

Witch for a Week



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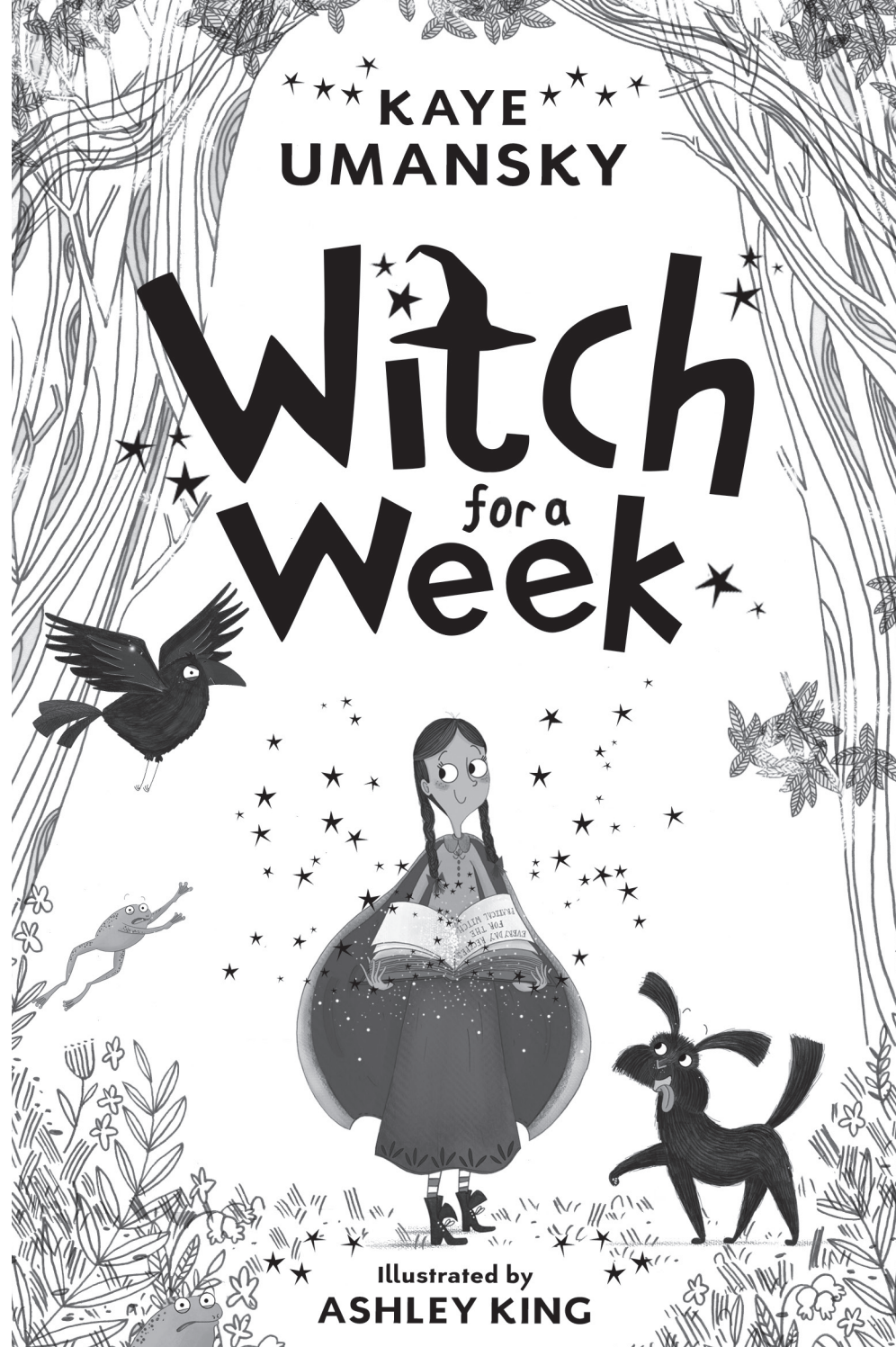
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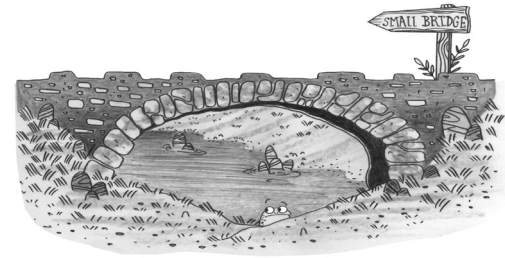


