp first published his *Morphology of the folk tale* in 1928. Another scholar of folktale ‘transmission’ via a classification system was Antti Aarne, whose work was carried on and expanded by Stith Thompson and, later, Hans-Jörg Uther (Teverson 2013, pp. 96-99). They have tried to answer the question of transmission through devising their systems to analyse folktale elements, types and motifs. These give us comprehensive lists of commonalities of character, action, object and outcome. Propp’s focus was the Russian folk tale, of which he carried out an analysis of the chronological sequences of story elements, resulting in a list of thirty-one elements that Propp called ‘narratemes’ (Propp 1968). The Aarne-Thompson Tale Type index divided tales into umbrella categories and then tale types according to common elements such as motifs, giving the types identification numbers. They answer what has endured, but not why.

Professor Jack Zipes, arguably the foremost scholar of fairy tales in the past thirty years, has tried to answer the question of endurance with books such as *Why fairy tales stick* (2006) and *The irresistible fairy tale* (2013), but has also written on topics such as the Disney-fication of fairy tales (*Happily ever after* 1997), children’s literature and its success (*Sticks and stones* 2000), the use of fairy tales for socialisation in children (*Fairy tales and the art of subversion* 1985, 2006) and an examination of the Brothers Grimm and their work (*The Brothers Grimm* 2002).

Zipes’s insistence on the importance of fantasy for children and adults is a key feature of his continuing studies, and I echo this insistence, while not sharing the Marxist perspective in which it is framed. He sees the fantastic as an antidote to consumerism, social forces and the culture industry: ‘Hope for change can only be created if the fantastic illuminates and exposes delusion’ (2009, p. 83). He describes fairy tales as illuminating the way to utopia, which gives them a rather more active role in our lives than merely replicating as memes. I will examine his proposal of meme theory and

fairy tales later in this chapter. While I share his desire for fairy tales and fantasy to create possible change in their readers, utopia seems an impossible goal in today's world. For children, who are most in need of what fairy tales offer, political and socio-economic change is beyond their experience and capabilities. Changes and growth in resilience and courage, however, are possible, and I will explore this further in Chapter 4.

There are times in his writings where Zipes edges into discussing fairy tales and their psychological impact, but overall he dismisses the possibility that their persistence and irresistibility might be related to our unconscious. He says that attempts by psychologists to research fairy tales cannot even be called research, for 'they only fish for what their psychological premises dictate' (*Breaking the magic spell*, 2002, p. 48). I disagree with this view but will discuss it further in Chapter 4.

It is inevitable that Zipes would be one of the strongest influences on other scholars and researchers in the field of fairy tales. An earlier theorist whose work influenced and is referenced by Zipes is Max Lüthi. Lüthi, Professor of European Folk Literature at the University of Zurich from 1968 to 1979, wrote several books on fairy tales that explore their meanings and social functions and focus on form and style. Much of his work was only published in German from the 1940s to the 1960s, and the first English translation, of *Once upon a time: on the nature of fairy tales*, did not appear until 1976. Lüthi is useful to me for his ability to discuss fairy tales using a multifaceted approach that includes form, style, content, meaning, history, psychology, sociology and symbolism/motifs. He believes a fairy tale is 'an invitation' to all of us, and in terms of their violence, 'even small children possess the readiness and thus, no doubt, the strength, to encounter what is dangerous and frightening' (1976, p. 114). I will return to this point later in my discussion of resilience and courage in Chapter 4.

In another of Lüthi's works, *The fairy tale as art form and portrait of man* (1984), he uses both aesthetics and anthropology to further examine fairy tales. His explanations of elements such as characters, objects and nature, the polarities of good/evil and beautiful/ugly, and role of the 'tiny flaw', point the way to developing these in my own work. I can also look for where the dynamism lies, how it contrasts with sequence regularity, and what use I make of repetition and sound – all of these contribute to more effective revision as I seek to emulate the resonances of traditional tales.

Other theorists in the field have carried on the work of examining the history, relevance and effects of fairy tales and have provided readers with both specific and more general texts. Maria Tatar explores the darker aspects of the tales such as their cruelty and violence, their heroes, villains and beasts, and the assumptions that adults make about the negative effects of telling these stories (1987, 1992). Her writings discuss the moral tales of the Victorian era as well as presaging the fears that the tales engender now in over-protective parents.

She takes a critical view of many previous writings on fairy tales, admonishing those who rely on only one version of a story, or any analysis that focuses on symbols, given that there is so much dispute over their various meanings. Nevertheless, she identifies elements that do appear over and over and whose roles rarely vary: the simpleton hero whose key attribute is compassion for animals; dark forests; kings, queens, ogres and witches; gold, silver, glass and crystal.

Tatar (1987) describes the ‘hard facts’ of a number of tales and then shows what various re-visionings have layered on top, from inserting moral lessons and finding so-called hidden messages to re-orchestrating certain tales such as ‘Bluebeard’ to cover up the most disturbing ‘resounding chords’. She sees that the violence in the tales is often retaliation for victimisation, where ‘getting even is the best revenge’ (1987, p. 183). This is in comparison to many of the tales by Hans Christian Andersen that ‘idealize wretchedness and deprivation as a state that leads to genuine happiness’ (1992, p. 44), such happiness as achieved by death as in ‘Little Match Girl’.

Regarding violence in the tales, she says ‘every time and place sets its own parameters’, suggesting the gruesome tales have no place in today’s society, then goes on to say the effects of ferocity and violence exercise ‘a powerful hold on the imagination of children’ (1987, p. 192). Ultimately she neither supports nor rejects these violent aspects, unlike other writers such as Marina Warner, whose book, *No go the bogeyman* (2000), investigates the cathartic and therapeutic role of fairy tale violence in a way I find more useful. She follows psychotherapist Bruno Bettelheim’s theories that scary stories can help a child face their fears and grow in courage and resilience. As several of my tales contain violence and revenge, I will explore these aspects in the final chapter, with particular attention to ‘gate keeping’ by publishers, parents and librarians and the risk of self-censorship in writing.

Tatar says that many tales punish women for pride, curiosity or any display of power, and it is likely this resulted in the surge of feminist re-visionings of the tales in the 1960s and 1970s, by writers such as Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Jane Yolen, Anne Sexton and Barbara Walker, all mentioned previously. As these re-visioned tales were written for an adult audience, they are not within the parameters of my research, but the notion of a strong female main character in a fairy tale world did become a central force in the writing of my novel for this project, *Red magic*. In writing and revising my original fairy tales intended as picture book texts, however, I was also aware of the question of which gender should the main character be in each story and have addressed this in my evaluations of the tales in Chapter 1.

Throughout my reading of the literature, I discovered numerous areas of contention in both the folklore and fairy tale fields: the ‘correct’ usage of terms such as ‘folktale’, ‘märchen’ and ‘fairy tale’ and exactly what they should encompass; the earlier erroneous belief that the Brothers Grimm wrote their tales, and later disputes over how and why they edited the tales in their seven editions (Ellis 1983); the vehement rejection by Zipes, Dundes (1991) and others of Bettelheim’s therapeutic uses of fairy tales; and the furore caused by Ruth B Bottigheimer, who insisted there was no substantiated oral tradition of ‘rise’ fairy tales (those where, for example, the poor simpleton rises to become wealthy and powerful) and that they were created by writers such as Straparola.

