

Fifty-six Story Starters (and one ending)

It looked like a perfectly nice, perfectly ordinary birthday cake.

Until they lit the candles...

*

“Everyone knows time travel’s impossible!” Kylie said. Her finger reached for the red button on the control panel. “Do you really think—?” Her finger hit the button.

And she disappeared.

“Help!” Jack stared at the empty space where she’d been. “Where *is* she?”

“You mean - WHEN is she?” said Makhan.

They looked at each other in horror. What were they going to do?

*

The castle was high on the side of the mountain, overlooking the lake. Sapphira looked up at it. The road leading to the castle was long and steep – but there was nowhere nearer, and the snow was falling fast. She cradled her baby dragon in one arm, pulling her shawl round to keep him warm. Then she started to climb, feeling worried and nervous.

Who lived in the castle? What would happen when she rang the bell at the gate?

*

The coach drove off and Mrs Meredith looked round at her class.

“OK!” she said as the coach disappeared. “Have you got your lunch boxes?”

“Yes, Mrs Meredith,” they chanted.

“And a mirror each, so you don’t get turned to stone?”

“Yes, Mrs Meredith!”

“Then let’s go and find Medusa!”

Waving her own mirror over her head, Mrs Meredith strode into the dark forest.

Ben took a deep breath. “Come on,” he said. “We can’t let her go on her own.”

And he turned and followed her

*

Fluffy squeezed in through the cat door. She had something in her mouth. Something small and brown.

“Hey, Jack!” I said. “She’s got one of your dinosaurs.” (My brother has the world’s biggest collection of little plastic dinosaurs. He’s obsessed.)

Jack looked at Fluffy and shook his head. “Not mine. All my stegosauruses are green.”

“It must have come from one of the kids next door then,” I said. “Should we—?”

Jack grabbed my arm. “Look!” he whispered.

The tiny dinosaur was moving...

*

One day, my brother will be king. I’ve taken the oath to defend him “from enemies and earthquakes and all wild beasts.” We live in the most beautiful city in the most peaceful kingdom in the world, so maybe that sounds easy to you. But you don’t know my brother. He’s only four and sometimes he does stupid things...

*

It was a small green egg, no bigger than her thumb. But it was so heavy that Laura could hardly lift it out of the puddle. She rubbed off the dirt that covered it – very gently, with the tip of one finger—until it gleamed like an emerald. And it started growing warm in the palm of her hand...

*

The old windmill stood on top of the hill, looming over the town. Its sails had fallen off and now it was just a grey stone tower, with boarded-up windows. No one had been in there for fifty years.

Rory walked his dog up the hill every day. He longed to take a look inside the windmill, but there was a large notice nailed to the locked door. DANGER. DO NOT ENTER. So he thought he never would.

Until one dark November evening when he walked up the hill—and there was a delicious smell of baking coming from inside the old windmill...

*

Deep in the Ellgrim Forest, a green shoot grew through the leaf litter under the trees. After a week, the seed leaves opened, very slowly. After another week, the first true leaves unfurled. For almost a year, the creeper snaked upwards, sucking life out of the trees, growing green and lush as the forest withered and died. Underneath it.

As it reached the tops of the tallest trees, a single bud formed at the very tip of the stalk. It swelled and grew, until it was as large as a human child. And then, very slowly, it began to open...

*

Lisa wasn't expecting a delivery. But when she opened the front door on Monday morning, there was a large cardboard box blocking the way out.

"Must be for someone else," she thought. But no, there was her name on the box: LISA HANNIGAN. She was already late for work. There was no time to open the box now. But she couldn't leave it outside. It was already starting to rain.

The box was too heavy to lift, so she dragged it inside. Then she squeezed past it, slammed the front door and ran for the bus.

Inside the house, the box start rocking from side to side...

*

From my bedroom window, I could just see the house on the other side of the valley. It was large and elegant, with tall, arched windows on two floors and small attic windows tucked in under the roof. A beautiful house—but I never saw anyone there.

"Too rich," Mum said. "Got a house in London too. And another in the south of France. They don't bother coming here."