For Freya, Elinor,
Reuben and Erin



**PICKLES' TOP TEN RULES
OF CUSTOMER SERVICE**

- 1. BE FRIENDLY**
- 2. PRETEND THAT THE CUSTOMER
IS ALWAYS RIGHT**
- 3. BE A GOOD LISTENER**
- 4. KEEP PEOPLE CHATTING**
- 5. BE SYMPATHETIC**
- 6. USE A SOOTHING TONE WITH THE
TRICKY ONES**
- 7. ALWAYS BE HELPFUL**
- 8. STAY OPEN WHENEVER POSSIBLE**
- 9. ALWAYS HAVE A HANDY HANKY**
- 10. USE FLATTERY**



Chapter One

THE WITCH BLOWS IN

Elsie Pickles was minding the family shop when the witch blew into town.

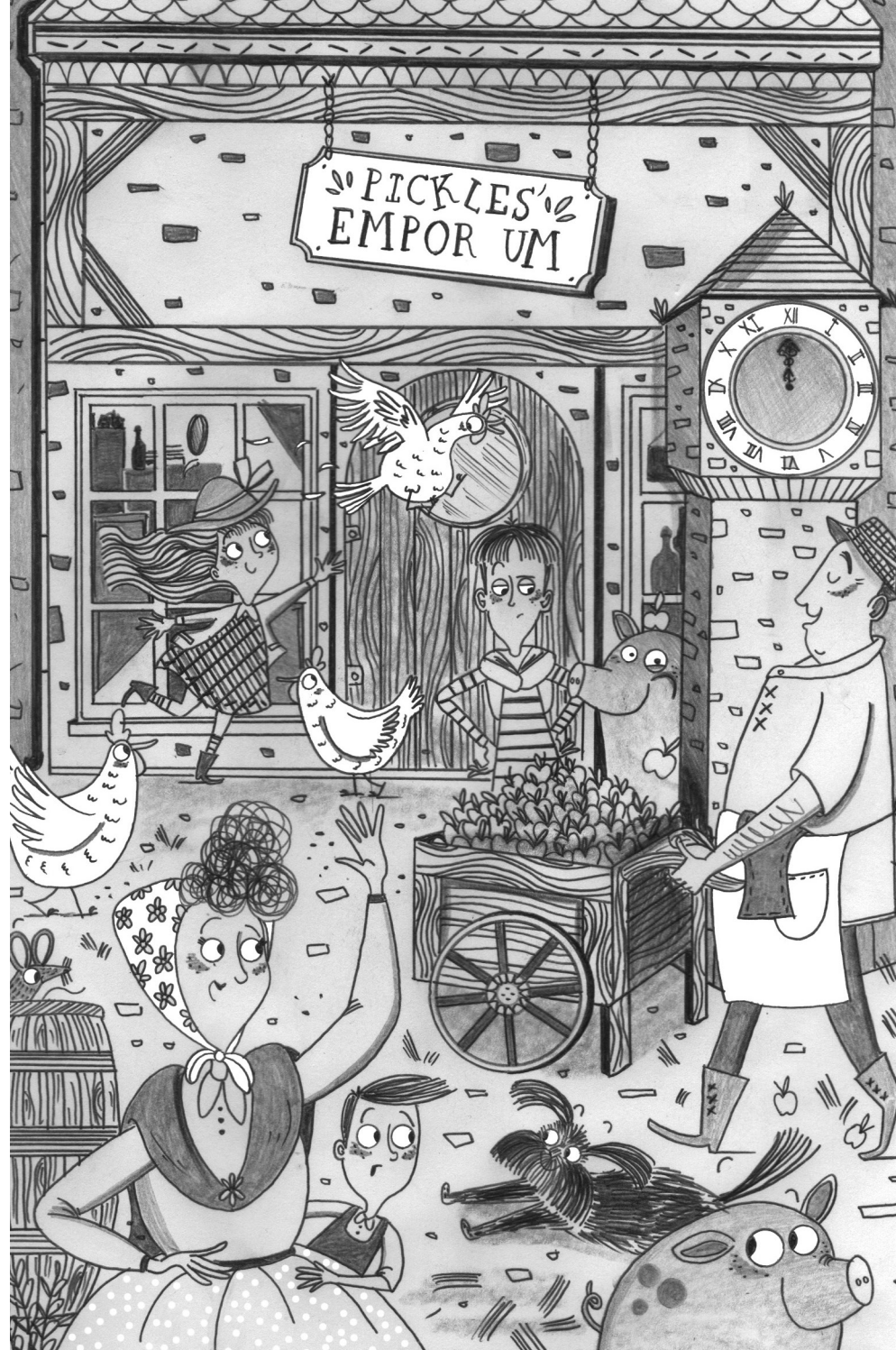
The town was called Smallbridge, because it was small and had a bridge. The bridge spanned a sluggish river called the Dribble. Like the river, life in Smallbridge trickled on with calm monotony. It was a dull little town where people went to bed early because there was nothing else to do.