In her text, *Fairy tales: a new history* (2009), Bottigheimer says, ‘It may surprise readers that folk invention and transmission of fairy tales has no basis in verifiable fact’. Despite the arguments against Bottigheimer’s position (Howard 2009, Zipes 2013), she has produced a substantial body of work, including a study of the Brothers Grimm (*Grimms’ bad girls & bold boys* 1987) that focuses on motifs and themes and their contexts and affinities rather than the analysis of individual symbols. Other researchers have nevertheless remained wedded to the idea that an examination of symbols can lead to deeper understanding (Vaz da Silva 2014). I am able to recognise these more effectively in analysis but, again, this is more useful in revision of my work rather than the initial drafting process.

Moving on from specific issues and dissensions, two recent books have responded to the resurgence in interest in fairy tales (possibly due to the plethora of movies and TV

shows based on fairy tales produced in the past ten years) by offering comprehensive overviews of the field. *Fairy tale* (2013) by Professor Andrew Teverson is valuable in exploring and explaining the different approaches to fairy tale scholarship, from his *märchen* definitions to examinations of psychoanalysis, history and ideology. His descriptions of *Volksmärchen* (people's tales), *Buchmärchen* (book tales) and *Kunstmärchen* (art tales) (p. 31) allowed me to position my own creative works as *Kunstmärchen*. When he says they 'carry with them the distinctive style of a named author' (p. 32), I feel on solid ground, using my own voice and creating via my own experimental process.

*Once upon a time: a short history of fairy tale* (2014b) by Marina Warner begins by noting the 'entanglement' of folk and fairy tales in a similar way to Teverson. This short, accessible text provides a useful history, whereas her previous extensive works such as *From the beast to the blonde* (1994) are intended as a cultural critique.

The plethora of journal articles on various aspects of fairy tale scholarship have also been valuable. Zipes has written on why fantasy matters (2009) and the history of the Grimms (2015); Bottigheimer, on the role of printing presses (2004); Vito Carrassi, on defining and broadening the categories of fairy tales (2016); Isabel dos Santos, on the Grimms, German Romanticism and Wilhelm Grimm's poetic language (2014); Marina Warner, on the changes in movie versions of fairy tales that reflect social issues (2014a); and several articles by Maria Nikolajeva, including how political regimes such as the Soviet Union can affect the subversive elements of fairy tales (2002) and the differences between fairy tales and fantasy literature (2003). I have only mentioned a few, and those that raised specific, interesting questions about fairy tales that added deeper layers to my general research.

I will now examine the key aspect of fairy tale scholarship that relates directly to my research question.

## **Answering the question of endurance**

The question – why have fairy tales endured? – is at the centre of my research project. I was convinced from the beginning that discovering the answer to this question would both inform and direct the writing process that I intended to develop in order to write my own tales. Why have *fairy tales* been the tales to endure? Why have they been republished countless times, as well as made into movies, TV shows, operas, ballets and artworks? What is it that we, like countless generations before us, respond to, both emotionally and intellectually, that then inspires us to retell these stories?

I am, of course, not alone in pursuing the answer to this question. Jack Zipes has led the research and theory in the field of fairy tale scholarship, followed by Maria Tatar, Ruth Bottigheimer, Kate Bernheimer, Donald Haase, Andrew Teverson and many others. Some, like Zipes, have used socio-historical and socio-political approaches; others have examined history, applied a feminist approach, examined specific aspects such as the tales' violence, or written comprehensive overviews.

However, to the best of my knowledge, no one has approached this question from the perspective of a practising children's writer whose aim is to write new, original fairy tales.

The key challenge for me has been how to turn their research upside down and 'shake out' the answers I needed to create tales with resonance and endurance that would enchant and engage the reader. Simply reflecting or repeating their theories would not help me take that necessary further step to inform my writing process. However, I did need to examine their theories to provide a sound basis for my own answers.

The works of the formalists, Propp, Aarne, Thompson and Uther, are useful to me in examining the structures of my tales and identifying the motifs I have used, but they do not assist in answering the question of endurance.

Folklorists such as Alan Dundes have criticised these formalist approaches for duplication and discrepancies, as well as neglecting the social and cultural contexts, let alone the eras and communities in which the tales have been told and re-told (1997). Dundes, however, acknowledges that 'the motif and tale type indices with all their

faults remain indispensable for the identification of traditional folk narratives' (1997, p. 200). In contrast to the formal indexes, the study of folklore includes a huge range of artistic communications (not just stories) between people and groups, and goes far beyond story types (Folklore Oral Tradition & Culture Studies 2012).

While folklore studies have been developing as an academic discipline since the 1950s, fairy tales as a field of academic study has come into prominence more recently. This is undoubtedly due to Professor Jack Zipes, the foremost scholar in fairy tales, whose first book in 1979, *Breaking the magic spell* (rev. edn 2002), moved away from the taxonomic approach of folktales-as-classification and examined folktales and fairy tales from a socio-historical, socio-political, Marxist perspective. In this book, he argues that fairy tales have endured because of their ability to change and adapt to the era and the society in which they are told, keeping them relevant to their audience. Zipes's theories have been highly influential in the field; he has decried any attempt to analyse the endurance of fairy tales from a psychological perspective (2002, p. 199), and continued to address the question of endurance from a Marxist perspective.

Zipes is critical of the way in which fairy tales have been used over the centuries, because of their adaptability, to socialise and civilise both adults and children (1997, 2006a). He reproaches Charles Perrault and the tales he wrote in the late 1600s in France as 'standard bearers of a male civilizing process', and suggests that writers of new fairy tales, or those that resist the traditional versions, should help children question rigid, expected societal standards and make their own 'moral and ethical choices' (1999, p. 11). He tracks the division of folktales and fairy tales in the late 1700s into *Volksmärchen*, which were deemed to be for the lower classes and children, and *Kunstmärchen*, literary fairy tales that he says were appropriated by the bourgeoisie (2002, pp. 31-32).

Zipes comments on how the ideology of the storyteller can lead to changes or adaptations in each story according to how he or she relates to the developments in the community (1999, p. 6). He is highly critical of Walt Disney's institutionalisation and infantilisation of the fairy tale through his movies, saying 'audiences can no longer envision a fairy tale for themselves, as they can when they read one' (1997, pp. 34-38). Unlike a fairy tale that is read, allowing the reader to imagine images and action, Disney's animations are 'trickery' and bombard the viewer with 'delightful images,

humorous figures, and erotic signs' (p. 37). His criticism focuses also on the way in which Disney and other producers of fairy tale movies from the 1930s onwards have been firmly aimed at commodification – producing merchandise that could be sold in conjunction with the movies (p. 91).

Much of what Zipes has written focuses on the politics and history of why the tales have been retold, and he often critiques the purposes to which the tales are now put in the culture industry. It is when his discussion turns to the tales' utopianism that I find some plausible explanation of reasons why people in all strata of society in so many different cultures have continued to retell these stories over many centuries. Zipes points out that fairy tales are utopian, offering hope, and that we respond to them because of our need to believe we can 'transform ourselves and our worlds', and that we want to be 'curious, startled, provoked, mystified, and uplifted' (1999, p. 7). It is when he discusses the tales in this admittedly Marxist context that his theories resonate with me.