I thought she was right. Then, late one evening, as I was drawing my bedroom curtains, I saw a light, flashing in one of the attic windows. On. Off. On. Off..... Three short. Three long. Three short.

I don't know much Morse code, but I know what that means....

*

“You can have this when I’m gone,” Great-Aunt Laura said, pointing to the pearl necklace she always wore.

As if I’d wear something like that! Mel thought. *I bet they’re not even real pearls.* But she just smiled, said, “Thank you, Great-Aunt Laura,” and went on cleaning the oven.

By the time Great-Aunt Laura finally died (five years late, aged a hundred and nine), Mel had forgotten all about the necklace.

But a week after the funeral, a black Rolls Royce drew up outside the flats where she and her mum lived. A man in a smart suit got out of the car, frowned at the tattered notice that said LIFT BROKEN and started climbing the five flights of steps to Mel’s flat. He was carrying a small, flat parcel.

Carrying it very carefully, as if there was something precious inside.

(Or maybe something dangerous...?)

*

No one took much notice of Nadia. She sat quietly in a corner of the classroom, staring at the teacher and doing exactly as she was told. If anyone spoke to her, she smiled and nodded, but she never said anything more than “Yes” and “No” and “I’m fine, thank you.” We had no idea who she really was.

Until she tripped over in the playground one day—and an armed security guard came racing out of the woods behind the school...

*

Henry INSISTS on playing the trumpet.

Everyone else in the family is very musical. We almost have a mini orchestra, with Dad on violin, me on the flute, Celine playing her oboe and Mum on the drums. When Grandpa comes, he brings his keyboard and the house is filled with music. It’s fantastic!

Until Henry joins in. It’s agony hearing him play. We all hate it.

Except the animals. It’s really weird how the cats start purring when he plays. And, outside, the garden starts filling with wild creatures...

*

When Philip was nine, his godfather gave him a hot air balloon.

It was there in the garden when he woke up—huge and round, with black and yellow stripes. Inflated and ready to take off. The message on the front was so big Philip could read it from his bedroom window. IT’S A GREAT DAY FOR BALLOONING. DON’T WASTE TIME!

Pulling on his clothes, he raced downstairs and into the garden. The balloon swayed and creaked strained at its tethering ropes. Philip jumped into the basket—just to see what it was like—and found a pile of things in there: a picnic hamper, a yellow oilskin coat and a bottle of water.

He was just going to open the basket when there was a huge gust of wind. Before he had time to think, the balloon broke free from its tethering ropes and started rising into the air...

*

Philippa's garden was as wild as a jungle. There were new oak trees growing along the fence, where the tree next door dropped its acorns. Big thickets of blackthorn blocked the paths and clustered round the back door, and brambles snaked round the apple trees and looped from one side of the garden to the other.

"It's a wildlife sanctuary," Philippa's mother said, when the neighbours complained. And there certainly were lots of birds and butterflies and bees in the garden. (And wasps. And rats.)

Philippa loved it. She cut tunnels through the brambles and made herself a secret den at the far end. She sat there for hours, very still, eating apples and watching the creatures in the garden. She thought she knew them all.

Until the day she saw the bushes move, as if something big was slinking through them. And she caught a glimpse of smooth, striped fur ...

*

"Ready for hyperdrive?" Mo said into the intercom.

"Ready, Captain!" voices answered from all over the starship.

Mo nodded and reached for the red lever.

It was meant to be just another routine mission to Mars. But, as the lever came down, it caught the cup of coffee on the desk. Mo flinched away from the scalding hot coffee—and hit the direction controls.

Then the hyperdrive hit and they all blacked out, the starship veered wildly, missing Mars by a million kilometres.

Heading for Alpha Centauri...

*

Gramps kept the map on his kitchen wall. It was old and faded—except for the heading that said COUNTY OF DORSET in fancy, flowery letters.

I never really bothered to look at it—until the day I noticed something strange. It WASN'T a map of Dorset. Oh, the names of a few Dorset towns had been written on to it, in the same fancy lettering as the heading, but the map itself was much, much older.

Someone had disguised it.