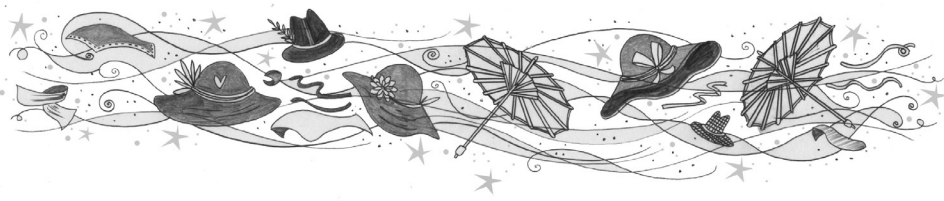
The shop was just off the main street, down

a narrow alley, and was called, rather grandly, Pickles' Emporium. But it wasn't grand at all. It was dark and dingy and sold cheap, boring things. Tea strainers. Buckets. Candles. Boot polish. Paper clips. The till didn't ding much. In fact, mostly people just came in to chat and didn't spend a penny. Some weeks, the shop hardly brought in enough to put food on the Pickles' table.

This particular day was a sunny Saturday. The high street was thronged with shoppers, strollers, children, chickens and the odd wandering pig. Smallbridge's stray dog lay sprawled in the middle of it all, tripping people up and enjoying the morning sun.

The Emporium was doing its usual roaring trade. Elsie had sold a shoelace. Her dad had sold a mop. Both of them had listened to a





lot of moaning about bad backs and annoying neighbours. Just another day of poor sales and earache. Nothing out of the ordinary at all.

And then . . .

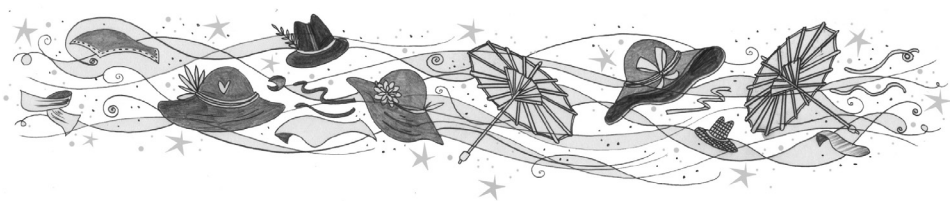
The town hall clock struck twelve. High noon.

The last chime died away . . .