As a writer, I draw two things from Zipes's comments and analyses at this point: I should be wary of reproducing stereotypical characters and plots that would continue that socialising, conforming role; and that I do indeed want to write tales that both provoke and startle (my preference) as well as encourage hope and transformation. This echoes the words of Alison Lurie in *Don't tell the grown-ups* (1990), who says children need other views of life than the shopping mall and the corporation, and that great, subversive children's books 'renew our instinctive energy, and act as a force for change' (1990, p. xi). In his article, 'Why fantasy matters too much' (2009), Zipes goes further to say, 'We need fantasy for resistance' (p. 79) as a deeper engagement with the fantastic impels us to question both the banality and harsh realities of our lives. Where our culture seeks to anaesthetise us or divert us, 'the fantastic can foster alternative thinking and viewing and negate spectacle and delusion' (p. 83).

Zipes's observations on the political and socio-historical role of fairy tales are echoed by other scholars such as Maria Tatar (1987, 1992) and Andrew Teverson (2013), who agree that every tale is 'culturally and historically layered' (Teverson 2013, p. 4). However, few other writers have tackled the question of endurance to the extent that Zipes has. Maria Tatar focuses on the grimmer aspects of the tales: how so many tales reward good deeds and deal out death for disobedience, the prevalence of sex, incest

and violence, and even cannibalism. She notes that children often laugh at the more gruesome stories, suggesting that they enjoy hearing about adults behaving in ‘extravagantly ghastly ways’, but I think she is closer to the mark when she says the stories provide a ‘safe distance from reality’ (1987, p. 216).

In the past, fairy tales have been an effective way of teaching children about life and how to cope with it, but Tatar brings this into the present by suggesting our culture today positions children as powerless, so that if a tale puts a child in the position of being morally right or victorious against larger foes, the appeal of it becomes obvious (1992, pp. xxiv-xxv). As Marina Warner points out (2014b), fairy tales were or are about real life. Family violence, famine, war, poverty and injustice are still with us. Fairy tales are able to depict the unsayable through generic characters, other world settings and the use of animal helpers, symbols and motifs and mostly happy endings. Realistic fiction situates the characters and plot entirely and inescapably in the reader’s own world. Neil Gaiman (*Coraline* 2002) and Patrick Ness (*A monster calls* 2011) are both adept at creating stories that start in the real world but transport the reader to an ‘other’ world in the same way fairy tales do with ‘Once upon a time’.

It is adults who are responsible for the retelling and republishing of fairy tales and it is credible to suggest they choose to do so where the tales can be used for moral instruction or warnings. Yet children resist didacticism, and the tales themselves resist fixed versions, as even the Grimms’ seven editions show (Tatar 1992). The most didactic of stories, known as cautionary tales, in *Struwwelpeter* (Hoffman 1845) are funny to children today and a source of comedy ideas for children’s writers such as Andy Griffiths in his *The bad book* (2004, Williamstown Literary Festival 2016).

Fairy tales have suffered the weight of various claims over the centuries: they are folk wisdom, social history, popular literature, socialising or child rearing tools (Bottigheimer 1987). These claims tend to say more about the scholar than about the tales themselves and how they were received by their audiences. Evidence from scholars such as Zipes shows that listeners and readers have come from all strata of society. While the tales were originally oral and of ‘the folk’, the advent of literary fairy tales and their extensive and continuing publication has served to make them more accessible, and therefore even more enduring.

Zipes expanded his ideas about the reasons for endurance as he researched meme theory for *Why fairy tales stick* (2006). He draws eclectically on meme theorists such as Richard Dawkins (1976), Susan Blackmore (1999) and Dan Sperber (1998) in applying memetics to fairy tales. Dawkins was the first to suggest that ideas that continue to persist and proliferate do so because of a kind of natural selection process, regardless of the host (Jordan 2014). Zipes proposes that meme theory can apply to fairy tales and the key factor in their replication is relevance to the community.

In 2012, in *The irresistible fairy tale* (ebook), he continues along this path, saying that stories exist as memes, forming ‘oral and literary traditions through imitation and repetition’ (ch. 3, para. 5). Certain language elements, such as rhythm, familiar plots, opening and closing lines, assist the storyteller and are welcomed by the audience. Once a story proves itself to be relevant and memorable, it is ‘memetically appropriated by large sectors of the populace’ and thus becomes ‘irresistible’ (2012, ch. 3, para. 6). If fairy tales are operating memetically now, appearing only as replications where their key functional components are ‘overshadowing, transformation, and remaking’ (ch. 3, para. 9), this does not bode well for those writers such as me attempting to create new tales. The challenge then is to break away from the memetic appropriation of fairy tales and their plots, motifs and what Zipes terms ‘stickiness’ and focus on what will provide or inspire originality.

In *Why fairy tales stick*, Zipes states, ‘the spread or contagion of a meme (fairy tale) does not depend solely on the meme itself, but also on decisions dependent on subjective and external (environmental) factors’ (2006, p. 9). He doesn’t develop the idea of ‘subjective’, but continues to emphasise the external factors, such as the culture industry, patriarchal society and control of children. It seems to me that, while he presents a good argument on meme theory and fairy tales, there is something in it that is too scientific, distant and ‘reasonable’. I am suggesting that it is the subjective, indeed what could be called the *collective subjective*, given how often a certain fairy tale is retold, that lies at the heart of fairy tales’ retelling and endurance.

Even after delving into memetics theory, Zipes still admits ‘it is difficult to say why we select certain fairy tales over others to disseminate’ (2006, p. xiv). Regardless of his fascination with the question of ‘stickiness’, as he terms it, ultimately he fails to answer it even to his own satisfaction, asking again, ‘why do certain tales appear to spread

almost like a virus?’ (2006, p. 15). At the end of *The irresistible fairy tale*, after criticising works by Ruth Bottigheimer and Willem de Blécourt, Zipes concludes ‘there is still a great deal of work to do’ by ‘judicious researchers with modest goals’, and that irresistibility is ‘still in demand of a great deal of explanation and interpretation’ (2012, Appendix B, para. 38).

The wealth of ideas, theory and discussion published by Zipes provided me with a solid grounding in the history, development, adaptation and commercial utilisation of fairy tales, but even in *The irresistible fairy tale*, his discussion on meme theory did not offer me a satisfactory answer for the central question of endurance, one that I could take forward into my writing practice. His work was even less useful for the second part of my research question: as a creative writer, how can I write new fairy tales for today’s children? Although a socio-economic-historical discussion tells me about how a fairy tale might have adapted and changed according to the circumstances of the time in which it was re-told, this would only assist me if I were focusing on adaptation and retelling, but I am not. The generation of a new, original fairy tale requires more than simply taking a list of elements from an old tale and re-forming it.

Stories do not survive without a willing, engaged audience who are gaining something from the experience. Before repetition occurs, there has to be something in the story that the audience responds to that is not evident in those other stories which do not endure. I would take Zipes’s term further – we select certain stories not only to ‘disseminate’, but to remember well into adulthood, to dwell on, and to use as a way to deal with both personal trauma and the vicissitudes of everyday life.

This leads me to my proposal that fairy tales have their enduring effect on us because of the way they correspond with the needs of our unconscious. Further, I propose that each of us experiences our own individual, unconscious response to particular tales, so that these are the ones we remember, read again, retell and ‘disseminate’. It is different for each person, but collectively we retain and then pass on the stories that are most important to our psyches. In Chapter 4, I will explore this theory further with regards to the work of Bruno Bettelheim and other relevant researchers and theorists in the field of psychoanalysis, psychology and fairy tales.