I fetched a magnifying glass to read the original, faded writing. And what I saw, written very small, made my heart beat faster. The writing said...

*

It started to rain on Will's tenth birthday. It rained all through March. And April. And May. Will watched the river rising to the bottom of the garden, then to the patio and then right up to the house. They had to put sandbags against the back door, to stop the water coming in.

That was the day the boat came, a small blue boat carrying an old man in a sou'wester. He rowed it down the river and up the garden and tied it to the patio railings. He had a kind face, but Will's mother sighed when she saw him.

"He's come for you, Will," she said quietly. "It's time for you to go."

*

*

When I was four years old, I was adopted by a pine marten.

Don't get me wrong. My mum and dad were still there (and my five annoying brothers), but the pine marten decided I was her kit. When I played on my own, in the pine wood behind our house, she brought me berries in her mouth, twining herself round my ankles.

She was utterly beautiful. The fur at her throat was pale, but on her back it was the same dark brown as my hair. If I sat down, she clambered on to my lap and nuzzled my head, as if she was grooming me. But she only stayed for a few minutes. Then she was off, loping over the ground and disappearing up the nearest tree.

I was five when I found out how to follow her...

*

"It's not fair!" Cody said. "How come Ben's a superhero? He's mean and lazy—and he's always boasting about how he can fly. Superheroes should be GOOD people."

"So?" Cody's godmother went on filing her nails. "What can I do? I can't make him good by magic."

"You could make ME a super-hero too." Cody gave her godmother a winning smile. "Pleease. Just one little superpower..."

Her godmother sighed and put down the nail file. "You need to understand—I can't choose which superpower you get. You'll have to put up with whatever the magic chooses. OK?"

"OK!" Cody whispered.

Her godmother reached for her magic wand.

*

Starbucks and Boots were next door to each other. They'd been like that ever since Harry could remember. So how come there was suddenly another shop in between? It was small and dusty, with a heap of books in the window. Harry pushed the door open and went in.

"Well?" said the old man behind the counter. "What are you after? Castles and dragons? Jungle adventures? Space travel?" He picked a book off the shelves. "Tell you what—try this one. It's free."

"Free?" Harry was surprised, but he held out his hand. "Th-thank you!"

When he got home, he leafed through the book. It looked as though every page was blank—except for a single word on Page 1: ENTER...

Harry stared at the word for a moment. Then, slowly, he turned to the next page...

*

We always went on holiday to Accrington. Same cottage. Same hills to climb. Same never-ending walks. (Dad was a walking fiend.) Same long evenings playing board games. We thought we knew everything about the place. And it was all boring.

Until the holiday when Dad and Mum both came down with chickenpox and the three of us had to amuse ourselves.

That was when we discovered the hidden cave, behind the waterfall. And the tunnel leading into the mountain...

*

*

It was Christmas. The tree was glittering and gleaming and the room was littered with presents. “This is the best Christmas ever!” I said.

Mum grinned at me—and then all the lights went out.

Not just the lights in our house. The whole town went dark—and the moon and the stars disappeared. For a couple of seconds, there was no light at all. Anywhere.

And when the lights came on again, everything had changed...

*

I was in the park, hanging out with Jo, when the boy came hiking into town. He went straight past without looking at us. A tall, ragged boy, with a mongrel dog, and a fiddle case strapped to his back.

Jo shivered. “You know that story?” he muttered.

“About the Fiddler?” I said. “Who was run out of town?”

Jo nodded. “He said he’d be back, didn’t he? You don’t think—?”

We stared at each other for a second. And then we started to run...

*

“Danger! Danger!” sang the bird.

It glittered sapphire blue in the ginkgo tree and its voice echoed over the palace garden. It reached the golden summerhouse where Alarina sat with her embroidery.

She lifted her head and looked at the bird. “Is it time?” she called.

But the bird only sang even louder. “Danger! Danger!”

Alarina jumped up. She had never been outside the garden, in her whole life. But she had to leave now. She was sure of that. Racing to the wall, she scrambled up into the old apple tree.

When the soldiers kicked the door down and marched into the garden, there was no one there.