And everything changed!

A wind came howling out of nowhere, sending hats flying and rubbish skittering along the cobbles. This wind wasn't a summer breeze. This wind was ferocious. The sort of wind that could uproot trees and topple chimneys.

The high street emptied as everyone ran for cover, holding down skirts and grabbing for flying parasols. Shopkeepers battled to pull down shutters. Children were called in. Doors slammed. The stray dog disappeared. It was



like that moment in a western films when the gunslinger comes to town and everyone runs for safety.

'Look at that,' said Elsie's dad. 'Weather's turned. I doubt we'll have many customers now. Reckon I'll put me feet up for five minutes.'

'Shall I put up the **CLOSED** sign?' asked Elsie.

'Nope. Remember Customer Service Rule Eight: Stay Open Whenever Possible. You'll be all right on your own, won't you? Make us our fortune, love.'

I wish, thought Elsie, as he trudged upstairs.

All they needed was one rich customer who was crazy about cheap, boring stuff. Although, now Elsie thought about it, she didn't suppose the Emporium's entire stock was worth much at all.

Outside, the wind continued to rage about



the deserted streets, looking for things to push over. Rich or poor, there would be no customers out in this wild, weird weather.

Elsie gave a small sigh. She loved Mum and Dad, and her three little brothers, Arthy, Toby and baby Todd. And she didn't really mind working in the shop. But sometimes she wished that her life was a little more exciting, like in books.

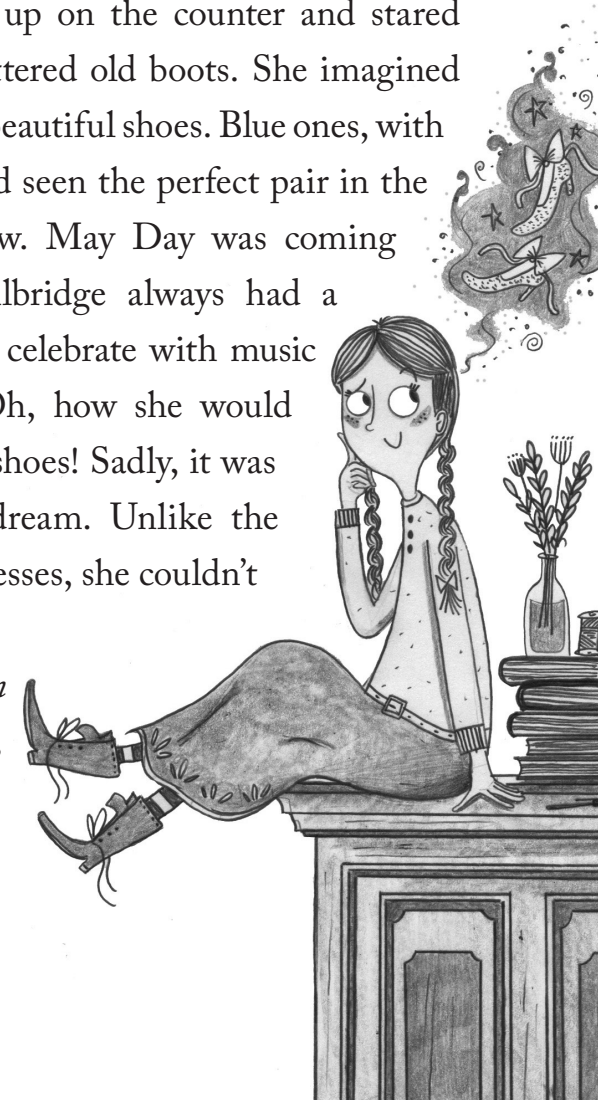
Elsie loved reading. She had read almost all the books in Smallbridge's tiny library. She couldn't bring them home because the boys would always ruin them. But she knew the best stories by heart.

Of course, in books, it was almost always the youngest son who had the adventures and made the fortune. Girls in stories mostly danced or slept, passing time until a prince came to the

rescue, and then they would get married in big white dresses and beautiful shoes. None of them worked in shops.