## Chapter 4 Signals from the unconscious

The field of fairy tale scholarship has tended to focus either on the history of the tales or on the reasons for their endurance, as I discussed in the previous chapter. Informed by the point of view of a creative writer, I now turn to those writings that I believe answer more satisfactorily my central question of how to write fairy tales that resonate in the same way as traditional tales. Time and again, as I have read works by researchers and scholars, I have found myself responding most positively to those ideas that involve psychological reactions to fairy tales, whether conscious or unconscious.

*The uses of enchantment* by Bruno Bettelheim (1976) is the book that led me initially into this research project. I first drew on this text while teaching the Myths and Symbols subject in the Diploma of Professional Writing & Editing at Victoria University TAFE. While it was originally a way to introduce students to the meaning of fairy tales on a personal level, my own interest in his theories grew. Before I examine Bettelheim's work in more detail, I will discuss the work of some relevant psychoanalysts and psychologists who preceded him.

Sigmund Freud's writing on the unconscious, along with symbolism in dreams, in *The interpretation of dreams* (first published in German in 1899) is a touchstone for many in the field. Whereas some writers, such as Bettelheim, frame their work as clearly Freudian, others draw on a range of theoretical works. Julius Heuscher's *A psychiatric study of fairy tales* (1974) consists of many short chapters that explore fairy tales psychoanalytically as well as phenomenologically. He cautions against pushing either approach too far to the point of becoming 'far-fetched and overly sophisticated' (p. 235), but he writes convincingly of the positive effects of facing the new and unpredictable (p. 309), and the ways in which fairy tales help a child or adult face the dread of death (p. 318). One of the accusations against Bettelheim was that he plagiarised from Heuscher's book (Dundes 1991, Zipes 2002, p. 180) but, while I found some similarities in material, I thought Bettelheim's book was more cohesive and logical, and took Heuscher's ideas to a deeper level of examination in terms of child therapy and how fairy tales can be used.

Earlier Freudian psychoanalysts writing on the subject of fairy tales and psychology tended to focus on adults (Heuscher 1974, Dieckmann 1997), as did Carl G Jung, the eminent Swiss psychoanalyst, who worked with Sigmund Freud but broke away from him in 1912. Jung wrote extensively about his theories of the collective unconscious and the role of archetypes. In 'The phenomenology of the spirit in fairy tales' (1969) he pays particular attention to the archetype of the old man as he appears in a number of tales, as well as animals' roles. He makes clear connections between our unconscious and the material of fairy tales: 'Being a spontaneous, naive, and uncontrived product of the psyche, the fairytale cannot very well express anything except what the psyche actually is' (Jung 1969, p. 239).

Jung's longtime colleague, Marie-Louise von Franz, was highly regarded in the field of psychoanalysis and the author of many articles and texts on fairy tales. She echoed and developed the connections made by Jung between fairy tales and the unconscious: 'Fairy tales are the purest and simplest expression of collective, unconscious psychic processes' (1996, p. 1). Her work connects archetypal images in fairy tales to the ways in which emotion plays a part in people's responses that 'mirror the basic patterns of the psyche' (p. 1). It seems reasonable to assume that an audience responds emotionally to a fairy tale, and yet theorists, such as Zipes, who focus on socio-historical relevance fail to give this element much weight in the question of endurance.

Von Franz's main interest was in those aspects that appear in patients' dreams, and that can be used in therapy to work towards a cure. The emphasis or exclusive focus on therapy is characteristic of most writings about psychoanalysis and fairy tales. Von Franz's works delve deeply into elements of fairy tales, such as the feminine (*The feminine in fairy tales* 1993), good and evil (*Shadow and evil in fairy tales* 1995) as well as general interpretation (*The interpretation of fairy tales* 1996). Her theories focus on how stories reside in the collective unconscious, how they reappear in our conscious minds and to what effect. The relatively recent republication of her works as cited here, first published in the 1970s, indicates the continuing interest in the field. Most recently, a 1976 lecture von Franz gave on connecting with and confronting our unconscious has been transcribed and published (2016).

Other psychoanalysts, scholars and theorists from the Jungian school have also written about the unconscious and its relationship with fairy tales, referring to CJ Jung's works

and his theory of the collective unconscious. Of some use to me was *Fairy tales: allegories of inner life* by JC Cooper (1983) and *The wisdom of fairy tales* by Rudolf Meyer (1997). While these texts did not offer me radically new or different ideas, they did serve to confirm that I was on the right track. Cooper discusses motifs and archetypal characters and story elements, reiterating that ‘sufferings, trials and tribulations are necessary for total fulfilment’ (1983, p. 21). Meyer’s book covers similar territory, but he also brings in the idea that fairy tales have a ‘supersensory’ origin, that they are evolved from spiritual sources and ‘inherited “blood” memory’ (p. 21), which echoes Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious. A common theme of these books is that of ‘starving souls’ in today’s world of reason, science, technology and mass media, and Cooper says that fairy tales offer people today ‘infinite moral, psychic and spiritual possibilities’ (p. 21). Meyer is noted as being a Rudolf Steiner disciple, and this led me to read further on Steiner and Waldorf education and its emphasis on using fairy tales and storytelling in the classroom (Kornberger 2008, Nicol 2010).

Central to all of this theory is that the response to fairy tales is coming at least partly from the unconscious of the listener. Because the unconscious, by its very nature, cannot be ‘mined’ for proof or data or evidence, let alone be forced to produce new fairy tales for a writer such as me, I continued to read widely and draw on pieces of evidence that would assist me in further exploring my questions.

While the writings of these psychoanalysts provide an entry point into examining the use of fairy tales in therapy, it is the work of Freudian child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim that has intrigued me and been the impetus for much of my research. Bettelheim ran the Orthogenic Home for children in Chicago for over forty years, where he treated many disturbed children. He believed that the use of fairy tales in therapy helped his patients to become stronger and more resilient and to cope with their traumas. Rather than just using the fairy tales in treating children, however, Bettelheim wanted to know why and how they worked, which became the driving force of his book, *The uses of enchantment* (1976). I spent considerable time weighing Zipes’s castigation of Bettelheim in a chapter in *Breaking the magic spell* (1979, 2002), as well as that of other critics (Dundes 1991, Pollak 1997), supporters (Seevak Sanders 2003, Meyer 2010), and a more balanced critical article by James W. Heisig (1978). I

concluded that Bettelheim has much to offer, especially where he is talking about the effects of fairy tales specifically on children, who are the target readers for my own creative work. More recent studies, discussed later in this chapter, have confirmed my conclusion.

Bettelheim describes in the first half of *The uses of enchantment* how he used fairy tales with his child patients, whereas the second half comprises analyses of several fairy tales in detail, using Freudian theory, symbol interpretation and terminology. The first half is the most useful to me as my primary interest is in Bettelheim's insistence on the psychological value of fairy tales as a way to assist children in dealing with their traumatic, frightening or overwhelming experiences. His practice/method is for children to be read a range of stories until they find one that they want to hear again. This is a signal that the story is important to the child for some reason. Even if the parent guesses what that reason might be, they are asked not to discuss it with the child. Bettelheim is adamant that the child be allowed to hear the story until, when 'he [sic] has gained all that he can from the preferred story, or the problems that made him respond to it have been replaced by others' (p. 18), he will lose interest and other tales can be read to him again. Bettelheim stresses that any explanation about the tale will destroy its enchantment and take away the potential for it to help the child through his struggles and to master the problem on his own.