Alarina was on the other side of the wall, racing towards the forest.

*

It was Basil’s OWN FAULT. He’s always chewing gum and leaving it around. Stuck under the table, on the backs of chairs—everywhere. On the day of the thunderstorm, I found some stuck in my hair.

That was the last straw. I pointed my finger at Basil and yelled: “You are a PIG!!”

As I said it, there was a huge flash of lightning. And suddenly, instead of Basil, a small pink pig was staring up at me.

I stared back in horror. Then I pointed my finger again and yelled, “Pig, you’re BASIL!”

Nothing happened.

“Oink!” the pig said pathetically.

What was I going to do???

*

My father gave me the harp for my third birthday. I was too small to play it then, but he started teaching me when I was five. As soon as I touched the strings, I could feel the harp speaking to me. And I knew...

*

Know what it's like when your mum keeps changing jobs? You have to keep changing schools.

Don't get me wrong. My mum's great and she's doing fantastic research. But imagine leaving your friends, and facing a new set of teachers and a new school bully. Every. Single. Year.

I gave up trying to make friends and worked out how to stay invisible. Keep quiet. Don't look too clever. That worked fine for me—until the day I started at Herrington High.

The moment I walked into the playground, all the kids turned round and stared.

"It's true!" someone shouted. "He's actually come to Herrington!"

What was going on? Who did they think I was?

*

The moon rose clear and purple over LoQ as Bennett steered the planet hopper on to the landing strip. It was his first solo mission and he was wishing they'd sent him somewhere else. Anywhere but LoQ.

It should have been a great posting. You could breathe the air there, and even drink the water—if you ignored the colour. But he'd been sent to make contact with the LoQians, and they were mean little creatures. Half a metre high and smelt of drains. They hardly ever came out of their tiny underground tunnels.

Bennett sighed and switched off the hopper's rocket drive. Then he reached into the back, for his spade. "Better get going," he thought. And he climbed out, walked clear of the hopper and started digging.

*

"Look," said Dad, pointing at the road ahead of us. "Look!"

There, running in front of the car, was a big brown hare. It had nowhere else to go. There were steep banks and thick hedges on both sides of the road. The car slowed down to walking pace, following the hare.

"People used to think witches changed into hares," Mum said. "Suppose that's really a witch in front of us."

I thought she was joking, but suddenly...

*

Lucas stood at the window blowing soap bubbles. They drifted over the town in a long stream, reflecting the colours of the roofs and the sky and the Old Red River. He watched as they floated away and then popped, one after another.

Except one.

One of the bubbles kept going, getting brighter and bigger all the time. And suddenly Lucas noticed another stream of bubbles coming up to meet it, from the far side of town.

What was going on???

*

My Mum keeps bees. You have to tell them when anything important happens. So the day the twins were born, I went down to the hives and whispered the amazing news.

“Mum’s had twins. Two boys—and they’ve got wings!”

“Bzzzzz!” Even the bees sounded surprised.

The wings were very beautiful, with their fluffy white baby feathers, and they didn’t cause any problems at first. Not until Larry and Ben were about two. But then the feathers started growing strong and straight. And the boys learnt to fly.

They were toddlers with wings. And the first thing they did...

*

Gran sent me the mirror for my tenth birthday. A round mirror with a short handle, small enough to go in my schoolbag. Tucked into the frame was a note in Gran’s small, writing: “Don’t ask for something unless you REALLY want it...”

What??? There was no time to work out what she meant. I pushed the mirror into my bag and ran out into the wind, racing for the school bus.

Miranda frowned when I sat down next to her. “You look a real mess. Better comb your hair.”

I took out the mirror. She was certainly right! “Wish I looked like you,” I said.

And suddenly...

*

When I was twelve, I was apprenticed to a baker. He was a kind man, who never used words unless he had to. He taught me to make tin loaves and cottage loaves, dough cake and lardy cake, milk rolls and saffron buns.

But he wouldn’t tell me the secret of his special cinnamon bread. He made a single loaf, every Monday, for old Miss Hepworth who lived in the middle of the wood. And he always sent me to deliver it.

