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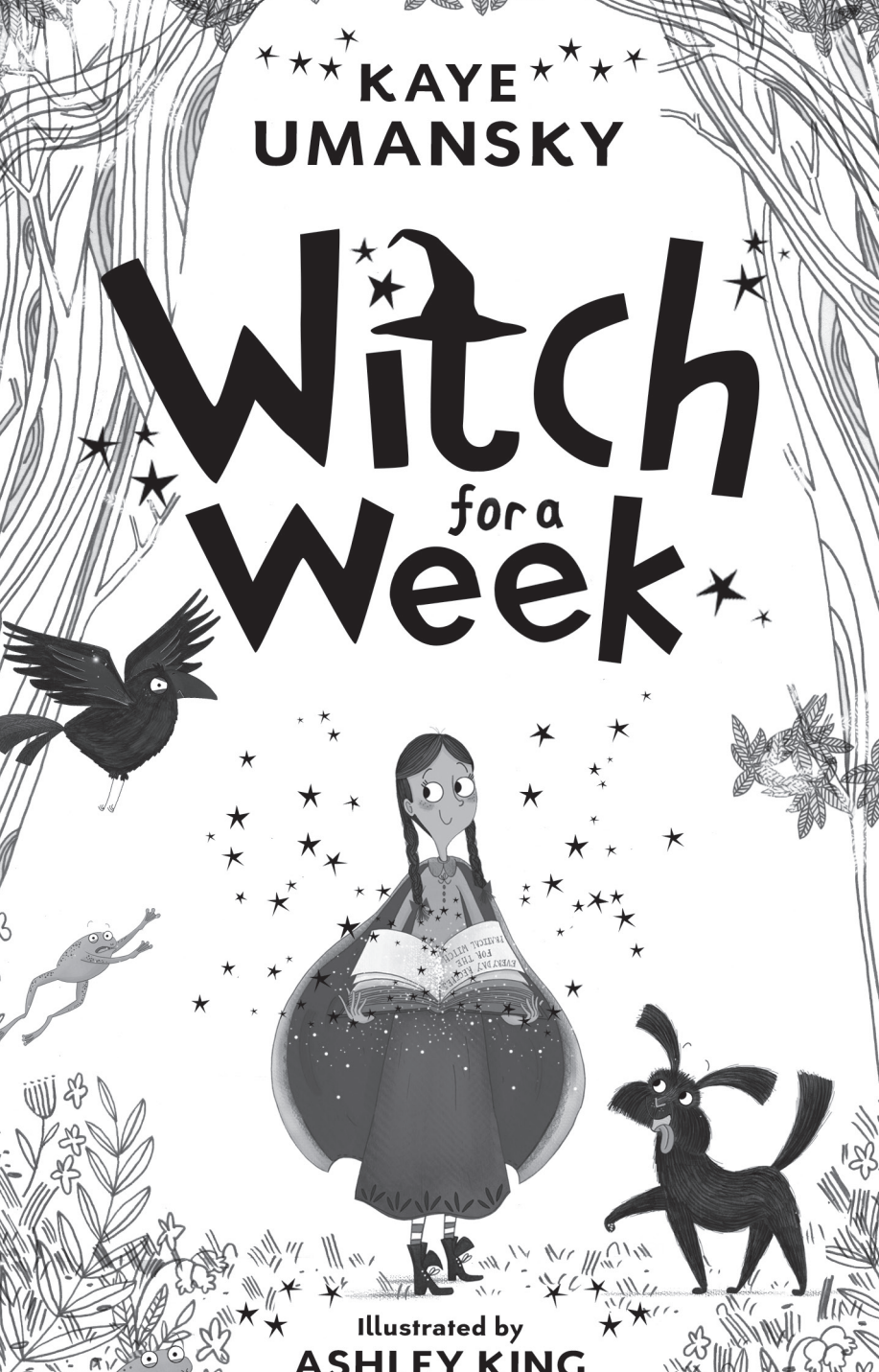
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KAYE UMANSKY

Witch for a Week



Illustrated by
ASHLEY KING

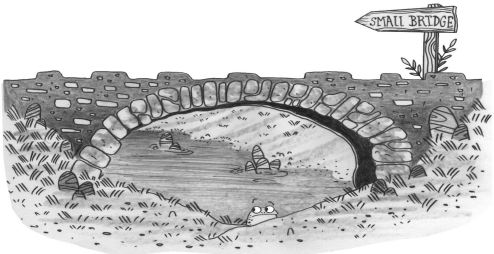


For Freya, Elinor,
Reuben and Erin



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.

