



CHAPTER ONE

One of the best things about staying with Nana and Grandad, apart from Grandad's legendary homemade ginger beer and Nana's world-famous apple strudel, was the Hollow Tree. Which was why, as soon as their father had dropped them off for the summer holidays, Lana and Harrison pulled on their wellies, clomped down the street, and squelched their way across the marsh to where their old friend was waiting.

There is something magical about hollow trees. Some people say they are the home of fairies and sprites, and that you should always turn your coat inside out before you climb into one to protect yourself from their spells. Others say they are the entrances to enchanted worlds. Whether you believe in magic or not, if you ever played in the Hollow Tree at Nana and Grandad's house, you would never forget it. It was hollow all the way up the inside, and generations of children had carved handholds so you could climb right up and stick your head out of the top.

Best of all, it seemed to have a face. In the middle of its trunk, two empty eye sockets sat above a twisty nose-hole, below which was a gaping mouth lined with bulges that looked just like grinning teeth. Add to that the fact that its broken branches looked just like hair, and you

might have thought the whole tree was about to laugh, or burst into song, or maybe just crunch up your bones, swallow and release a leafy burp.

On this day in particular – a day that turned out to be very unusual indeed – the Hollow Tree had a surprise in store for Lana and Harrison. It had been surrounded by a bright yellow plastic safety barrier and pinned to its bark forehead was a large sign which read:

DANGER!
TREE FELLING IN PROGRESS.

‘What?’ exclaimed Lana in disbelief. ‘You can’t be serious!’

‘They’re going to cut it down,’ said Harrison mournfully.

Lana’s heart sank. She’d recently had a growth

spurt and was hoping that this holiday she would finally be tall enough to reach between the handholds and make it all the way to the top of the tree.

‘That’s so unfair!’ she protested. ‘I’ll never get to climb it now.’

‘I’m sorry, Lana,’ said Harrison sympathetically. ‘You were looking forward to that. I feel bad for the tree too. It’s been here for ever.’

There was a pause.

‘I’m going anyway,’ said Lana determinedly.

‘No!’ said Harrison, catching her by the arm. ‘Look at the sign. We’re not allowed.’

‘But there’s no one here!’ protested Lana.

‘There’s no one here *yet*,’ corrected Harrison. ‘They could come any minute,’ he added, anxiously turning to scan the horizon. Which gave Lana the perfect opportunity to duck under the safety barrier.

‘Lana!’ hissed Harrison, as she hopped across the marsh. ‘You’ll get us into trouble!’

But Lana was already jumping from tuft to tuft across the marshy field, heading straight for the Hollow Tree.

‘Come back!’ shouted Harrison, but Lana wasn’t listening.

‘I’m going in!’ she called, squeezing her head and arms through the tree’s open mouth. She breathed in the old familiar darkness: a delicious mix of wet leaves, fresh fungus, and dry rotting wood. Wriggling forward until just her legs were poking out, she tumbled inside and landed in an undignified heap in the giant hollow. Then, as she struggled to her feet, a stray twig spiked the top of her head.

‘Ow!’ she howled, rubbing the sore spot.

‘Lana?’ called Harrison from behind the barrier. ‘Are you okay?’



There is something magical about hollow trees

‘No!’ she lied. She wasn’t really hurt; she just wanted Harrison to join her. Seconds later, he landed heavily beside her.

‘Something scratched me,’ she sobbed. ‘Is it bleeding?’

‘Stand in the light a minute.’ Lana moved to the centre of the hollow and Harrison made a fingertip search of her hair. ‘I can’t see anything. Come on, let’s go back.’

‘No,’ Lana said, pulling at his sleeve. ‘I want to climb up there.’ She pointed to the little blue circle of sky at the top of the Hollow Tree.

‘No way,’ said Harrison.

Lana stretched herself to her full height, but she couldn’t quite reach the first handhold.

‘I need a boost,’ she begged.

Harrison shook his head and folded his arms. ‘What if someone comes while you’re

up there? It's too dangerous.'

'Please,' begged Lana. 'You've done it. This could be my last chance.'

Harrison gave her one of his Weary Looks. Then he cradled his hands and launched Lana upwards towards the light. But as soon as she gripped a handhold, they heard voices in the distance.

'There's someone coming!' said Harrison anxiously, grabbing Lana's ankle. 'STOP!' he shouted over his shoulder. 'THERE ARE CHILDREN—!'