It smelt amazing. I longed to know what it tasted like, but Miss Hepworth always snatched it out of my hands and slammed the door in my face.

So one Monday, as I walked through the wood...

*

Most dragons are fun. I like them best of all when they’ve just hatched and their scales are shining gold. They’re sweet when they’re toddling too, playing at lighting candles. And it’s exciting to ride them when they’re learning to fly!

But the dragon on top of the mountain is different. She’s old and bad-tempered and she doesn’t care what she sets on fire. We need to keep her asleep, so she doesn’t come flying over the town—and what send her to sleep is the Dragon Song. So there’s always someone singing to her, day and night.

It’s my turn tomorrow. I have to go up the mountain and sing for forty-eight hours. And I’m really worried that I’m going to fall asleep...

*

*

I was ten when the War ended.

I remember the crowds and the singing and the great outburst of joy and relief. But what I remember more than anything is Gran's face. Her fierce eyes as she said, "Never again, Patty. You hear me? Never again!"

She'd lost her husband in the First War and both her sons in the Second. That would have broken lots of women. But not my Gran. On VE Day, she decided to stand for Parliament...

*

Wengor has my crown! And my throne!! And my kingdom!!! Everyone accepts him as the rightful High Monarch, just because his father was High Monarch before him. And because he is a man.

But I am the firstborn, and I have gathered an army from Ebendur to the east and Karosia to the west. Wengor will surrender and I shall sit on the Diamond Throne.

Tomorrow we march...

*

I first met Sat in the middle of a general election. We were both too young to vote, but not too young to deliver leaflets. I did my side of the road at top speed, pushing the papers through the letterbox and running on to the next house. But Sat kept stopping to talk to people. Trying to persuade them to vote for our candidate.

When I got to the end of my side of the road, I turned round and saw Saj stuck halfway along his side. He was arguing with an old, white-haired man. Suddenly, as I looked, the man grabbed Sat's arm, dragged him into the house and shut the door.

*

The tunnels under the Town Hall were older than the building. Older than the whole town. They hadn't been properly explored—because the people who went into them never came back.

On their fifth birthday, all the children in town were told the same thing: "Never, never, NEVER go into the tunnels. Never even talk about them." And they didn't.

So when Chaz came to the town, on his twelfth birthday, no one warned him about the tunnels. When he discovered the entrance to the First Tunnel, he asked his new friends about it, but they just shook their heads and backed away.

The third time that happened, he decided to explore on his own. He put a rope and a torch into his backpack and set out very early...

*

I love pomegranates. I love their shiny, leathery skin and the sharp-sweet taste of the juice. And I love the moment when my latest slave breaks open the skin and tastes the first fleshy, jewel-red seed, to check for poison.

I live with danger, every moment of my life...

*

*

It happened in my favourite bookshop. I'd chosen six quirky paperbacks (I like discovering unknown authors) and while I was waiting to pay, I looked at everyone else in the queue. Most of them had just one book—usually a bestseller—but the man at the front was different. He looked like a tramp, with ragged clothes and unbrushed hair, but he had six books. Just like me.

I watched as he put them on the counter, one by one. They were the same six books as mine. How weird was that?

Not as weird as what I saw when he turned round.

His face was the same as mine too. EXACTLY the same.

*

The moment we walked into the Bank Holiday fair, Serena started shouting, “Candy floss! I want candy floss!!”

Mum nodded to the man behind the stall. “I’ll have three, please.”

The moment Serena got hers, she started waving it around and I had jump out of her way. “It’s going to get in my hair,” I thought. “Or all over my new coat. Or—”

I was so busy dodging Serena’s candy floss that I forgot my own—until I heard a furious shout from behind me. I turned round and saw an angry man in a long purple robe covered in stars—and pink goo.

It was a wizard, and I’d hit him with my candy floss...

*

Mr Muldoon’s tortoise was very old. “It’s at least five hundred,” he said, when Caitlin asked.

Her eyes opened very wide. “You mean it was alive in the seventeenth century? In the English Civil War?”