Importantly, Bettelheim also emphasises that the parent should not hold back any tales that they believe too gruesome or violent. If a parent only reads 'safe' stories to the child, they are not offering the opportunity for the child to learn and grow from the story, to face whatever is scary in it. Bettelheim says that, although 'a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence' (p. 8), fairy tales give a child 'suggestions in symbolic form about how he [sic] may deal with these issues and grow safely into maturity' (p. 8). Bettelheim also stresses the importance of not assuming that motifs in tales can be easily interpreted and matched to psychological neurotic symptoms: 'the content of the chosen tale usually has nothing to do with the patient's external life, but much to do with his inner problems, which seem incomprehensible and hence unsolvable' (p. 25).

Bettelheim also discusses the role of heroes in fairy tales, how they must go out into the world and find their own secure places, and how this becomes a model for the child.

Aspects of this can be seen in studies such as that by child psychologist LI El'Koninova, looking at four- and five-year-olds, their ability to identify with the hero of a fairy tale and, more importantly, act out the tale and take action (2001). This is a core element of much of the drama and play therapy examples that were presented in talks and workshops at the Fairy Tale and Storytelling Therapy Seminar I attended at Sintra, Portugal, in 2017 (see p. 190).

Bettelheim was well aware of how many children were growing up without extended families or communities, and how many were struggling in dysfunctional families (p. 11). Bettelheim believes the deep emotions felt by small children may be expressed through their behaviour, but these emotions come from the unconscious. At that age, he argues, they cannot identify the true cause of the emotion, nor should they. A child cannot 'analyse' himself. This is where there is a crucial place for fairy tales: 'The child's unconscious processes can become clarified for him only through images which speak directly to his unconscious' (p. 31).

As a children's writer, the key idea I have gained from Bettelheim's book is the central importance of our unconscious responses to fairy tales, especially as children. While his theories focused on children in therapy and the therapeutic uses of the tales, their insights can be generalised to all children and their responses. Because children have few barriers to fantasy and easily suspend disbelief, they are more open to engaging with tales on an emotional level and, as Bettelheim says, responding to whichever tale relates to their current psychological needs.

I would also venture that this theory ties in with Andrew Melrose's proposal of the picture book as 'mediator' between parent/reader/writer (nurturer) and child (nurtured), as well as being an 'important psychological and sociological tool' (2012), given Bettelheim's insistence on the fairy tale being told in a loving, supportive environment (1976, pp. 154-156). It is an issue I have with Bettelheim: that he eschewed the reading of tales from a book, despite demanding that traditional versions be used, and insisted the parent retell from memory. Melrose's idea of the fairy tale picture book, even a scary one, being a place where a child comes to explore, to confirm what it already knows and to find 'what he or she knows not', even if the child can't yet articulate it, is motivating for me as a writer (Melrose 2012, pp. 10-12).

Bettelheim also asks himself what became a central question for my project: ‘why, in my experience, children – normal and abnormal alike, and at all levels of intelligence – find folk fairy tales more satisfying than all other children’s stories’ (p. 6). Bettelheim’s answer was rooted in his Freudian psychoanalysis of the tales, his theory that their endurance came from meeting the ‘conscious and unconscious requirements of many people’ (p. 36), and in his long-established use of the tales in his therapy with disturbed children. Much of what he put forward in his book resonates strongly with me. His insistence that children should be read the darker tales as well as the lighter, that children relate to certain stories because they answer an inexpressible need or address a problem they are struggling with, and his theory of why a fairy tale endures – these ideas make a deeper sense to me than theories of socio-economic history or simple symbol analysis.

Bettelheim’s theory that a child who faces scary things, or ideally listens to a scary fairy tale, can learn how to be brave and grow in resilience is borne out, ironically in reverse, by current studies that show over-protectiveness and ‘helicopter parenting’ leads to anxiety and a disabling lack of coping skills (LeMoyne & Buchanan 2011, Locke, Campbell & Kavanagh 2012, Estroff Marano 2014, Cortes 2014, Schiffrin & Liss 2017). Gaiman echoes their findings with his words that I previously quoted: ‘I think if you are protected from dark things then you have no protection of, knowledge of, or understanding of dark things when they show up’ (Popova 2014). As a children’s writer, I want to create stories that encourage and enable children to grow and develop courage and resilience. Bettelheim has placed fairy tales in a therapeutic environment with abused and traumatised children, and observed and written about their healing and strengthening effects. He confirms my theory that fairy tales can achieve this for other children, too.

Bettelheim’s theories of fairy tales and their ability to heal children met with both loud acclaim, including *The uses of enchantment* winning the National Book Award in the USA in 1977, and subsequent severe criticism by eminent scholars such as Zipes, Dundes and Tatar (1992). The idea of fairy tales having therapeutic value was scornfully dismissed, despite Bettelheim and other psychoanalysts having successfully used them in child therapy for many years. The esteemed Melbourne child psychoanalyst, Dr Margaret Erickson, used fairy tales with disturbed children for over

thirty years, and her work is archived at the Dax Centre at the University of Melbourne (The Dax Centre n.d.).

It seems from my research that very little work on fairy tales that mentioned Bettelheim's theories was published in English in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, when I interviewed Jack Zipes, he was still vociferously anti-Bettelheim (J Zipes, personal interview, 3 July 2014), and I have experienced this kind of reaction to Bettelheim's work in discussions with other researchers.

Nevertheless, I have returned many times to his ideas on developing courage and resilience in children through reading fairy tales to them. This therapeutic value seems to me to hold a core veracity that underpins the reasons for the endurance of so many tales over the centuries, and has been at the heart of writing my own fairy tales.

Further research revealed a number of recent studies where fairy tales have been used in therapeutic situations, helping children with terminal illnesses (Margherita 2014, Zehetner 2013), war trauma (Feuerverger 2010), abuse (Hours 2014), death (Lamers 1995) and mental health issues (Walker 2010). I will now examine these in more detail.

In 2008 Adamo et al published 'Tom Thumb in hospital: the fairy tale workshop in a paediatric oncology and haematology ward'. This workshop was carried out in a hospital in Naples, Italy. The article refers firstly to the work of Pierre Lafforgue who 'for the last 30 years has used the fairy tale in therapeutic workshops for young psychotic and autistic patients in ... Bordeaux' (p. 264). Although Lafforgue wrote a book about these workshops, it is not available in English. However the article describes his work and his theory:

the fairy tale can also promote the construction or reinforcement within the child of mental functions that have not yet been activated or disturbed by the interference of traumatic events, such as the capacity to make distinctions (good/bad, internal/external, aggressor/victim, etc.) and the capacity to establish connections (of cause-effect, of temporal succession, between external reality and the inner world, etc.) (p. 264).

Lafforgue developed a methodology based on those principles that he called *atelier-conte*, a series of workshops that use a particular fairy tale chosen on the basis of the needs of the participants. Adamo and her team devised their fairy tale workshop on the

same principles in order to create an intervention program that would help children with terminal or serious diseases. Tales were chosen that avoided connection to real traumatic events of abandonment or death but would ‘activate or support the capacity to think about feelings and experiences that may even be extremely painful and channel them elsewhere or upon others apart from oneself, thus respecting the children’s defences’ (pp. 267-268). From that, ‘each child identifies with different characters, according to the anxieties that he or she is coping with and his or her defensive strategies’ (p. 268).

