

Every story should have at least one heroine and this story has two. They were twins, and their names were Eirwen and Rhoslyn. As is usual in stories like this, they lived with their widowed mother in a cottage on the edge of the forest. They weren't poor, as their farm brought in a fair income, and their beloved father had invested wisely before he had died, but they weren't rich either.

Wen and Rhos were fine looking girls, and all the local boys were interested in them. But the girls didn't fancy any of them that much, though they remained on good terms with all the young people in the neighbourhood.

"Are you waiting for your princes to come, girls?" asked one local joker. "The chance of one prince to happen along is small. For two of them to appear here is astronomically unlikely!" The girls laughed along with him.

They were happy girls, and their mother was happy enough too. The only slightly unpleasant aspect of their lives was their neighbour, Trev, who wanted to expand his farm to include theirs. He had tried many times to buy it from their mother, and when that hadn't worked, he'd been trying to woo the widow.

"Why do you put up with him, Mum?" asked Wen asked one time when he had just left. "He's horrible."

"Wen, please don't call people horrible," said their Mum. "It's true that I don't like him much, but we have to get along with him. He's our neighbour."

"Only because he stole the farm," said Rhos.

"That's only rumour and gossip, Rhos. If there had been any wrongdoing, I'm sure that it would have been found out."

Rhos and Wen were not so confident. It was rumoured that when their original neighbour had died there were two other claimants for the property, cousins of the farmer, but they never appeared, and after a lengthy legal battle the farm became the property of Trev, who was a distant relative of the farmer.

Rhos was dark-haired and more outgoing than Wen. She excelled in sports and was particularly expert with the crossbow. Wen was blonde and more inclined to be bookish, though she could out distance her sister easily in the swimming pool. They did well at school, with Wen usually a little ahead of her sister. They were well liked within their group of friends.

If they had a peculiarity, it was that they liked to go into the forest together, collecting firewood, browsing for berries and nuts, if it was the right season, and watching all the forest animals as they went about their forest business. Of course all their friends visited the forest as well, but none of them loved it like Rhos and Wen.

That's how they met the two bears. They were sitting on an outcrop of rock overlooking a clearing when the two young bear cubs tumbled into the clearing followed by their mother. The mother bear dug at the roots of a tree and found something tasty that she passed on to the cubs. One of the cubs sniffed a bee, which buzzed around the cub's head, and surprised, he rolled over backwards. It was so comical that the girls, watching from above, couldn't help but quietly laugh.

The mother bear heard them, turned and stood on her back legs and sniffed. She looked directly at them, and the girls knew that she had seen and scented them. What now? They got ready to run. But, the mother bear ignored them, and continued teaching the cubs how to survive.

"She noticed us," breathed Rhos.

“Yeah, and ignored us!”

The girls often saw the bears after that, and sometimes watched them from a distance. If the mother bear spotted them, she would stand on her hind legs and growl at them in the usual bear way.

“Mwoooaah!”

But it didn't seem threatening, and then she would continue with whatever it was she was doing. Rhos and Wen were then able to watch the bear family for a while.

One day in late summer, Rhos and Wen saw the mother bear heading for the ridge, which was the first of the foothills of the mountains. She was alone.

“I wonder what's happened to the cubs,” said Rhos.

“Perhaps she's taught them all that she can?” suggested Wen. “We'll have to look out for them.”

It turned out that they didn't have to. At the back of their cottage there was a disused stable in which they used to keep all the garden tools. Night was falling and Rhos was returning the yard rake to the stable. She put it in its rack, and then jumped when she heard a snuffle behind her. She turned, and the two bear cubs were cuddled up together in the horse stall, fast asleep. Rhos quietly walked past them to the door.

“Mum, Wen, come and look at this!” she cried as she rushed into the house.

The three of them looked at the bears asleep in their stable. They had ripped apart a hay bale that had been in the stall and had spread it on the ground and made themselves a comfy bed. While they watched one of them yawned and scratched his ear.

They retreated to the house.

“Well how about that! What are we going to do?”

They set up some pots and pans outside the door, which would give them a warning if the bears came near the house, and they all cocked their crossbows and kept them handy, just in case.

“What's up, Mum? You look worried, and it's not about the bears.” asked Wen.

“Trev has signed up all the spare labourers for the harvest. I don't know how we're going get the harvest done.”