Mr Muldoon shrugged. “Suppose so.” He wasn’t interested in history.

But Caitlin was. OK, she was an IT superstar, but she loved history best. And she was doing a school project on the English Civil War.

“If only I could download that tortoise’s memory!” she thought. “If I could just—”

That was when the idea came—like a flash of lightning!

*

When I came downstairs, Mum was gazing at the TV screen. She looked as if she was going to faint.

“What’s the matter?” I said. “Are you OK?”

She nodded, breathing fast, as if she was struggling to speak. “Yes... it’s just...” She stopped for a second, looking down at the dirty, fraying carpet. “You’re not going to be the poorest kid in the class any more.”

I stared at her. “What do you mean?”

She waved the ticket she was holding—and gave me a wicked grin. “I’ve won the lottery. Fifteen million pounds. And I’m going to give you half.”

*

Celine loved wild swimming. She swam in forest lakes, in wide, clear rivers, in deep ponds at the bottom of waterfalls. Everyone told her she ought to be careful, that it was dangerous to go on her own, but she didn't take any notice.

Whenever she went on holiday, she crept out before anyone else was awake, looking for somewhere to swim. That was how she found Loch Alistair. She climbed the hill behind the holiday cottage and there it was in the glen on the other side, shining in the early morning light.

She ran down the hill, slipped out of her sundress and waded into the calm, clear water. She was a strong swimmer and she had almost reached the middle of the loch when the surface of the water started rippling and swooshing around her. And suddenly...

*

Jonas is the ultimate geek. Remembers every book he's ever read, word for word, but has no idea about normal things like music and football. If he wasn't my best friend, I'd hate him. But he's totally nice. Generous and kind and unflappable.

Well, he's usually unflappable. But last week he came into school looking frantic. "My dad's signed me up for some idiotic TV programme! I have to dress up in stupid clothes and pretend to be an expert. Every day for a week—if I don't get voted off."

"You're going to be on Zany Professors???" I nearly fainted. "I love that programme! You have to do it, Jonas. The prize is fifty thousand pounds!!!"

Jonas scowled. "I won't win. Who's going to vote for me?"

"Everyone!" I thought fast. "Look, I know EVERYTHING about Zany Professors. It's always the zaniest person who wins. So this is what we'll do..."

*

"Leo sings like an angel."

People started saying that when he was five. He was the star of every school choir and no Christmas play was complete without a solo from Leo. His mother had posted up hundreds of YouTube videos of him singing carols and sentimental songs, gazing soulfully into the camera.

When his voice broke, thousands of fans posted weeping emojis—until he made his triumphant return to YouTube with a beautiful new tenor voice.

When Ellie Pearson heard that voice, she knew she and Leo were made for each other. And she started stalking him...

*

The post came early on Sam's birthday. There was a card from his mother. A flyer advertising a new gym. And a small brown envelope. He threw away the flyer and put his mother's card on the mantelpiece.

Then he picked up the brown envelope. The address was handwritten, but he didn't recognise the writing. He lifted the flap of the envelope and slid out the card inside.

It was a playing card, with a pattern of flowers on the back. Turning it over, Sam saw a Joker staring up at him. He had red and black clothes and bells on his hat—just like any other Joker. Except that it was Sam's own face looking back at him.

The Joker looked exactly like him. And he had no idea who had sent it.

*

*

Emily Pringle had blue eyes and long golden hair and all the teachers thought she was wonderful. She thought so too. She knew the answer to every question. And if anyone else gave the wrong answer, she would sigh and give them a pitying look, tossing her long hair back dramatically.

One day, she was silly enough to do that to Ben Crimond.

The next day, he brought a pair of scissors into school and sat behind her in the Hall, snipping away quietly, all through Assembly. Emily didn't notice anything until she stood up and heard everyone laughing. Her hair didn't reach her collar.

And Ben hadn't even cut straight.

He was suspended for a week, but that wasn't enough for Emily. She started planning a terrible revenge.

*

It was Georgie's idea.

Miss Anderson, our teacher, brought in a huge bag of leftover wool. "I'm teaching you all to knit!" she said brightly. "What would you like to make?" We all groaned and shook our heads.

