Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Opening extract from

Clover Twig and the Incredible-Flying Cottage

Written by

Kaye Umansky

Published by

Bloomsbury

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.



Chapter One

Wonted. Storng Gril to Cleen

Clover Twig stood at the garden gate, staring in at the Witch's cottage – and the cottage stared right back. The windows were like black eyes – small, dark and sunken. Ivy drooped over them, like hooded eyelids.

The gate was secured with a loop of old string. Clover pulled it free, and gave a brisk push. The gate

remained firmly closed. She pushed again.

The gate said, 'Take the hand off!'

The voice came from deep within the bars. It sounded bossy, like a guard in a museum who has spotted you blowing your nose on a priceless tapestry.

'What?' said Clover.

'Take the hand off!' This time, the tetchy order was accompanied by a puff of rust, most of which showered down on to Clover's boots.

'Well, thanks for that,' said Clover. 'I polished those this morning.'

'The hand. Take it *off*. Then go away.'

Clover kept her hand right where it was. She wasn't about to be ordered around by an old gate, even if it did belong to a witch.

'I'm not going anywhere,' she said, firmly. 'And I won't take my hand off until you give me a bit of service. How come you're able to talk, anyway?'

'How should I know? I'm a gate.'

'I suppose it's some kind of magic spell, is it?'

'Not my department. I open, I shut. That's it.'

Clover glanced up at the watchful windows. Behind one, she thought she saw a movement.

It's *her*, she thought. She's waiting in the dark behind the curtain. Waiting to see if I'm put off.

We will be spending some time with Clover, so let's look at her for a moment.

Tidy brown plaits. Steady blue eyes. Brown cloak, getting on the small side. Beneath the cloak, a green dress – faded, but clean and well pressed. Over her arm, a basket containing an apron. On her feet, patched old boots, polished as well as patched old boots can be. Altogether neat and respectable, which is how she always looks.

'Let me in,' she said. 'I'm here to see Mrs Eckles.'

'Name?' snapped the gate.

'Clover Twig.'

'Friend or foe?'

'Friend. But if I was a foe, I'd hardly be likely to say so, would I?'

'Oh *ho*! *Backchat* now. *That's* not going get you in, is it?'

'What is, then?' Clover was getting tired of standing around arguing with a gate. She gave it another shove.

'Just don't *push* me,' snapped the gate. 'Purpose of visit?'

'I'm here about the job.' Clover reached into her basket, produced an old envelope and held it up. 'See?'

On the back, in a spidery scrawl blissfully

untroubled by punctuation were the following words:

WANTed
STOrNg gRIL To CLEEN aPPLy mRS ECkLES COTTaGE iN THE Wud sicK PenS A wEEK bRiNG AN AYpRUN

Beneath was a small, rudimentary map, consisting of scribbled lines, thumb marks and a lot of very badly drawn trees. In the middle was what looked like a toddler's attempt at drawing a house, together with an arrow and the word **ME!**

Clover had spotted it the day before, crookedly pinned on the village noticeboard.

It was the 'sick pens' that had caught her eye. Six whole pennies! Most cleaning jobs didn't pay more than four pence. It was too good to miss – although she had a feeling that her mother would have something to say.

'Password?' rapped the gate.

'*Password?*'

'You heard.'

'I don't know anything about a password.'

'In that case,' sneered the gate with relish, 'Admittance Denied.'

Just at that moment, a testy voice shouted, 'Is that gate givin' you grief?' It came from behind the front door.

'Yes,' called Clover. 'It's going on about a password.'

'Ah, it's just bein' difficult. Give it a kick.'

'With pleasure,' said Clover. And she drew back her foot and gave the gate a small, but very hard, kick. It slammed open in a furious squeal of hinges.

'Thank you so *very* much,' said Clover, and walked through with her nose in the air. Behind her, there came a huffy crash, which she ignored.

And now she was in the Witch's garden.

It wasn't a pretty sight. Thistles, nettles and weeds, jostling for space. A collapsed washing line. A crumbling well. An old bucket lying on its side in the mud, trailing a frayed bit of rope. An ancient water barrel, covered with green scum. It didn't bode well.

Clover stared up the path, giving the cottage her full attention. It was old. Very old. The thatch was going bald. The walls were held together by creepers and the whole structure sagged heavily to one side as though it was too exhausted to stand up straight. The angle of the twisty chimney was quite frightening. The windows still had that watchful air, like they were inspecting her. Giving her the once-over.