“Oh, no! I knew he was mean. I didn't know how mean.”

“Now dear. He's perfectly entitled to hire all the men he needs.”

“I know that, Mum, but it is still nasty of him.”

They spent a restless night because of the bears in the stable and the problems with the harvest, but in the morning the bears had gone. What was more surprising was that their truck was piled high with their produce from the harvest.

“What? Who did this? Girls, do you know anything about this? That's at least half of a field's worth of produce.”

“No Mum. We've no ideas, have we?” Rhos looked at Wen who shook her head.

“Maybe the bears were magic bears?” Joked Wen.

“Well, that’s unlikely,” said their Mum. But she frowned a little. “Can you girls go and ask Trev if his men did it? I’m going to drive the truck to the market.”

“OK, Mum,” said Wen, though she didn’t look forward to doing it.

She and Rhos trudged through the fields onto Trev’s farm. There was a harvesting machine slowly making its way down the rows of crops, and they could hear Trev’s voice round the far side.

“Come on, get this thing moving faster. I want to finish this field by tonight.”

The arm of his coat caught on a projection of the machine, and he was dragged along by it. Fortunately for him, it wasn’t a moving part, but he was stumbling, and looked likely to fall under the wheels.

Rhos and Wen screamed and waved at the machine operator, who couldn’t see what had happened, and the machine stuttered to a halt.

“What did you do that for?” yelled Trev. “They’re going slow enough all ready!”

He managed to free himself from the machine.

“You were caught on the machine! You could have been killed!”

Trev shrugged it off. “I’d have got free eventually. Back to work guys! No more breaks. What am I paying you for? Not to sit around chatting.”

He stomped off.

“Trev, Trev,” called Wen. “Please, we want to ask you something.”

Trev stopped irritably.

“What is it? Be quick, I’m busy!”

“Mum wants to know if any of your men harvested our top field for us. Did they?”

“What? You think I’d pay my men to work on your fields? The idea is preposterous.”

He left them standing there as he strode off. They walked back to their farm past the harvesting machine.

“Should’ve let me run him over, if you ask me,” said the machine operator, with a chuckle, as they walked past.

Wen and Rhos smiled, but didn’t comment. One result of this incident was that two of the men hired by Trev gave up working for him and came over to work on their Mum’s farm.

That evening, just as the sun was going down, Wen crept out to the stable on a hunch. At first, she thought she was wrong, but then one of the shadows moved and sighed. They were back!

She rushed back to the house.

“Mum, Rhos, the bears are back! They’re back!”

“Well, fancy that. Best put the pots and pans back tonight, though I don’t think that they will cause trouble,” said their Mum. She put two apples down in the stable doorway.

The next morning the bears had gone and so had the apples. Again the truck was full of produce.

“Maybe they really are magic bears,” said their Mum, unbelievably. “Anyway, I’ll take the truck in again. You two can clean out the stable and give them some fresh straw. It whiffs a bit in here now.”

“Maybe they like it like that,” said Rhos, half seriously. She saw her Mum’s expression. “OK, Mum. We’ll do it.”

So they cleared out the stables, which did smell a bit, but not too unpleasantly, and spread some fresh straw in case the bears came back again. They also left two apples.

And so it continued. The bears spent the nights in the stables and in the mornings the truck was ready to go to the market. The girls sneaked looks at the bears and each came to have her favourite. One had a scar on the back of its left paw and the other had a small nick in its right ear. Rhos liked the one with the scar on its paw, while Wen liked the one with the nick in its ear.

One morning, Rhos and Wen were hitching a lift with their Mum into town for school. They’d been running late and missed the bus. Suddenly a man stepped out into the road without looking and Rhos and Wen both yelled at their mother to stop. It was Trev.

Their Mum stood on the brakes, and they skidded to a halt mere millimetres from Trev. Astoundingly he blamed them for the near miss.

“Why don’t you drive more carefully! You nearly hit me!” He stomped off.

“Why don’t you look where you are going you ungrateful...”

“Rhos!”

“OK, but this is the second time that we’ve saved his life, I reckon!”

“Rhos!”

“OK, Mum. OK!”

Their Mum had a deep think about Trev, the bears, and the mysterious harvesting of their crops. She went into the stable and felt a distinct tingle when she was in the horse stall. Ah! She decided to contact a friend she knew from a long time ago.

