

SWAN LAKE



With six
enchancing
pop-ups

Illustrated by Jenny Zemanek



It was a beautiful summer's evening, and Prince Siegfried and his friends had gathered for a party beyond the castle walls. At last, the Prince had come of age; it would be a great celebration. A long table was laid out, piled high with rich foods and dainty pastries, and the trees along the edge of the forest were festooned with lights, just starting to glimmer in the fading pink light.

A band of musicians surrounded the revelers as they swirled and pranced beneath the open sky. Siegfried had not a care in the world. But then his mother laid a hand on his arm.

"Son," she said, "Now that you have come of age, it is time for you to choose a wife."

"Must I?" asked Siegfried, the happiness falling from his face. "But why so soon?"

"It is right and proper for a prince to have a princess — one day you will be King and you will need a Queen at your side."

But Prince Siegfried was despondent. Life as a prince had many privileges, but sometimes it felt as though his whole future was already mapped out before him.

A sudden noise beyond the party lifted Siegfried from his gloomy thoughts. Looking up, he saw a great flock of swans taking flight. Their long white necks and powerful wings rose up high above the top of the forest. Then, as one, they turned and vanished into the distance. Siegfried looked longingly after them. "If only I could be like them, flying and free," he thought to himself.

He had no wish to return to the party now. Looking around, he saw the other revelers were occupied in dancing and merry-making. Nobody would notice if he slipped away. So without another moment's hesitation, he stopped silently between the boughs of the forest and into the gloom of the approaching evening.



Prince Siegfried ventured further and further into the forest, the music from the party fading behind him. The wind whispered through the leaves, like shared secrets, and the birds were singing their evening song.

At last Siegfried came to a vast shimmering lake, surrounded by tall trees. Across the water drifted a flock of elegant swans – the very birds he had watched take flight.

As Siegfried watched them, the sun cast its last rays desperately over the horizon, and sunk from sight, the dark descending instantly. And as this happened, one of the swans rose up, stretched its wings and thrust its neck towards the sky. It turned once on the spot, and then Siegfried found himself looking at the most beautiful young woman he had ever seen. Their eyes locked, and Siegfried looked at her in astonishment as the rest of the swans all underwent the same transformation.

The Prince was no longer looking at a flock of swans, but at a group of girls.

"Who are you?" said Siegfried to them. "And what magic is this?"

The first girl stepped forwards and spoke in a soft, sad voice.

"My name is Olette," she said. "And this is a wicked enchantment. My friends and I have all been put under a spell by a sorcerer. His name is Rothbart, and his magic is too strong to be broken. By day we are doomed to live as swans, only returning to our true form by night."

"But that is awful," said Siegfried. "Can't something be done?"

"The only way to break the spell, is for someone who has never loved another before, to swear his love to me." At this, she looked down with despair.

The Prince wished desperately that there was something he could do.



Siegfried and Odette talked all night, exchanging their stories and sharing their dreams for the future. Siegfried could feel himself falling in love, but Odette kept looking anxiously at the sky, waiting for the sun to rise.

As Siegfried was about to depart, there was a sudden flurry of leaves in the trees above them, as though a great storm had whipped up. Out of it appeared a mighty sorcerer, his cape flying about his shoulders like the wings of some great bird. He glowered at Prince Siegfried as he advanced upon him.

"These swans are mine," Rothbart growled. "I would return to your castle, if I were you, princeling."

"No," shouted Siegfried. "These are people, not swans — how can you have done such a thing to them? You are a wicked man. I will fight you — here and now!"

"Don't," cried Odette, pulling Siegfried away. "You do not know Rothbart's power! And besides, if anything were to happen to him, we would be trapped in this enchantment forever."

"But this isn't fair," said Siegfried. Such was his fury at Rothbart, that he would have drawn his sword and duelled with the sorcerer had Odette's friends not intervened. For seeing the danger they were all in, they came between the prince and the sorcerer, driving them apart by beating their long arms like wings. As Siegfried marched for Odette's face, the sun's first rays broke through the night. Arms became feathered wings, and with sadness the girls changed back into graceful swans.

"I will find you, again Odette!" Siegfried called, even as the swans beat him away.



Horried at his mistake, Siegfried hurried from the ball. He found Odette weeping beside the rushes of the lake, surrounded by her friends.

