

Chapter Four

A Long Way To Fall

The gypsy clan hurried over to the fortune teller's caravan, and sure enough there lay Madame Rosa slumped across the table, her eyes staring into space all glassy and glazed over. Her mouth was wide open as if she were gasping for air and strange white foam bubbled from her lips.

“I came to see if she was ready to depart and found her like this!” cried Helga, wringing her hands. “I think she's been poisoned!”

“Nonsense woman!” proclaimed her husband, shaking his head. “Who could

possibly want to harm Madame Rosa?
Certainly not any of us!”

“I don’t know!”

“It must have been a tragic accident! She must have ingested some strange and deadly herb by mistake. You know how she was always collecting all manner of odd potions and lotions. Besides if somebody had murdered her then one of us would have seen something! It’s impossible for a stranger to have entered our camp undetected and to have carried out this heinous crime. There’s just no way that could have happened!”

The rest of the gypsies nodded as they muttered amongst themselves and agreed that nobody had seen anything suspicious but Florrie wasn’t convinced.

Her head kept spinning over and over every strange thing that the fortune teller had

told her earlier. She could not shake the feeling that something was dreadfully wrong.

“Oh, the poor soul!” wailed Helga, “What a dreadful way to go!”

“We must bury her immediately and pay our last respects,” announced Johann, putting a comforting arm around his distraught wife.

Naturally, after Madame Rosa’s unfortunate demise, the mood amongst the Gypsy Kings was sombre and silent, as a few of the men collected some spades and began to dig a hole in the cold, hard ground. Helga and a couple of the other women carefully wrapped the fortune teller’s body in a white sheet and in due course Madame Rosa was laid to rest.

Nobody said much that evening and Florrie knew instinctively now was not the

time to mention what had occurred to any of the others. Besides, she reasoned, there was no indication that anything Rosa had said was actually true.

The following morning the convoy of caravans set off towards Hamelin, the sadness of their loss dragging after them like a sack of stones.

They had travelled for more than seven days and Albert and Florrie had no real sense of what day it was, as if time had simply evaporated. The journey had been mostly uneventful and straightforward, and Arthur Canarthy was confidently predicting that their luck had changed for the better. But, just as with the flip of a coin when you bet on heads and it lands on tails, their luck was altered for the worse.

“I think we might have a problem,” Johann Junkert yelled, as the gypsy convoy came to a stand-still. They all stared in dismay at a long swaying, fraying, rickety rope bridge that extended across a vast chasm in front of them. The fragile foot bridge juddered and shuddered alarmingly in the gusty breeze not looking safe at all, and it was clear from Arthur Canarthy’s face that he wasn’t happy about the prospect of having to attempt to cross it.

“Flibbertigibbets!” grunted Ebenezer Smythe, “This ain’t good!”

“I don’t remember this being here. We must have taken a wrong turn somewhere,” mused Johann Junkert.

“That’s impossible!” muttered Ebenezer, consulting his odd little compass. “This makes no bleedin’ sense, the needle’s

gone mad like we're standin' in some sort of magnetic vortex!"

"It's probably just broken. Anyway, one thing's for sure, there's no way we can cross with the caravans and horses," replied the gypsy frowning.

"Maybe, there's another way to cross," the children's guardian ventured hopefully.

"If we go round it will take many more days," announced Johann taking out a telescope and peering through it. "I can't even see an end to it in either direction."

"Bleedin' 'ell Arthur! It's time we don't 'ave," growled Ebenezer gruffly, "come on! We'll 'ave to leave the 'orses an' cross on foot."

"Now hang on a minute, let's not be hasty! I mean, it would be a tad remiss on my part, to allow the children to cross such an

unsafe looking bridge. What if it were to break? The children would plummet to a certain and painful death from such a height! We would all be smashed to smithereens. I really think we should reconsider.”

“Johann’s already said there ain’t no other way to get across, so stop stallin’ an’ let’s go!” snapped Ebenezer Smythe, giving his friend a non too gentle shove towards the edge.

“Wait!” shrieked Arthur Canarthy, sounding like a little girl, “I’m just examining the options. There’s no need to be testy, or indeed for us to make such a perilous decision in haste, I mean for all we know those wooden planks might be rotten, or somebody might have tampered with the ropes!”

“Uncle Arthur, we don’t have a choice. We have to cross the bridge if we are going to

complete the third quest in time. Come on don't be frightened, take my hand," Florrie suggested gently, trying to reassure him. "Look, I'll go first if you like."

"Yes, that might be a good idea, after all you are much lighter than I am. You go across first and I'll wait here," gulped Arthur Canarthy.

"Blimey Mimey! Arthur Canarthy, what sort of attitude is that to take? You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"I don't mind," replied Florrie, "if Uncle Arthur is scared..."

"I'm not scared," spluttered Arthur Canarthy, looking as terrified as could be, "it's just that heights make me a little dizzy, that's all."

"Well don't look down an' you'll be fine. Now come on, I'll cross first - you little 'uns

follow behind me an' Arthur, you go last. Johann, if you can look after the 'orses we'll find you when you get to 'amelin!"

"Alright my friend, good luck and go carefully!" cautioned the gypsy, slapping the smuggler's back.

Ebenezer nodded and cautiously started to walk across the tippy bridge closely followed by the children as the wind whistled tunelessly around them. Arthur Canarthy took a deep breath and gingerly placed one foot on the bridge, slowly edging himself across the wooden planks, his hands clinging onto the rope railings for dear life. Step by step the small group made their way forward until they had almost reached half way. It was at this stage that the children's guardian let out a blood curdling cry that made them jump like grasshoppers. As they turned round to see

what was wrong, they could see Uncle Arthur's foot had gone through one of the slats and that he was dangling over the side of the bridge.

“Don't move!” yelled Ebenezer, “Ang on! Don't let go!”

“Help! Help me! I'm too young to die! I told you it wasn't safe but would you listen? Oh no! You insisted we went across!” wailed Arthur Canarthy, struggling to regain his balance and failing miserably as he lost his grip on the rope he was holding.

“Help me, I'm falling!”

“Mr. Smythe! Quickly do something! Uncle Arthur's going to be killed!” screamed Florrie, as her guardian slipped again and found himself hanging upside down.

“Children! Get to the other side now! Get yourselves to safety!” shouted Ebenezer,

pushing past them. “I’m goin’ back for your uncle.”

And so, with their hearts pounding like hammers, Albert and Florrie, ran the remaining distance of the bridge, and threw themselves to the ground. When they glanced back to see what was happening, they realised that Ebenezer had managed to pull their guardian back onto the bridge and the two men were crawling on their bellies towards them. The Gypsy Kings looked on in horror, as they shouted out words of encouragement from the other side of the chasm.

“Hurry! You’re almost there!” yelled Albert urgently, as he stretched out his hand to them.

“Come on you can do it!”

It only took moments for the men to haul themselves over to the other side of the

bridge, but those moments felt like hours to the Leadington twins, especially as the old fraying ropes holding the bridge together were creaking and groaning in a distinctly disturbing manner.

“I saw my whole life flashing before me!” spluttered Mr. Arthur Canarthy, in a most melodramatic fashion, as the children helped drag him further away from the edge.

“I knows wot you mean! I thought we wos gonnas!” panted Ebenezer Smythe, holding his chest and bending over in obvious discomfort. “Anyways it’s over now. We is all safe an’ that’s the main thing!”

In the distance they could see the Gypsy Kings cheering and clapping their hands, the sense of relief tangible on both sides of the chasm.