Except Georgie. She bounced up, with her hand in the air. "Let's knit the school!" For a second, everyone looked blank.

Then Neil Harris grinned. "Yeah! I'll knit YOU, Miss!"

"I'll do the football field!" That was Jack. (He loved football, but never got in the team.)

"I'll do the choir." "Mrs Blenkinsop!!!" (She was the Head.) "The front gate!"
Everyone had a different idea. We couldn't wait to get started.

People watched knitting videos on YouTube. Made up their own patterns. Used all Miss Anderson's wool and bought more of their own. The knitted school grew and grew. After a month, Miss Anderson laid out all the bits in the Hall and put a photo on Facebook.

And that was when it went viral...

*

"I'll race you across Cripps Bottom!" Conan said.

If you think that's funny, it just means you have NO IDEA what Cripps Bottom is like. It's a narrow valley between the hill where I live and the hill where Conan lives. It looks green and lush and beautiful, but it's a complete bog.

"We'll lose our trainers!" I said.

"I'm running in bare feet." Conan stood up. "I'll start from my front door and you start from yours, so we cross in the middle. Tomorrow morning at seven. Bet I win!"

"Bet you don't!" I said.

Which is how I came to be standing at our front door at sunrise, looking across at Conan on the other side of the valley. He raised an arm, looked down at his watch and then – dead on the dot of seven – he dropped his arm and we both started racing down the steep, slippery slopes towards the evil mud...

*

*

“Anyone can make pancakes!” said Drew. “You don’t need much. Eggs, milk, a bit of flour and a pinch of salt—what can go wrong? I’ll use all the frying pans, so I can cook four at once. We’re going to have a great pancake party!”

“But—” I said.

Drew waved his hand. “No buts. Just make yourself pretty and keep the kids out of the way.”

He pushed me out of the kitchen and shut the door. A minute later, I heard the mixer going...

*

“Bet you can’t be silent for a week!” Henry said.

“Bet I can!” I said. Without thinking.

Henry laughed—scornfully—and checked the time. “If you don’t speak to anyone, from now until nine o’clock tomorrow evening, I’ll give you my bike.”

I nearly said “Wow!”. But I spotted the trap just in time and nodded instead. Henry frowned. I knew he would try and trick me, but he wouldn’t succeed.

I was going to win that bet! I only had to hold out for seven days...

*

“Josh? Is that you? Have you seen the sun???”

It was Grandpa. He always watched the sun rise over the Long Mynd. Sometimes, if it was really beautiful, he sent me a photo. But he never phoned.

“Grandpa,” I said. “I’m still in bed.”

“I don’t care!” Grandpa shouted. “Just go to the window, and LOOK AT THE SUNSET!!”

“OK, OK.” I climbed out of bed and walked over to the window. The sun was just above the horizon.

It was bright green...

*

Princess Amanda shook out her long golden hair and bent down to lace up her shiny new walking boots. Then she looked back at the palace guards standing behind her.

“You’re not to follow me,” she said. “Understand? I’m facing this challenge alone.” Hoisting her heavy rucksack on to her shoulders, she tightened the straps and set off down the road.

Sergeant Heathersett sighed. “Right Mornington,” he said. “Uniform off.”

The shortest guard unbuttoned his long ceremonial coat and took off his satin pantaloons. Underneath, he was wearing hiking shorts and an old cotton shirt.

“Good lad.” Heathersett handed him a rucksack—much smaller than the Princess’s—and glanced down the road. “OK, you can go. Keep her in sight at all times. But don’t let her see you.”

“Y-yes, sir!” Mornington saluted nervously and set off down the road. Hoping he could keep up with the princess.

*

And one ending

...Amanda sat down and began to unlace her boots. "Well, I did it," she said. "It's finished."

Mornington looked down at her. "It's never finished," he said. He pointed past the palace, at the path winding up into the mountains. "That's where I'm heading tomorrow."

Amanda lifted her head and looked. For a moment, she didn't say anything. Then she started lacing up her boots again.