Clover didn't even blink. She was good at staring. She wasn't about to lose a staring match with a pile of old bricks. Not after coming all this way. Finding the cottage had taken for ever. It was well off the beaten track and the map was hopeless. But Clover had a stubborn streak. In the end, she had found it. Hidden in the deepest, darkest part of the forest, sitting plonk in the middle of a small clearing, encircled by a wildly overgrown hedge and protected by a talking gate.

The staring match was getting nowhere, so Clover decided to call it a draw. She thrust the paper into her pocket and crunched up to the flaking front door, which unhelpfully lacked a knob, handle, knocker or bell. She gave a brisk knock.

'I'm here,' she called, half expecting the door to talk back to her.

Silence. Clover waited, straightening a crease in her old green dress. She would have liked to have worn her better blue one, but it was torn. Sorrel, of course – the youngest of her three sisters. She coveted Clover's blue dress and was always sneakily trying it on.

Clover rapped again.

'Mrs Eckles? Are you there?'

She pressed her ear to the rough wood. Instantly,

there was a strange, unpleasant *tingling* sensation. Before she could jerk her head away, the testy voice spoke directly into her ear.

'What you usin' this door for? It don't open. Sealed up with a protection spell. Go round the back. Left, past the privy round the log pile.'

Round the back was a big surprise. The front was dark and unwelcoming, but the back was very different. For a start, it was bathed in sunshine. Like the front, the back wall of the cottage was covered with a thick, ancient growth of ivy, but here it looked charming rather than sinister. A robin perched on one of the tendrils, singing its heart out.

There was a herb bed, a bird bath and a patch of lawn, where two plump chickens strolled around searching for worms. There were flowers that didn't appear to pay any attention to seasonal rules. Bluebells, lavender and roses were all in bloom at the same time. An ancient, sun bleached bench was set at the far end, in the sunniest spot.

Best of all, in the middle of the lawn grew a cherry tree. It was covered in pink blossom. A bird feeder hung on a lower branch.

'Admirin' me tree?' said the voice from the doorway.

So. This was the Witch.

Clover had seen her from time to time, but usually in the distance, hobbling away from the village shop, whacking stray dogs and small children out of her way with a stick. She didn't seem very sociable. She never stopped to talk or gossip. She always wore the same clothes – an old black cloak, button boots and, when it was raining, the traditional pointy hat. This was the first time that Clover had seen her close up.

She certainly looked the part. She had the hooked nose, the pointed chin and the mad grey hair. No warts – but people said warts were optional, like the extra finger. Clover did a quick finger count and was relieved to discover that she had the normal amount.

But she had witchy eyes. Sharp, knowing, emerald green ones that didn't miss much.

'I were a girl when I planted that,' said Mrs Eckles. 'Did it with me sister. Fought like blue blazes, 'cos there was only the one spade. A wonder it survived. All them lightning bolts. All them sparks flyin' around. All that smoke.'

'Goodness,' said Clover. 'It sounds like quite a row.'

'It was. We didn't mess about.' Mrs Eckles folded her arms and looked Clover up and down. 'I knows you. You're that young Clover Twig. Yer pa calls

'imself a woodcutter. Spends all his time in the Crossed Axes.'

'It's thirsty work,' said Clover. 'His back's playing up.'

'Yes, well, he's yer pa, you would stick up for 'im. Yer Ma's got 'er 'ands full. Too many kids to feed. You're the eldest. You'll be eleven next birthday.'

'Yes,' said Clover, surprised. 'That's right.'

'You got three sisters an' one little brother. Fern, Bracken, Sorrel and Herbediah. Always wailin' for food.'

'That's true. But they won't be so hungry if I get the job.'

'Hmm. I dunno. I wanted strong. You don't look strong.'

'Stronger than I look.'

'Well, you gave that gate a good kick, I'll say that. But can you lift, unaided, all by yerself, a large double wardrobe?'

'I've never tried. Why, do you want one shifting?'

'No, but I might one day. Does yer ma know you're 'ere?'

'No,' admitted Clover. 'I thought I'd give her a surprise.'

She moved towards the doorstep and was just about to step up when Mrs Eckles said,

'That's far enough.' She was staring hard and tapping her chin with a gnarled finger.

'What?' said Clover. 'Are we waiting for something?'

'I'm decidin' whether to invite you over the threshold. I don't let any old rough riff-raff in. Could be thieves, con men, anything.'