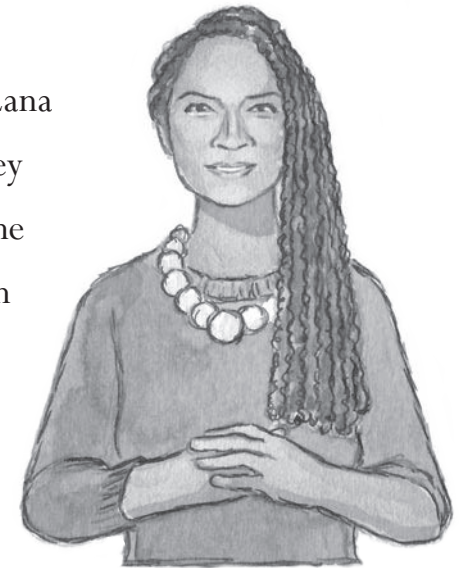
Lana toppled back on top of him, swiftly untangled herself, then clamped her hand over his mouth. 'They're just talking!' she hissed. 'Look.'

Harrison followed her gaze out of the tree's mouth to where four adults were approaching the yellow fence.

'See?' said Lana. 'No saws or diggers or anything. Just be quiet. Then we won't get in any trouble.'

Harrison nodded his agreement, and when Lana took her hand away, they each moved to one of the eyeholes, listening in on the conversation.

A confident-looking woman with long braids was talking.



'Thank you for coming, everyone,' she said. 'I'm Gudrun Lloyd, the mayor. Carl Ellis is the developer in charge of this project.'

A stocky bald man wearing canvas shorts and a leather waist bag nodded.

'And this is Professor North, our spider expert.'

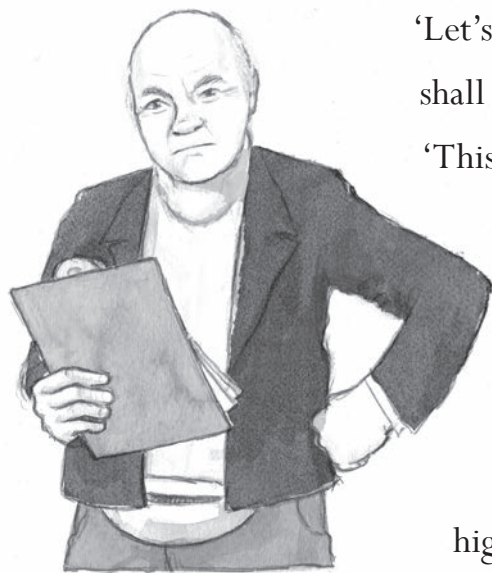
A tall, slim lady with white hair and a striking gold necklace forced a thin smile. Next to her, a dark-haired man with a patterned red scarf

coughed politely, asking for Gudrun's attention.

'Oh! I'm so sorry,' said Gudrun. 'This is Yashar Falarmarzi, the local science teacher who first noticed we had spiders living in the marsh.'

'Thank you, Gudrun,' said Yashar with a winning smile. 'Carl, thank you so much for meeting with us today . . .'

Carl held up a hand to silence Yashar, then turned to Professor North.



'Let's cut to the chase, shall we?' he snapped.

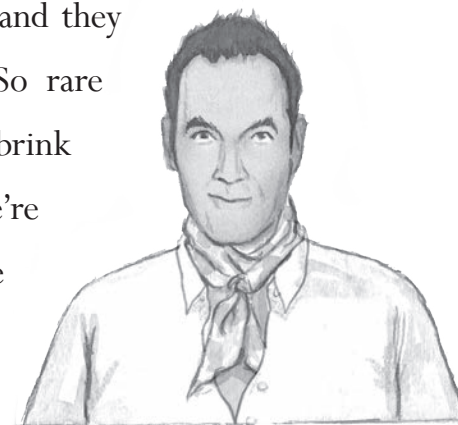
'This project has been years in the planning and will provide seventy-five much-needed high-quality homes.'

It has cost me millions of pounds, not to mention years of my life . . .' His voice trailed off and he snatched a breath. 'And you want to cancel it, just because of a few poxy spiders?'

There was a long pause, while Professor North regarded him steadily. 'Not cancel,' she replied coldly. 'Delay.'

'Are you out of your mind?' snarled Carl angrily.

Yashar, the teacher, appeared between them. 'You have to understand, Mr Ellis,' he began in a soothing voice, 'these are no ordinary spiders. They are Golden Diving Bells, and they are extremely rare. So rare that they are on the brink of extinction. All we're asking for is a chance to move them to another location.'



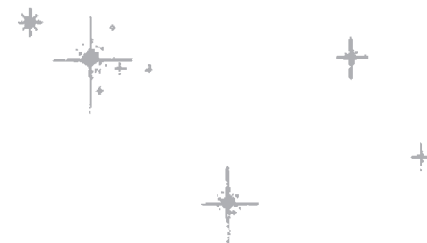
‘For a teacher, you’re not very bright, are you?’
snapped Carl. ‘Tell him, Mayor.’

Gudrun sheepishly stared down at her feet.
She looked over to the Hollow Tree – and saw
movement in its eyes!

‘Aaagh!’ she screamed.

‘What the—!’ exclaimed Carl.