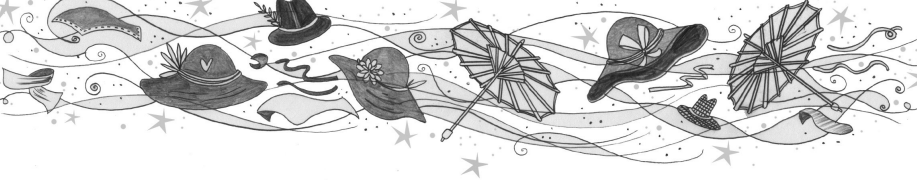
The shop was just off the main street, down

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


PICKLES
EMPOR UM



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 . . .

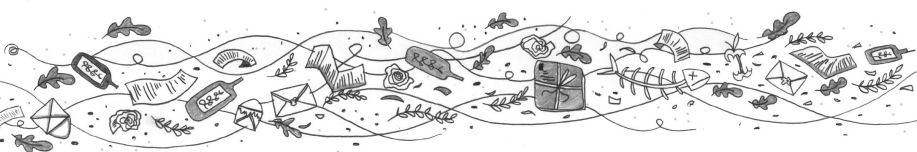
The town hall clock struck twelve. High noon.

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.'

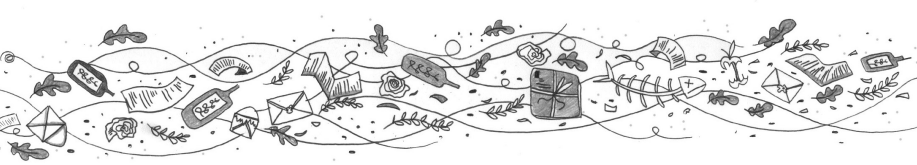
'Shall I put up the **CLOSED** sign?' asked Elsie.

'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.

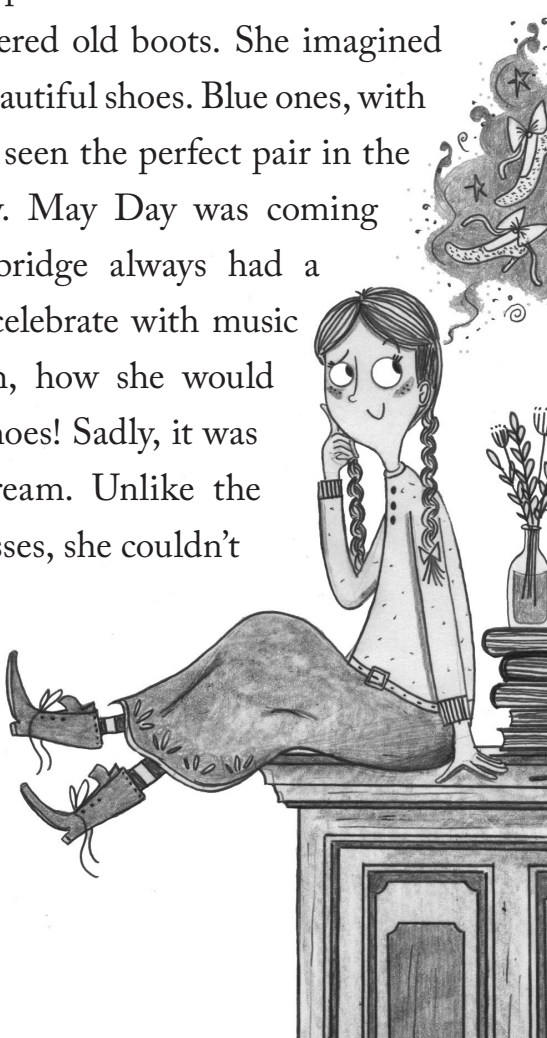
Elsie loved reading. She had read almost all the books in Smallbridge's tiny library. She couldn't bring them home because the boys would always ruin them. But she knew the best stories by heart.

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?'