'I'm not riff-raff,' said Clover.

'Plain old nosey parkers, then. No one comes in without an invitation. Place is all wired up with protection spells. Doorway, windows, chimney, all entry points covered. 'Specially the threshold. Used a double strength one, it's a killer.'

'So what would happen if I just walked in?'

'Try it and see. Mind yerself, though. Just stick yer hand out and use the tip of yer finger.'

Clover leaned over the doorstep and cautiously extended a finger into the dark doorway. There was an instant horrible, tingling, buzzing sensation, which crackled up her arm in an very unpleasant manner.

Hastily, she snatched it back.

'Effective, ain't it?' said Mrs Eckles, cheerfully. 'Sorry, but you did ask. Anyway, you can come in now. I'm extendin' you an official invitation.'

'You are?' said Clover, doubtfully, sucking her

finger, which was developing a small, painful blister.

'Yep. In you come, nothing'll 'appen. Not once you been properly introduced. Cottage, Clover Twig. Clover Twig, cottage. That's it, formalities over. Come on, come on, I won't eat yer.'

Chapter Two

First Off, Are You Stupid?

There was only one room downstairs, and it was in turmoil. Crockery was piled high in the sink and the stove was littered with blackened pans. All kinds of rubbish was dumped on the table: a mouldy turnip; a pestle and mortar; an old bird's nest; an axe; a single muddy boot and a plate containing the remains of cold scrambled eggs unattractively

garnished with an old sock. Two rickety chairs were piled high with old newspapers. The only place to sit was in the rocking chair, if you first removed the exploding bag of lurid green wool and the knitting needles.

There was a nasty, charred, burning smell in the air.

'I got a bit behind,' announced Mrs Eckles, casually waving her hand at the appalling mess as though it were a case of a few crumbs on the carpet. 'Me knees is playin' up. Run out o' cups, so don't expect tea.'

'I see you have a cat,' said Clover, nodding at the large, luxurious basket set beside the stove. It had a red cushion in it and was by far the nicest thing in the room. Beside it was a collection of lovingly arranged toys: a ball with a bell in it; a cork: a stuffed mouse; a selection of conkers and a piece of heavily chewed string.

'I 'ave,' said Mrs Eckles, sounding soppy. 'My Neville.'

'And that's his shrine, is it?'

'That's his *corner,* if that's what you mean. He ain't been in it lately. Gone off on one of his rambles. I bin out shoutin' an' rattlin' his biscuit tin, but no luck.'

'What's that burning smell?' asked Clover, sniffing.

''Is fish. Bit of a crisis earlier. Forgot I'd put it on.'

'You want to be careful,' said Clover. 'The whole place could catch. Old cottages like this go up easily.'

'Dunno about *easily,*' said Mrs Eckles. 'But you're right, they do go up.'

'Anyway,' said Clover, beginning to unfasten her cloak, 'anyway, I'll make a start on the washing up, shall I? Where do you keep the kettle?'

'Ain't said you've got the job yet. I only stuck the notice up yesterday. There might be a huge queue o' lasses later. Bigger ones. *Stronger* ones. '

'I'm first, though,' pointed out Clover. 'That shows I'm keen.'

'True. An' you didn't let the gate put you off, you gets points for that. But I needs to interview you in a proper manner. Ask you questions. I got 'em written down somewhere. You've caught me on the 'op, you 'ave.' Mrs Eckles began rummaging around in the chaos, picking things up and slamming them down, on a quest for the missing list.

Clover stared around the squalid kitchen, taking it all in. The grandfather clock with a slow, faintly sinister tick; the pointy hat, hanging from a hook on the door, along with a black cloak; the cauldron in the

fireplace; the bunches of unidentifiable herbs hanging from the low rafters; the broomstick which, judging by the cobwebs, hadn't been used in a while.

Another low, partly open door, revealed a narrow flight of twisty stairs leading up into darkness. Clover wondered what was up there.

'Hah! 'Ere it is, in the teapot.' Triumphantly Mrs Eckles waved another old envelope. 'Right. First off, are you stupid?'

'I don't think so. I know my letters and can count up to a hundred. But mostly, I'm good with a mop and bucket. That's what you want, isn't it?'

'Just yes or no will do. Can you cook?'

'Of course. Who can't?'

'Some can't. Some can. Some say they can't and can an' some say they can and can't.'