Elsie hopped up on the counter and stared down at her battered old boots. She imagined her own feet in beautiful shoes. Blue ones, with ribbons. She had seen the perfect pair in the cobbler's window. May Day was coming soon and Smallbridge always had a street parade to celebrate with music and dancing. Oh, how she would love those blue shoes! Sadly, it was an impossible dream. Unlike the storybook princesses, she couldn't afford them,

No harm in wishing, though, thought Elsie.



There came a sudden, sharp tap on the window. Elsie looked up.

And there she was. The witch. Staring through the glass. Green eyes in a pale face. Strands of wild auburn hair whipping wildly around her head.

For a long moment, she held Elsie's startled gaze . . .



Then she was gone.

Crash! The door flew open! The rusty old doorbell fell to the floor and shattered!

The wind barged in, swept round, saw nothing it wanted and roared back out again!

And suddenly the witch was in the shop.

Elsie had heard all the gossip about this strange customer. Magenta Sharp was her name, and the villagers called her the Red Witch for three reasons:



Even if she hadn't been a witch, people would have talked about Magenta Sharp, because she hadn't been born and bred in Smallbridge and was therefore a bit suspect. She rarely came to town – only when she needed the sole of a boot fixing or to buy some socks – one of those dull errands that you put off for as long as possible. When she did visit, she didn't go out of her way to make herself popular. Just swept in and out again, ignoring everyone and tapping her foot impatiently if she was kept waiting.

Whenever she arrived, there was always bad weather. Sudden snowfalls, hail, thick fog. Annoying weather that people were never suitably dressed for. The more traditional townsfolk were also put out by the fact she always dressed in those dreadful, garish red clothes! She didn't shuffle about in black rags

and the traditional pointy hat, like a respectable witch would. Not a cackle to be heard. Not a wart to be seen. No sign of a broomstick. She was different. Strange. Unwelcome.

People said she lived in a tower deep in Crookfinger Forest, although nobody had actually seen it. Everyone avoided the forest. It grew right up to the edge of town and was vast, ancient and a bit frightening. The sort of place that might hide dark secrets.

Many rumours had grown up about the tower. Some said it was made of glass. Some said ice. Some said marble. They said it was impossible to find – in which case, of course, they wouldn't have a clue what it was made of. When Elsie pointed that out, they just shrugged their shoulders and said, 'Still . . .' in a meaningful way.

None of that mattered to Elsie, though. What mattered was that here was a customer who just might spend some money.

Elsie jumped down, took her place at the till, put on a welcoming smile and said brightly: 'Can I help?'



Chapter Two **ANYONE COULD DO IT**

The witch nudged the broken bell with the toe of her boot.

'You need a new bell.'

She said it abruptly, as though she had nothing to do with it. No 'sorry, was that me?' No 'oh dear, allow me to pay for the damage'. Nothing.

'So we do,' agreed Elsie. 'Never mind, accidents happen. See anything you fancy?'

'Frankly,' said the witch, staring round the tiny shop, 'no.'

‘Well, take your time. Corkscrews are on sale today and we have a special offer on hinges. It’s a nasty wind out, isn’t it?’

Saying these kind of things is automatic when you work in a shop. Elsie’s dad had taught her all the important rules of Customer Service. Things like:

1) BE FRIENDLY, EVEN TO RUDE PEOPLE

(in fact, especially to rude people)

**2) PRETEND THAT THE
CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT**

(even when they’re clearly wrong)

**3) BE A GOOD LISTENER AND MAKE SURE
TO NOD AND LOOK INTERESTED**

*(not easy when talking about
corkscrews and hinges)*

**4) KEEP PEOPLE CHATTING AND THEY
JUST MIGHT BUY SOMETHING**

And those were just the top four; her dad had hundreds of rules! Elsie was very good at Customer Service.