Eventually her message reached the Mage, and he went in search of the Boffin.

“I’ve just had a message from a friend,” he said. “She wants my advice. It’s not urgent. Do you want to come along?”

“Mmm. Where does she live? I’ve nothing on at the moment.”

The Mage told her.

“Yeah, that’s a nice place, isn’t it. There’s that huge lake down there. Why don’t we drive down?”

So the Mage replied to the message and told Rhos and Wen’s Mum when to expect them, and they packed the car and set off.

“Who is she, this friend of yours? A witch or a wizard?”

“Elsie? She’s what is called a hedge witch. She’s got the powers, but not a lot of training. Uses the powers as little as possible. She was a student of mine once, but although she was getting good marks, she didn’t have the enthusiasm for study. She left to get married and had twin baby girls. You’ll love them. One dark haired and one fair haired.”

He had a sudden thought. "Oh, but they'll be grown girls by now. It's been a while. Her husband unfortunately died of the flu the year of the big epidemic. It was such a shame."

Rhos, Wen and their mother became accustomed to the bears sleeping in their stable and sometimes went out and watched them while they were sleeping. They didn't wake even when Rhos and Wen peeked over the partition into their stall. Once or twice the humans caught a glimpse of the bears arriving in the evening or leaving in the early morning.

Their mother pondered the matter of the bears and the mysterious harvest. It couldn't be coincidence that the bears had arrived at the same time that the harvests started. And another thing. She knew bears and firstly, male bears never stayed together like these two did, and secondly, they usually stayed well clear of humans. Besides, she felt a certain tingle when she was close to them, and that meant that they had something magical about them. Never mind. The Prof could take a look when he arrived.

It turned out that others had seen the bears, and one day when Rhos and Wen were walking along the riverbank they spotted Trev on a dinghy in the middle of the stream, slowly drifting with the current. When he saw the girls, he called out to them.

"Throw me a rope. I've lost my paddles."

"OK, Trev, I'll fetch one," called Rhos and ran off. Fortunately this stretch of river was slow flowing but it did end in some nasty rapids.

Rhos came back a minutes later with the rope, her crossbow and a light line. She shot the light line across the river into a tree and Trev grabbed it and stopped his drift downstream. It wasn't strong enough for the girls to pull him in, so they tried to throw the heavier rope to him, but they couldn't reach the boat with their casts.

"I'm going to have to swim out to him," said Wen, and grabbed the end of the rope.

She removed her boots and dived into the water. She swam out to Trev's dinghy and gave him the rope. Rhos bent the other end around a tree and started to pull the dinghy into the bank. Slowly, with Wen pushing the dinghy, she managed to bring it to the bank.

Trev was not happy.

"It's all your fault," he accused. "If you'd kept those trees trimmed I wouldn't have lost my oars in them."

This was unjustified, of course. His patch of bank was much worse than theirs, with fallen trees jutting into the river, and his cattle had turned a part of the bank into a smelly slippery mess.

"What were you doing on the river, Trev?" asked Rhos. She'd not expected thanks.

"I was looking for those bears that are hanging around. I want to get them before they start raiding my livestock and stealing the apples off my trees. I thought I might see something of them from the river."

The girls must have shown by their reactions that they knew something.

"Wait. What do you know, you two? Do you know where they are sleeping?"

"No, of course not," lied Rhos.

"We're just scared. Our house is right next to the forest. Come on, Rhos. I need to get dry," said Wen.

Trev watched them suspiciously as they walked away.

“Do you think he believed us?” said Rhos.

“Not for a minute,” said Wen.

“I hope the bears stay away tonight,” said Rhos, without much hope.

A bit later that afternoon the Mage and the Boffin arrived. They’d had to stop a couple of times to top up the boiler with water of course, and once they had stopped to fill the tender with more wood from a roadside vendor. Then they stopped at a nice little cafe for lunch, but they had made good time, and steamed up to the farm to be greeted by Rhos, Wen and their Mum.

The Boffin removed her hat and goggles and looked at the view. Behind the farm the forest swept up to the ridge, and beyond that, other ridges grew higher and bluer, until, in the far distance, the mountains were bare rocks, skirted by the high forest, dark with pines. A scattering of snow dotted the highest peaks.

“Oh, wow, it’s beautiful here!”

“Thank you. I’m Elsie and this is Rhos and Wen. Please come in and have a cup of tea.”