While this program differs from Bettelheim’s strategies and is aimed at older children and teenagers, it is still an important example of the perceived psychological benefits of fairy tales in areas of childhood trauma. The children displayed a range of therapeutic outcomes, including being able to direct their anger towards adults (parents and medical staff, who were regarded as a source of pain because of treatments), and being able to express their anxieties and fears.

One of the greatest fears for the adults, and some children, was of talking about death. Adamo et al use Lafforgue’s term, *interfantasmization*, where the fairy tale represents ‘a flexible and endless field within which otherwise unmentionable emotions can be expressed’ (p. 277, italics in original). It is worth noting here an article by Elizabeth P Lamers about the long-term negative effects in our society of shielding children from the realities of death, leading to adults who have great difficulty dealing with mortality later in their lives (1995, p. 152), greatly exacerbated when it is their own child. It is another facet of the problems generated by over-protective parenting. Facing terminal illness at any time is confronting and frightening, but there is a tendency to avoid talking about it when a child is terminal. This avoidance often serves to heighten children’s fears instead of helping them.

In Adamo et al’s study, through dramatising and then drawing, the children were able to approach their anxieties and fantasies ‘through a character who makes it possible to be *someone else in a different situation*’ (p. 278, italics in original). At this point, the writers refer to Bettelheim’s theories, noting that the ability of any child to identify with the character or the story depends on when the child hears the story and what it evokes, a point that he makes several times in *The uses of enchantment*. Most important of the fairy tale features in this context is ‘and they lived happily ever after’, the

element of hope, which takes on ‘special significance’ in a paediatric cancer ward (p. 278).

A somewhat similar program was set up in Naples several years later, in a different hospital – Santobono-Pausilipon Hospital (Margherita et al 2014). This time the children were all cancer patients, and it was decided that instead of using traditional fairy tales, the workshop would facilitate the invention of fantasy tales by the children themselves. The aim was still to facilitate ‘sharing the experience of the illness’, and to allow fears and anxieties to be shared (p. 427). This program had similar positive outcomes to that of Adamo et al, who place their study in the continuum of earlier psychoanalysts’ work with fairy tales, including Bettelheim, von Franz and Lafforgue.

In 2013, a paediatrician at Sydney’s Westmead Hospital, Dr Anthony Zehetner, published an article, ‘Why fairy tales are still relevant to today’s children’. His interest lies in working with his patients, who are often facing severe illnesses or family disruption due to substance-abusing parents. Zehetner is a firm believer in the therapeutic value of fairy tales. Interviewed by phone on 5 December 2014, Zehetner explained that he often uses fairy tales as a tool of engagement when talking to children about their diagnoses and that children clearly respond to the analogies. They struggle with their own feelings of being disempowered, both by the hospital system and by their own parents. This is similar to the observations and evidence of Adamo et al’s study.

A more personal account of the therapeutic power of fairy tales appears in ‘Fairy tales and other stories as spiritual guides for children of war: an auto-ethnographic perspective’ (2010) by Grace Feuerverger. She explores the way in which stories help children to ‘make personal meaning out of difficult – and sometimes terribly unjust – events in their young lives’ (p. 233). As she sat with two children from Afghanistan who had been traumatised by the war and seen family members killed, she realised that she wasn’t really connecting with them and chose instead to read them a story (*A time for toys* by Margaret Wild, set in a concentration camp). The story opened up a conversation about death and pain in a way that had not seemed possible before.

Feuerverger goes on to explore her own experiences of reading fairy tales as a child of Holocaust survivors. She says about the tales, ‘what I most appreciated was that I was

not being falsely reassured ... it was a relief to read the truth [and] fairy tales often demonstrated ways to vanquish the doom' (p. 239). Like Adamo et al, she points out the importance of the happy ending where a child can 'play with his or her problems in the safe harbour' (p. 240). She explains that the stories took her on a journey of personal discovery – the journey to autonomy that Bettelheim describes, and she directly refers to – and that 'you will have to leave home for this journey but know that there will always appear threads and signposts along the way in order to bring you back' (p. 240).

She quotes Bettelheim's words on how good and evil appear in practically every fairy tale, as they do in life and in every person. So, 'the child has a basis for understanding that there are great differences between people, and that therefore one has to make choices about who one wants to be' (p. 242).

Feuerverger ends in words that almost directly quote Bettelheim: 'All children, vulnerable or robust, gain different meaning from such stories according to their own needs at different times in their lives' (p. 243). By describing her own experience of finding courage and resilience through a particular fairy tale, she provides further evidence, in both a historical and contemporary sense, that Bettelheim's theories still hold true.

Like Bettelheim, Armelle Hours, a French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, has focused on working with abused children. 'Reading fairy tales and playing: a way of treating abused children' (2014), records the research that took place in an institutional foster home where many of the children had been placed because of family abuse or neglect. Hours explains that in the case of abused children, there is little or no room for fantasy because 'the child is expending so much energy trying to survive' (p. 143). They are not even able to dream this emotional experience and deal with it in that way. Instead 'the threat of being overwhelmed is permanent' (p. 144) and may stop the child being able to open up to standard psychotherapeutic treatment.

The result is a lack of 'internal space for play', which is why psychoanalysis often uses play as a way to restore the space and allow a place for mediation between the child and the therapist (p. 144). Hours lists a number of authors, including Bettelheim and Lafforgue, who have used fairy tales in psychoanalytic treatment. The tales are used to

encourage play, without interpretation from the adults, consistent with Bettelheim's instruction. Hours describes what takes place throughout the sessions as a process of 'transformation' and says the fairy tale play scenarios restore and extend 'psychic reality' (p. 149).

These new studies quote Bettelheim's work extensively and show that there continues to be great value placed in the theories he wrote about in *The uses of enchantment*. My examination of studies and writings on the use of fairy tales in therapy has shown how important the connections and resonances are between the deep themes of the tales and our unconscious.

The current development and use of bibliotherapy needs to be mentioned as it is also used as a therapeutic tool. Practitioners can be psychologists, teachers or librarians, but they should be trained in the theory in order to select the right book/s for each child (Lucas & Soares 2013). Generally, realistic books are chosen that deal with the same kind of problem that is identified in the child, along with positive resolutions, using recommended levels of appropriateness (Rozalski, Stewart & Miller 2010, Lucas & Soares 2013). While some practitioners do use fairy tales as an option (Dughi & Cotrau 2014), most focus on realism and direct identification with the character by the child. For this reason, I have only read enough about bibliotherapy to enable me to understand the purpose of it.

In storytelling therapy, however, fantasy, and fairy tales in particular, take the reader to another world and facilitate exploration of the unknown and the unconscious. As academic and psychologist Maria Vallasekova says, fantasy is vital in a young child's development and a fairy tale is 'a form that corresponds in a strange way to the special features of a child's psyche' (1974, p. 28). Tatar says in *Enchanted hunters*, 'Absorbed early in life, words and stories powerfully affect the formation of identity' (2009, p. 22). Fairy tales, depicting both beauty and horror, provide the 'thrill' of fear in a 'safe zone where nobody gets hurt' (2009, p. 83).