‘I brought the wind with me,’ said the witch. ‘Thought things could do with a bit of a shake-up round here, it’s always so deadly dull, don’t you think?’

‘I do,’ said Elsie, Customer Service Rules One, Three and Four clicking in. ‘Nothing like a bit of wild weather to stir people up. They’ll moan about it for weeks.’

‘Good. My efforts are not in vain. Where’s your noticeboard?’

‘Behind you.’ Elsie pointed.

‘How much to display this?’ A large piece of paper suddenly appeared in the witch’s red-gloved hand.

‘A penny for the week,’ said Elsie.

‘I haven’t got a week. I need fast results.’

‘It’s still a penny, I’m afraid. But I’ll point it out to people, of course.’ (Customer Service Rule Seven: Always Be Helpful.) ‘Are you sure I can’t tempt you with a half-price kitchen mat?’ (Customer Service Rule Eleven: Draw Attention to a Bargain.)

‘No.’ The witch snapped her fingers. ‘Pins.’

Elsie handed over four drawing pins and the witch fastened the piece of paper slap bang in the middle of the board, knocking down several old notices in the process.

“Temporary Caretaker Wanted”, read Elsie. “Apply to Magenta Sharp. Tower in Forest.” Hmmm . . .’

‘What do you mean, “hmmm”?’ The witch frowned. ‘Something wrong?’

‘Well, you need a bit more information.’

‘Such as?’



‘Such as, how long do you need someone for?’

‘A week. I’m visiting my sister. Although if she’s like she is sometimes, I could be back in a matter of hours.’

‘When would you want someone to start?’

‘Tomorrow.’

‘That’s very short notice. What will the duties be?’

‘Lock up. Keep nosy parkers at bay. Take in the complaints.’

‘Complaints?’

‘I run a mail order service. **Sharp Spells on Tap.**’ The witch sniffed. ‘Wish I’d never started it. I spend all my time wrapping up parcels that leak, explode or never arrive. People moan and want refunds.’

‘Poor you,’ said Elsie sympathetically. ‘People can be so unreasonable, can’t they?’

Be Sympathetic was Customer Service Rule Five. But in this case, Elsie was genuinely interested. The witch was very different to the usual Emporium customer.

‘Yes,’ said the witch. ‘They can. Oh! Almost forgot. The caretaker will need to change Corbett’s water.’

‘Who’s Corbett?’

‘The raven. Comes with the tower. Looks after himself mostly, but turning the tap on is

a step too far. No opposable thumbs, you see.’

‘Corbett’s an unusual name,’ said Elsie. ‘If I had a raven, I’d call him Charlie.’

‘It means *raven* in Old French. But I didn’t name him, it’s what he’s called.’

‘Right,’ said Elsie. ‘Change Corbett’s water. Is that it?’

‘Pretty much. There’s no need to cook, the tower takes care of that. I’ve got a decent collection of books, for anyone who’s interested.’ Her eyes narrowed. ‘You like reading, don’t you? I’ve seen you in the library. Go there often?’

‘Not as much as I’d like,’ said Elsie. ‘I’m usually stuck here in the shop. And I can’t bring books home. My little brothers chew them.’

‘Well, stop them! Freeze them in their tracks! I have a spell for that. Comes in



spray form. **Squeeze 'n' Freezem.** One squirt and they're rigid. It's one of my more popular products.'

'I'm sure,' said Elsie. 'But I don't think it's very nice to freeze family.'

'I don't see why not. I've done a lot worse to my sister. But here's another clever suggestion. Put the books out of the way.'

'There's nowhere to hide them. We're very squashed upstairs. Erm, just to be clear, the caretaker's duties wouldn't involve any actual . . . *magical* activity, would they?'

'No. All professional services are on hold until I get back. Of course, the tower's got all the *magical* gear – fully equipped, so to speak. So, if the fancy took, there's nothing wrong with having a little *dabble*. Trying out a spell or two, just for the fun of it. I'm a great believer in

letting people have a go at things. How else will they know if they're any good?'