'Well, I can,' said Clover, firmly.

'Got an apron?'

'Yes.' Clover held out her basket. 'Here it is, look, with little flowers on.'

'Got an attitude?'

'Pardon?'

'You heard. 'Ave you got an attitude? Because I don't like girls with attitude. I likes 'em respectful. I deserves a bit o' respect in me old age.'

Clover thought about this. Did she have an attitude?

'Well,' she said, honestly, 'I do tend to say what I think.'

'Nothin' wrong with that. It's the way you says it. I can't be doin' with sulks and flounces and whinin'.'

'I don't think I do any of those.'

'Good. Green-fingered?'

'So-so. Not as good as Ma, but I usually remember to water . . .

'All right, all right, next question.' Mrs Eckles peered at the list. 'Ah, yes, proud of this one. Describe yourself in five well chosen words.'

Clover thought.

'Hardworking,' she said. 'Tidy. Honest. Mostly sensible. And – sometimes stubborn.'

'That's eight,' said Mrs Eckles. 'I asked for five. Thought you said you could count. Never mind, never mind, it's a good enough answer. But a bit dull. I 'ope you got other things about you. I 'ope you got a sense o' fun. Know any jokes?'

'No.'

'Dance? Sing? Whistle while you work?'

'No. I'm not Snow White, you know.'

'Just as well, she'd get on yer nerves after a while. Too busy larkin' around to pay proper attention to

security. What *can* you do that's entertainin'? Come on, come on, everyone's got a party piece.'

Clover thought. What could she do?

'Well,' she said, 'I'm quite good at staring. I can do it for ages, without blinking.'

'Go on then.'

Obediently, Clover fixed her steady blue eyes on a distant cobweb hanging from a rafter and stared. It was quite easy. She had a technique for it. Basically, she just went off into a pleasant little trance. Sort of retired into her head and thought about something else entirely, leaving her eyes to get on with it. It didn't matter what she thought about. It could be anything. Sometimes she emptied her mind and thought about nothing at all. That was quite restful.

After a minute or so, Mrs Eckles began tapping her foot.

'All right, that'll do. Not exactly earth shatterin' is it? When I stare at things, they *do* summat. Prepared to live in?'

That came as a shock. Clover hadn't even thought about living in.

'You gets yer own room,' went on Mrs Eckles. 'In the loft. There's a bed.'

Ah. Now, that was different. At home, Clover shared a bed with her sisters. She couldn't imagine

the luxury of waking without someone's elbow in her ear.

'Well,' she said, 'I'll certainly give it a try.'

'Of course, we'd need to see 'ow we get on,' said Mrs Eckles. 'See if we suit each other.'

'Of course. And I'll need to take every Sunday off, to visit home.'

'Fair enough. And you're 'appy with the terms? There's other stuff needs doin'. Shoppin', cookin', collectin' the eggs from Flo and Doris. That's the chickens. They takes turns. Flo does brown, Doris does speckled. You up for that?'

'Of course.'

'Last question,' said Mrs Eckles. Her eyes narrowed and her voice took on dark overtones. ''Ave you, or anyone in the family, got certain – shall we say – *Powers*?'

'Well, I've seen Pa lift up a pig with one hand. We think that's what put his back out. It was a very big pig, you see, and . . .'

'Nah, nah!' Mrs Eckles waved her quiet. 'I ain't talkin' about *pig* liftin'. I means– *unusual* Powers? You know. Fortune tellin'. Premonitions. Able to shift things about usin' the *Power o' the Mind*.' She gave a slow, meaningful wink. 'Like this,' she said.

Her green eyes swivelled to an old watering can

that stood by the back door.

To Clover's astonishment, the can began to rock. Gently at first, then faster. Then it swivelled on its base. Leading with its spout, rolling drunkenly from side to side like an old sailor, it propelled itself through the door. It hopped down on to the doorstep, then down again and out into the sunny garden, where it proceeded to water a clump of bluebells.

'Now, *that's* starin',' said Mrs Eckles. Her eyes were on Clover. She was clearly waiting for some sort of reaction. 'Can *you* do stuff like that?'

'No,' said Clover, slowly. 'None of us can do stuff like that. We're not a – magical family.'

'Does it bother you? Stuff like that?'

'Well, I'm not easily rattled, if that's what you're getting at.'