"Please forgive me," begged Siegfried. "I thought it was you at the ball. All my thoughts were of you."

Odette looked up at the Prince's earnest face, and saw the pain written across it. She knew he was honest – it had been a mistake, nothing more than a terrible mistake.

"I forgive you," she said. "But we can never be together now."

"There must be something we can do," said Siegfried.

At that moment, Rothbart appeared, full of swagger and confidence, with Odile close behind him. Rothbart stepped forwards threateningly, but he had underestimated the fury of Odette and the swans. The sun was beginning to rise, and the swans' transformation had begun. Before it could complete, they swept towards the sorcerer in an angry flock, driving him back, back towards the lake. Siegfried, too, was on his feet, rage pulsing through his veins. He grabbed the nearest object – a branch from the woods – and thrust it at Rothbart.

The branch glanced off the sorcerer's side and fell with a splash into the lake.

"You fool," laughed Rothbart. "I am unharmed, you see!"



He held out his arms to show them. But Siegfried's actions had not been in vain – he had snapped a single feather from the sorcerer's great robe. Everyone watched in silence as the feather drifted slowly to the ground. Then, suddenly, the sky was awash with feathers of all colours.

"What's happening?" cried Rothbart.

The swan's white feathers were falling away from their limbs, while a flurry of feathers wrapped Rothbart and Odile in a furious whirlwind, spinning them round and around. When the wind finally died down, the sorcerer and the girl had gone: in their place was a scowling owl and a single black swan.



The next night, a great ball was held at the palace to celebrate Prince Siegfried's birthday. Siegfried's mother had invited many beautiful princesses, from far and wide, in the hope that the young prince might choose one as his bride.

Siegfried danced with the princesses, each beautiful, intelligent and charming. But he could think only of Odette, the bewitching swan princess. And though he danced daintily, his eyes roved the crowd, searching for the face he longed to see.

Just as Siegfried was beginning to lose hope, a young woman and her father entered the ball: her clothes were as dark as the night and her face was captivating, a mysterious smile playing across her lips. It was Odette – Siegfried was sure of it! Pushing aside the thought that something was amiss, he swept the girl into his arms and whirled her around the room.

The dancers spun in sweeping circles, the girl's dress billowing out around her. Siegfried was dizzy and elated, and at the end of the dance he fell down on one knee.

"I love this woman," he declared to the shock of the crowd. "And I will marry her. There, you have all heard it."

But as the words left his mouth, Siegfried's eye was caught by a movement at the window. With horror he glimpsed a face in the darkness beyond. It was Odette, who had watched the whole scene. So who was the other young woman?

"You see, Prince?" said Rothbart, appearing from the crowd. "You cannot help these matters. It is not Odette you danced with tonight; it was my daughter, Odille, disguised to trick you. You are bound to her now."

Outside, Odette's features were painted with despair. Siegfried realized that his words had sealed her fate. Now, she would never be free from her enchantment.

But before the Prince could reach Odette to comfort her, she had vanished into the night, the sound of her sob trailing behind her.



"The magic?" asked Siegfried, taking in the scene in disbelief.
 "It has been undone," said Odette, laughing. "A single feather was all it took! Now we are free once more."

"And Rotbart?" asked Siegfried, looking at the owl.

"An owl forever. This means we can be together at last."

Siegfried and Odette watched, smiling, as the owl and swan spread their wings and rose up into the rose-tinted sky. The sun was rising higher and higher now, its fiery rays touching everything with golden strokes of colour.

High above them, the sky faded to a bright forget-me-not blue. Odette and the other girls exchanged smiles: it was the first time in many years that they had greeted the day, not as swans, but as girls. The curse had been lifted.

The girls turned away from the lake and the dark spell of the past. Ahead of them, the sunlight illuminated the path back home: to their freedom and their futures. Linking arms, the friends strode boldly towards their new lives.

Odette and Siegfried turned to face one another. "Take my hand," said Odette, lacing his fingers through hers. He smiled and bent to kiss her hand.

"My promises are my own to make now," he said. "And I promise to love you forever."

Slowly they made their way towards the castle, as the sun shone high above them. Over their long lives, Prince Siegfried and Odette would see the sun rise and set many times. But they would never lose their sense of wonder at this transformation from light to dark and back again. And they would never forget the time when they had lived under a great, dark sorcerer: or that their love – and the love of their friends – was far stronger than any spell.