“So, Elsie,” said the Mage, after they had settled down to tea and scones, “you think you have a problem?”

“Yes, Prof. We have two bears coming round and sleeping in our stables. There’s something magical about them.”

The Boffin raised her eyebrows at the Mage. She was usually the one who was called “Prof”. He ignored her.

Elsie told them about the bears and the tingle she felt from them. Rhos and Wen were surprised, as they hadn’t heard their Mum talk about magic before.

“Would they be there now?” asked the Boffin.

“Yes, probably. Let’s go and see,” said Elsie.

At that moment there was a terrific noise from outside, and they all rushed out. Trev and one of his men were in their yard. They were standing with raised crossbows aiming into the stable.

“Stay back! We’ve got the bears cornered in here. They will never steal my sheep again!”

A lot happened very quickly. Trev and his man let loose their bolts, Rhos and Wen yelled “NO!” and the Boffin appeared in the doorway of the stable holding the two crossbow bolts.

“We’ll have none of that,” she snapped. “You’ve not lost any sheep to bears, Trev.”

“How did you know my name?” gasped Trev.

“That doesn’t matter. What do you know about these bears?”

“Nothing!”

The Boffin looked at the Mage who was consulting a scrying globe. “He’s lying.”

“Get lost,” the Boffin said to Trev’s man, who shot off as if the bears were chasing him.

“Try again, Trev.”

The bears were sitting quietly inside the stable, in the stall.

Trev seemed to shrink. “They’re my nephews. Twin sons of my sister. She died and their father remarried. They moved away, and he thought that they didn’t keep in contact because they didn’t get on with his new wife. But the real reason was because they had been changed into bears.”

“Because they would have inherited the farm?”

“Yes. I bought a curse from a rogue wizard and changed them into bear cubs, then I set them free in the forest.”

The Mage muttered about the rogue wizard. He’d try to track him down later, but it was a long time ago.

“But they are only young bears. Two or three years old,” said Wen.

“If I had to guess, I’d say that the mother bear had some cubs who died, so Trev’s nephews became the cubs, and she raised them. That sort of thing is known to happen, but I’m only guessing. Time doesn’t mean much to charms and curses., and anyway, it’s not important,” said the Mage.

“Yes,” said the Boffin. “The question is, what will remove the curse?”

“It’s usually the death of the person who laid the curse,” said the Mage.

“What if I let the bears loose on you, Trev? Oh, that’s why you tried to kill them. You were afraid that they would kill you,” said the Boffin. She looked furious.

“My dear,” said the Mage. “Hold on. There is another way. If the person who laid the curse wants to, they can voluntarily remove the curse. All it needs is for them to say that the curse is lifted.”

“Yes, I saw the bears in the forest,” said Trev, “and somehow knew them immediately. How does that work? Never mind. I thought that they would come after me, so I decided to hunt them down. I’m sorry. I had no idea that it would come to this. ‘The curse is lifted’.”

The Mage lifted his hand and everything stopped. Everyone except for him, the Boffin, Elsie, and Trev stood like statues.

“What are we going to do about you, Trev?” asked the Mage. “What does the story hold for you in the future?”

“Me? There wouldn’t be a story without me. There’s no story like this without a villain, is there? I’ll not apologise for that! But nobody actually chooses to be the villain, do they? It’s thrust on them. I’d like to stop being the villain, now, if it’s possible.”

“He’s got a point. What do you think, Elsie?”

“I think it’s up to Trev. The story can develop either way.”

“Very shrewd, Elsie. You would have made an excellent witch,” said the Mage.

“Well, maybe. But I’m happy with how my life turned out, even though I lost my husband too early. But we’d better get those lads some clothes.”

The Mage lowered his hand, and briefly chaos reigned as the boys covered themselves with bits of tarpaulin and handfuls of straw, and the girls tried to peek into the stables.

“Come on, girls, let’s go back to the house and get them some clothes,” said their Mum, pushing them firmly away.

Trev approached the boys who looked at him suspiciously.

“Look, I’m so sorry, boys,” he said. “I’ve done you a terrible wrong. We’ll go to the lawyer in the morning and straighten things out. Then I’ll leave.”

“Look, boys, why don’t you keep Trev around?” said the Mage. “He knows how to run a farm and you don’t. I think you’ll find that he will be a great help.”