‘The tree!’ shrieked Gudrun, pointing straight
at Lana. ‘It’s alive!’



CHAPTER TWO

‘Who’s there?’ yelled Carl.
‘DON’T PANIC!’ piped
up Harrison, clambering out.

‘We’re just two kids!’

‘Sorry!’ blurted Lana, climbing out after him.

‘We didn’t mean to scare you.’

‘Can’t you read?’ bellowed Carl, pointing to the
danger sign.

‘They’re children,’ said Gudrun firmly. She took

a deep breath and gave Lana and Harrison a broad smile. 'So, who do we have here?'

'I'm Lana. And this is my brother Harrison.'

'I've got a son about your age,' said Gudrun. 'He's called Kyle. He plays around here sometimes. Maybe you've met him?'

'Has he climbed the Hollow Tree?' asked Lana.

'So he tells me,' chuckled Gudrun. 'He's very adventurous.' There was kindness in her warm brown eyes, and Lana smiled shyly back at her. 'I'm so sorry,' she continued, 'for shrieking like that. I hope I didn't scare you.' Talking to the children seemed to be relaxing her, and she took a deep breath. 'I have to be honest: all this talk of spiders has me on edge. I keep thinking one's going to leap out at me.'

'You'd never notice if one did,' clipped Professor North, fiddling with her necklace. 'They're tiny.'

'Are they?' asked Gudrun hopefully.

'Let me see if I can find one,' said Professor North, crouching beside one of the many puddles that dotted the marsh and scanning the depths of the water.

'Good luck,' Carl huffed. 'I've not seen so much as a tadpole.'

'Here,' said Professor North, breaking off a stalk of marsh grass, and beckoning Gudrun towards her.

Intrigued, Harrison edged closer, while Lana — who wasn't sure she wanted to meet a spider face to face — held nervously back. Professor North was using the stalk as a pointer, and at its tip was a flash of gold.

'That's a special web called a diving bell that it makes as its home,' she said softly. 'See? No bigger than my little fingernail. And the spider inside is even smaller.'

‘But . . .’ began Harrison with a look of confusion. ‘Spiders don’t live underwater.’

‘That’s what makes the Golden Diving Bell spider so special,’ Yashar supplied enthusiastically. ‘It spins its home out of silk, then fills it with air.’

‘Fascinating,’ said Carl, in a bored voice that made clear it absolutely wasn’t.

Professor North rolled her eyes, then raised herself to her full height.

‘They have to be moved,’ she stated bluntly.

‘Tell her, Mayor,’ said Carl again, looking pointedly at Gudrun.

There was a pause while Gudrun tried to find the right words. ‘It’s not that simple,’ she said awkwardly. ‘The works are due to start first thing tomorrow and the council has approved them. A delay will be very expensive.’

‘But if we destroy their habitat, these precious

creatures may disappear for ever,’ countered Yashar, with feeling.

‘Sorry,’ Carl snorted, ‘but spiders aren’t precious. Bees maybe, because they make honey. But spiders don’t make anything.’

‘They make webs,’ added Harrison helpfully.

‘Exactly,’ broke in Professor North. ‘Spiders eat flies. And flies eat crops. Without them, we wouldn’t be able to grow food. So . . .’ She turned to Mayor Gudrun and looked her right in the eye. ‘Are you going to save these spiders, or aren’t you?’

‘I don’t know what to say,’ said Gudrun.

‘You know what your problem is?’ asked Carl, squaring up to Professor North. ‘You prefer spiders to people.’

‘Just some people,’ replied Professor North, staring coolly back at him. Lana stifled a smile.

‘Tell you what,’ said Carl defiantly. ‘Let’s ask

the kids. They're the ones that play here, aren't they?' He put his hands on his knees, bringing his face down to Lana's height, and Lana's nose tickled with the scent of aftershave. 'What would you rather? A stinky old marsh full of spiders, or a brand-new adventure playground?'

'An adventure playground?' repeated Lana, feeling a flutter of excitement.

'You betcha,' said Carl.

'Will it have a zip wire?' asked Lana hopefully.

'And a pirate ship,' added Carl. 'And maybe a climbing wall, agreed in principle but subject to best endeavours. So? What do you think?'

'I think we should save the spiders,' said Harrison firmly. Professor North caught his eye and smiled.

'And what about you?' asked Carl, turning to Lana.

'I don't really like spiders,' she said, doing her

best to ignore both Harrison and Professor North's disapproving scowls. 'They give me the creeps. But if you do all this building on the marsh, can we still keep the tree? Everyone round here loves it, and I really want to climb it.'

'Lana,' said Harrison snippily. 'That's really selfish.'

Carl grinned, revealing a large gold tooth. 'Deal,' he said, holding out his hand.

Lana looked apologetically at Harrison. 'In that case . . .' She put her hand in Carl's and shook it. 'I'd like an adventure playground.'