'Isn't that dangerous?' asked Elsie. 'Going off and leaving someone to mess about with spells and stuff if they don't know what they're doing?'

'Ah. You're talking health and safety. I don't bother with all that.' The witch leaned her sharp elbows on the counter. 'You learn by your mistakes, Elsie. Besides, if you stick to the rules, magic is surprisingly straightforward. People don't realize that.'

'How do you know my na—'

'*Shush*, I'm talking. There are three important things to remember when it comes to magic.' The witch ticked them off on her long red fingers. 'One, read the instructions. Two, follow the recipe. Three, make it work.'

'I was with you until the last one,' said Elsie.

‘How do you “make it work”?’

‘Practise. It helps to have the knack, of course.’

‘The knack?’

‘Yes. It’s like playing the piano, or creating a delicious meal out of cheese rind, an old potato and a stick of rhubarb. Some have it, some don’t.’ She straightened up. ‘Anyway. Back to business. Anything else you think I need to put in the advert?’

‘It would help to say how much you’re paying.’

‘Haven’t a clue. What do you think?’

‘I don’t know. Just what’s fair.’

‘Very well. I shall pay what’s fair.’ The witch gave Elsie a sideways look. ‘Plenty enough for a new pair of pretty blue shoes, I would think.’

Elsie was shocked.

Shoes? she thought. *How does she know about my dream blue shoes?*



‘That’s what you want, isn’t it?’

‘Well, yes. But how . . . ?’

‘Oh, stop gaping like a fish. I’m a witch! Mind-reading is part of my skill set. If you want your thoughts to remain private, don’t leave shoes lying around where anyone can trip over them. Anyway, the job’s a piece of cake if you can put up with Corbett. *You* could do it.’

‘Me? Oh, no,’ said Elsie. ‘No, I have to help Dad in the shop. And Mum needs help with my brothers.’

‘It’d help if you could earn enough for new boots for your brothers, wouldn’t it? Provide a turkey for May Day? New bonnet for your mother? Bit of extra cash, smarten the shop up? Mmm?’

‘They won’t agree,’ said Elsie.

‘Because I’m a witch, I suppose. They’re witchist.’

‘They’re not! They don’t know you, that’s all.’

‘So? I won’t be there.’

‘Even so, Dad won’t let me.’

‘I have a spell for that. Yes Drops. Three drops in his tea and he’ll agree to anything. Kiss a frog. Eat his own socks.’

‘I said that I don’t think you should use spells on family,’ said Elsie.

‘Fine, do it the long way, if you must. Get your mother on side. Talk up the turkey. Big up the bonnet. Tell her you’ll be safely back home in seven days, she has my word. Think of it, Elsie. Your own bedroom. Plenty of interesting books to read. Time to yourself. And I will pay you – let me see – twenty-one gold pieces, three for each day. The traditional purse of gold. Fair?’

Elsie was taken aback. ‘Twenty-one gold pieces? Why, that was a fortune! More than

Pickles' Emporium had earned in the last ten years!

But . . .

'What are you waiting for, Elsie?' the witch pressed. 'Where's your sense of adventure? I know you've got one.'

She's right, thought Elsie. I have.

But . . .

'Come early tomorrow morning. Bring a toothbrush. Here's your penny for the advert – use it to buy a new bell.'

A coin appeared in her hand. It leapt up, spun through the air and landed on its edge on the counter before rolling to the till, ready to be popped in.

'How will I find you?' asked Elsie. It was out of her mouth before she could help it. 'Not that I'm saying I'll do it, but . . .'

'Walk into Crookfinger Forest and keep going. We'll find *you*.'

And with that, the witch was gone. Not through the door. Just – gone.

Outside, the wind dropped. A shaft of sunlight streamed through the window. There came the sound of rumbling wheels and hesitant feet as the town rose back to life.

Elsie scooped up the coin and rang up the till . . .

Which was full to the brim with shiny copper pennies!