Storytelling therapy relates much more closely to my central questions because it often intentionally uses fairy tales. Storytelling is also of use in play therapy, sandplay therapy and drama therapy, all of which were presented and discussed at the III International Seminar of Storytelling and Fairy Tale Therapy I attended in Sintra,

Portugal in 2017. As well as seeing concrete examples via case studies and in workshops of how this kind of therapy works, I was also able to present my own work in writing new fairy tales and engage participants in writing their own tales, as discussed in Chapter 1.

As part of my writing workshop at this Seminar, I adapted a number of prompts from Nancy Mellon's *Storytelling & the art of imagination* (1992), which provides many examples of the therapeutic value of both listening to and creating fairy tales, for both children and adults. Her offering of storyscapes, ideas for visualisation and stimulating the imagination, and case studies from her workshops provide qualitative evidence that echoes Bettelheim's theories. One of her writing workshop story prompts led me to write my tale, *The handkerchief of tears*.

Horst Kornberger is a writer and teacher who uses the term 'story medicine' in his book, *The power of stories: nurturing children's imagination* (2008). He also echoes Bettelheim, when he emphasises the importance of the unconscious: 'Sometimes the relationship between the content of a story and our life may be blatantly obvious. At other times it may remain unconscious. The intellect may not be able to see the link, but the soul recognises the healing properties' (p. 21). Like Mellon, he goes beyond Bettelheim in proposing that fairy tales are of benefit to all children, not just those who need therapy. His analysis of which fairy tales are most beneficial at each age level was particularly helpful to me in analysing whether each of my own fairy tales was suitable for its intended age group.

Other methods of using storytelling in therapy have developed in the 20th century, along with the publication of books such as *Therapeutic metaphors for children and the child within* (Mills & Crowley 1986, 2014). This text focuses on the role of metaphor and storytelling in educational psychotherapy and discusses their use with traumatised and disturbed children with behavioural issues. The stories used or created in therapy sessions are fairy tale- and fantasy-based. There has been a growth in educational psychotherapy, where treatment is approached through story groups, via organisations such as the Caspari Foundation in the UK (Caspari Foundation n.d.). Recently, this broader interest of therapists in storytelling has included a renewed reliance on the therapeutic value of fairy tales as demonstrated by the focus of a third international seminar on fairy tale and storytelling therapy, previously mentioned.

The scholars who have written about the endurance of fairy tales, discussed in Chapter 3, rarely engaged with the psychological effects of the tales. Zipes, with his criticism of Bettelheim, actively rejected his work. Indeed, it seems to me that the firm rejections by him and Dundes were as much about staving off any encroachment by psychologists into their field of study as about genuine engagement with the ideas. Zipes's discussions of utopian elements and hope in fairy tales is always couched in socio-historical, socio-political, Marxist approaches.

Whichever approach these various scholars have taken, it has been from 'the outside', attempting, through academic analysis of and discourse on various 'first level' elements, to explain the endurance of fairy tales. By 'first level', I mean those elements that can be identified and classified by reading the tales – generic characters, other world settings, clear and evocative symbols, melodic and rhythmic language, familiar opening and closing lines and animal helpers. Only the psychological approach takes us to the deeper levels, where personal affective responses create the need for the tales to be listened to or read again and again until, as Bettelheim said, the need has been assuaged.

As I proposed earlier and now reiterate, Bettelheim's insights into the value of fairy tales for traumatised children can be extended in today's society, for all children. Children today live in a climate of fear and powerlessness, which may be ironically made worse by over-protective 'helicopter' parenting (Gray 2011, LeMoyne & Buchanan 2011, Estroff Marano 2014). Many children are constantly exposed to media that increase this fear further or, in some cases, cause desensitisation (Denby 1996). Part of this helicoptering has led to perhaps the biggest change in the reception of fairy tales in the past twenty years: their rejection by parents and educators as being unsuitable reading material for children, due to the violence and gruesomeness in their more traditional versions. Instead, picture book versions have become sanitised and sentimentalised in the same way as Walt Disney's fairy tale movies (Zipes 1997, p. 37).

Much of the violence and darkness is deleted or changed in the Walt Disney versions, reducing them to light visual entertainment. It is what leads scholars such as Armando Maggi to declare fairy tales have lost their magic altogether (Gibson 2012). Gone are the deeper psychological meanings and the potential for children to learn courage and resilience through dealing with things they find scary via an imaginary 'other' world.

Most recently, the fairy tale in all its darkness has been taken up by those making films and television series for older audiences, not children, such as *Maleficent* (2014) with a powerful, vengeful fairy, *Snow White and the huntsman* (2012) where the huntsman becomes her protector, and *Grimm* (2011-2017), a TV series which features a police detective who is a descendant of the Grimms and can see people transforming into monsters.

Children are left with the sanitised versions of traditional tales while the darker tales are ignored or deleted from collections, and publishers of new tales are similarly constrained by what they see as the demands of the vocal conservatives. Yet a number of writers and publishers persevere, publishing fairy tales in both picture book and novel form that challenge, unnerve and provoke both child and adult readers with lasting benefits. These new fairy tales, such as those discussed in Chapter 2, resonate in the same way the traditional tales do, but their modern published formats and mostly contemporary settings bring them into the twenty-first century and perhaps help to make them more palatable to the conservatives, although it is still likely scary tales will be challenged by fearful parents, or rejected by nervous publishers as was the case with *The grab-me* (J Davis, personal communication 9 March).

In the children's literature field, relatively little has been written about the psychologically therapeutic benefits of fairy tales. However, much has been written about the positive effects of stories on children, especially those stories that challenge conformity and sanitisation (Lurie 1990, Nodelman 1996, Warner 1998, Tatar 2009). Even Zipes, from his Marxist perspective, is keen for stories and fantasy to stimulate readers into rejecting conformity and capitalism through subversive storytelling (2009).

If fairy tales operate on deeper levels and are capable of helping children to heal and grow in courage and resilience in order to cope with the world they live in, then it would be beneficial for children to experience more fairy tales. Bettelheim says, 'Which story is most important to a particular child at a particular age depends entirely on his psychological stage of development, and the problems which are most pressing to him at the moment' (*The uses of enchantment*, p. 15). Neither we, nor our therapists if we are in therapy, can predict with any certainty which tales will strike that deep chord in us, although some adults are clearly keen to reflect on their childhood experiences and responses to particular stories (Bernheimer 2007).

I am restating that this unconscious, needs-meeting response is the underlying reason for the endurance of fairy tales. The deep themes of the tales are a form of Susan Cooper's 'signals' that correspond to our traumas, whether these arise from forms of family violence, war, fear or powerlessness. This unconscious response occurs in both adults and children of all ages and backgrounds and is evidenced through the wealth of writing from psychologists who have used fairy tales in therapy.

Regardless of adaptations, retellings, or what Zipes calls socio-political and culture industry manipulations, fairy tales have survived over the centuries because psychologically we need them. We need these stories because they speak to our unconscious, and each of us has favourite or compelling stories because these are the ones our unconscious tells us are helpful or meaningful to us.

All the familiar formal elements of fairy tales – their generic characters, other world settings, clear and evocative symbols, melodic and rhythmic language, familiar opening and closing lines and animal helpers – assist us to engage with and enjoy them. But it is the deeper themes that we respond to, themes that deal with the reality of our lives – injustice, alienation, isolation, poverty, death, powerlessness, hunger, good and evil, violence, abuse and incest – in a form that reaches into our unconscious and stirs our imagination and emotions. Sometimes it stirs us to action, to resistance, as Zipes hopes, and sometimes towards healing, hope, new courage and resilience.