The boys were suspicious at first, but eventually they decided to ask Trev to stay around, at least for a while.

The Boffin and the Mage stayed with Elsie and the two girls for a few days. It seemed to the Boffin that the two boys found reasons to visit every day, and she smiled to herself. Rhos always seemed to be near the boy with the scar on his hand, while Wen and the boy with the nick in his ear were seldom far apart.

Trev also dropped by a couple of times, and he was intent on building bridges. Rhos and Wen were suspicious at first, but he was much more relaxed and friendly than he was before, and the girls were surprised to find that they soon quite liked him.

When it was time to leave, the Boffin filled the boiler of the car and the small tank in the tender with water, and gratefully accepted a load of wood for the fire and the bunkers on the tender. She lit the boiler the hard way, with sticks and paper, and while they were waiting for the steam pressure to build, they said their goodbyes.

The Boffin and the Mage trundled down the road towards the lake and the Boffin linked arms with the Mage who was manning the tiller.

“That was a good outcome,” she said.

“Yes, wasn’t it? Though you do like your theatrics, don’t you. Catching the bolts in mid-air indeed!”

“I didn’t have a lot of choice! There was no time! What about you, stopping time like that?”

“That was just to give Trev a chance, and he took it. I think most of his irritability and meanness sprang from guilt. He’ll be a good man, in the end, I think.”

“Yeah. It was the two boys who did the harvest, then?”

“Or bears. It’s hard to tell. Yes, they were touched by magic of course, and picked up on Elsie’s worries. It was a sort of thank you for letting them sleep in the barn. They were able to do the harvest so long as no one saw them. Otherwise, they’d revert to bear, I think.”

“But they didn’t know how to run a farm.”

“Yeah, that’s true. The magic helped, of course. Now they will have to learn to farm without the help of magic. Trev will help, I’m sure.”

He paused and stroked his beard. “There’s one thing that I don’t understand though. Why Elsie’s barn?”

She kissed him. “Think about it, my dear. They were not really bears. They were really boys.”

“Oh, of course. It’s obvious. Silly me! And they met the two girls in the forest when they were bears, didn’t they?”

They rounded a bend in the road and the lake opened out in front of them.

It was just an arm of the big lake. The trees edging the lake were mostly conifers, but there were stands of deciduous trees scattered here and there between them, and as the year was turning to autumn, many of them showed brilliant yellows and reds. The trees were reflected in the still lake

waters which also reflected the deep blue of the sky and the white of the clouds. Behind the stands of trees by the lake, the forest swept up and over the ridges, showing more of the green of the conifers, and less of the bright colours of the deciduous trees the higher up one looked.

Much higher up, the ridges marched to the mountains. The rocky shoulders of the giant peaks of the range shrugged off the trees, showing their rocky shoulders. Early season snows carpeted the sheltered gulleys and gulches, while the highest peaks were still clear this early in the year.

Down at the lake level, some of the lake's borders, where the rivers and streams reached the lake, were muddy havens for reeds and rushes. In other places the forest stopped two or three metres from the water and grass borders separated the forest from the stony or gravelly beaches. Small gnarled shrubs and bushes struggled in the thin soils, and the occasional flowering plants painted bright spots and patches here and there. Small succulent plants sported bright yellow stars in mats of fleshy green.

In the stonier areas, little lizard creatures skittered from here to there, hiding under the sprawling mats of tough little plants from the herons and other wading birds for whom they would be a nice snack. The birds stalked the shores and the shallows, looking for lizards, small fresh water crustaceans and fish, and insects. Kingfishers perched on dead branches, swooping down on small fishes in the shallows, returning to their perches with their prey if they were successful. A toss and a flip and a swallow and the fish was gone.

Further out on the water, ducks upended and dabbled in the mud, or quacked and cruised busily about. In contrast, flocks of swans cruised regally around, bending their long necks and dipping their heads into the water. Out where the arm of the lake opened into the lake proper, a flock of geese flew in from somewhere, and drew arrow shaped intersecting wakes on the placid surface.

“Oh, that's beautiful,” said the Boffin. “And not a trace of science or magic involved.”

The Mage put his arm around his wife, and she hugged him back.

“Oh, but there is magic there. And beneath the surface, science is involved,” said the Mage. “Can't you feel it? Science and magic are the foundation of everything, and it is glorious!”

“You're right, Prof. Completely right!”