For children's writers today, such as me, who want to create new original tales that will be relevant in our highly technological, challenging society, understanding the psychological reasons for fairy tales' endurance is paramount. Simply using a list of elements from a formalist such as Propp may help to create a story, but it will by no means result in a deeply resonant tale that will hold within it those therapeutic effects. Just as listening to or reading a fairy tale connects with the unconscious, so writing a new tale should emerge in some way from the writer's unconscious. The writer needs to find a way to 'dig deep' to draw out the material.

The process I have developed through my research, reading of fairy tales and experimenting with focused free writing has resulted in seven original fairy tales (four included here) and a novel. The workshop I presented at the Sintra Seminar showed that my process could be used successfully by others. Attempts to direct the

unconscious are always likely to fail, but my conviction that the unconscious was where the deep resonances and themes of fairy tales lay propelled me to keep exploring and trying to open the 'unbiddable door', for myself and other writers.

## **Conclusion: Happily ever after**

I began with Cooper's idea of the 'unbiddable door' – the writer's unconscious – and her theory of 'radioactive signals' between writer and reader, and continued with my focus firmly on fairy tales and why we respond to them and retell them.

The texts of Jack Zipes were an important part of my research, and both his translations and his scholarly texts inspired me and expanded my knowledge of fairy tales and their history. Ultimately, though, despite agreeing with much of his theory, particularly the potential of fairy tales to be both subversive and utopian, I decided that neither socio-historical relevance nor meme theory were the answers to the question of endurance that I was seeking as a creative writer.

*The uses of enchantment* by Bruno Bettelheim led me on to deeper research in the field of psychology and fairy tales, and it was here I found an answer that resonated strongly with my aims for this project and pulled together the threads of my growing theory. The continuous circle of fairy tales between writer/storyteller and reader/audience is enabled and endures because of our deep psychological responses to the core archetypal, thematic and emotional elements of each story. The strong, compelling evidence of the use of fairy tales in psychology to heal trauma and grow resilience and courage serves to confirm my theory. It provides a sound basis from where I can propose that fairy tales can do this for all children. I would add that these fairy tales should be those aligned thematically with the traditional tales, not adulterated 'Disneyfied' versions which have been drained of deeper meanings.

The six contemporary writers discussed in Chapter 2 who created compelling original fairy tale works identified at least some of their unconscious connections, or were aware of their own process in opening their 'unbiddable door'.

The creative writing process I have developed as a key component of this thesis goes further in deliberately tuning in to a writer's own 'signals' in order to potentially produce new, deeply resonant fairy tales. The process served to enable both the writing of fairy tales in a traditional style and a novel that echoed and drew on fairy tale

elements. While it may not serve all writers, and is not intended to be seen as a mandatory requirement for others to adhere to, its successful outcomes provided key evidence of my theory linking the unconscious to both the reception and production of resonant fairy tales.

This writing process draws from or is inspired by my unconscious, and results in a fast first draft that opens my own ‘unbiddable door’ far enough for the birds to fly out. The revision process further drew deeply on reading, history, research, and consideration of the intended audience. It now only remains for me to share my stories with this audience and see how resonant and ‘radioactive’ they are.

*And so the children’s writer gathered her tales around her, gave them one last brush-and-polish, and sent them out into the world, hoping they would fly far and make many children ... courageous and resilient, and perhaps even rebellious and revolutionary.*

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## **APPENDIX 1: Writing prompts for Sintra workshop**

(Loosely adapted from Mellon, N 1992, *Storytelling & the art of imagination*, Element, Rockport, MA.)

- a. Think of a forest which is a dark, tangled place without a clear path or where the path becomes obscured or hard to find. Listen to the forest, smell and taste it. Who is walking through it, trying to find their way? What struggles are they undergoing? Who comes to help them? What happens in the darkest places? What happens in the clearings? What does your character find in the forest? How do they respond or deal with it? How do they find their way?
  
- b. Think of a habit or person that absorbs your good energy in a negative way. Think of this as your internal bog, a place of stagnation, part of your inner geography. Give your bog an imaginary name. Describe the bog's smells and sounds and sensations. Who is the keeper of your bog? A monster or human-like? Describe them. Who is the hero who will cross the bog, or find a way around, or change its nature? Describe your hero.  
Tell the story of your hero's journey into the bog.
  
- c. What do you feel most resistant to? What do you shy away from? What can't you get past?  
Imagine this as a door or gate. Describe the door or gate in as much detail as you can. How big is it? What is it made of? What is it attached to? Who guards it? How can you get past them? What weapons, internal or external, will you use? Describe the forcing of the door or gate, the opening of it, the passing through to the other side.
  
- d. Imagine a character who alternates between living in the land of the dead and the land of the living. In your story, tell how he or she helps in the land of the dead, and why he/she is able to return to the land of the living. How does your character escape death? How does he/she speak to the dead? How does she/he deal with the living, and explain where

she/he has been?

Is there one occasion when something goes wrong? Or a problem is solved? Tell this story.

- e. Tell the worst nightmare you remember from your own store of dreams as a story. How does it begin? What happens? How do you feel? How do you respond? How does it end? Tell it in as much detail as you can. If you feel the need to invent some things, do so. Tell the story you need to.
- f. Tell the story of a sleeping prince. What has happened to him? How did he get this way? Tell how he is awakened by a princess. Describe her and how she finds the prince. What happens? What does it mean?
- g. Imagine an ancient tree, huge and shady, with deep roots in the soil. Imagine yourself digging in between the roots and finding a box. When you open the box, inside is a piece of parchment, and on this is written a question that you need to find the answer to.  
Write a story in which a hero or heroine goes on a journey to find the answer to this question for themselves.
- h. Think of a time in your childhood when you experienced an awful rejection of your eager, loving small self. See yourself as a positive character under a spell, perhaps imprisoned or held captive somewhere where no one can find you.  
Now picture the one who rejected you as an ogre or ogress or witch or wizard, angry and negative. Let the negative energy and the positive energy do battle until help comes and the spell is broken. Imagine yourself winning the battle, becoming happy and positive again.
- i. Imagine a story of three brothers or princes (or three sisters or princesses) who are given a quest. Imagine what each of the three are like – all different – and describe them and their characters.  
Set them on their quest, and describe what happens and why. Which one

succeeds? Why? How does it all happen? What happens to the two who fail? How is the quest resolved?

- j. Name and describe an evil witch or wizard. What does he or she do? How does she or he behave and act towards others? Purposes and pleasures?

Now create a child or children who are captured. Where are they imprisoned? How do they cleverly escape? Tell the story of their success.

- k. Imagine a house near a forest or in a forest. Who lives in this house? Is it a forest creature of some kind, or an elf, or a fairy, or someone more negative? Describe as much as you can of the house and the inhabitant. Who finds the house? What happens?

- l. Imagine a crown. What is it made of? What are its qualities? Where is it? Who gets to wear it? When and why? Tell the story of the crown – does it get into the wrong hands? Is it stolen? Who rescues it? How? Or does the crown have the power to rescue itself? How does this happen?

## APPENDIX 2: Photographs

Installation views 'Cai Guo-Qiang: Falling Back to Earth' at the Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane 2013-14.

Photographs by Sherryl Clark. Caption kindly supplied by Queensland Art Gallery GOMA.