'Ah,' said Mrs Eckles. 'Ah, but can you keep yer mouth shut? I don't want you snoopin' an' spyin' an' spreadin' gossip. Too many blabbermouths around. *All right, pack it in now, no need to drown 'em!'*

That was to the watering can, which immediately stopped watering and plonked down next to the bluebells.

'I'm here to clean,' said Clover. 'I don't pry and I never gossip.'

'In that case, I'll give you a trial. Work 'ere today and we'll see how you gets on. Scrubbin' brush under the sink, bucket in the towel cupboard, kettle's somewhere, I dunno, you'll 'ave to look. I gotta do me outside chores. Gotta oil that flippin' gate, put it in a better temper. Then I gotta look fer Neville. Can't do everything.'

''Course you can't,' said Clover, tying her apron strings and rolling up her sleeves. 'You leave me to it, and as soon as I've cleared a space, I'll make us both a nice cup of tea.'

Chapter Three

The Shoes Go First

We must leave Clover here. Someone else is demanding our attention.

Far, far away from the forest, in a mountainous region of high, pointy crags and blithering, icy winds, standing right on the edge at the top of the highest peak, there is a castle. Castle Coldiron.

It stands right on top of the highest peak. It is all spires and pointy roofs and sharp bits. It looks dramatically impressive from a distance, but if you look

closely, it is crumbling quite badly. Here and there, sections of wall are missing. Bits of it have dropped off and plunged into the ravine far, far below, where a rough, raging river roars.

From the topmost turret window there is a good view of other, lesser peaks. If you like rock and grey skies, this is the view for you.

The castle is home to another, very different witch. Her name is Mesmeranza and she has a Plan. It is an Evil Plan, full of sly cunning. If time, trouble and years of wicked brooding count for anything, it deserves to succeed.

Mezmeranza has a pale, heavily powdered face which at first glance looks quite young. But her eyes are older. They are emerald green and look like they've been around for a while. Her lips are painted red. Her black hair is swept up and secured with a scarlet comb. She is wearing a purple satin dressing robe and has matching high-heeled mules on her feet.

Currently, she is sitting in a high-backed chair next to the window, flipping through the pages of a shoe catalogue. Her nails are very red, very long and filed into points.

Next to the chair is a polished glass table. On it sits a large glass ball. It is the size of a goldfish bowl.

This is a Crystal Ball. Right now, it is nothing to get excited about, being filled rather boringly with drifting grey mist.

Mesmeranza's Plan requires quite a bit of multitasking, as Evil Plans so often do. As well as looking at shoes, she is in the middle of dictating a to-do list to a small, grey, frazzled-looking woman with flyaway hair, who is sitting at a desk some distance away, frantically scribbling into a little black book.

Behind the desk, two things are pinned to the oak panelled wall. The first is a calendar, open to the month of May. Three days – the bank holiday – are circled in black. The words **THE PLAN!!!** are written inside, in bold black letters. Next to the calendar is a postcard of what could be a cottage. It is hard to tell, because it is a very small postcard pinned to the wall by a very large dagger.

The scribbler at the desk is Miss Fly. She has hollow cheeks, a long, red, stuffed-up nose and reddened eyelids. She has a liking for thick, wrinkled brown stockings and brown, shapeless cardigans covered in cat hairs. The pockets are full of screwed-up hankies. Miss Fly is a cat lover who is allergic to fur. Sad, really.

'What number are we on?' demanded Mesmeranza. Her sharp voice echoed across the

room, causing Miss Fly to give a startled jump and drop her pencil.

'Five,' said Miss Fly, nasally.

'I can't remember what I've said now. Read them out.'

Miss Fly gave a little sneeze, mopped her nose and began to read.

'Nubber One. Cottage. Nubber Two. Cake. Nubber Three . . .'

'*Number*,' corrected Mesmeranza. 'It's *Number*, not *nubber*. Speak properly.'

'Sorry, it's by Ebs.'

'What? Oh, your *Ems*.'

'Yes. It's by allergy.'

'Get rid of the mogs, then. Or, as *you* would say, bogs. Don't expect sympathy. Carry on.'

'Nubber Three. Disguise. Nubber Four. Boy. Nubber Five. Shoes.'

'Put the shoes first.'

'What?'

'The shoes go first. Before anything else, I need the right shoes. These red ones.'

Mesmeranza stabbed at a page with a crimson talon. The shoes she was pointing at were bright red, pointy and strappy, with perilously high heels.

'Haven't you got enough shoes?' ventured Miss

Fly, who went in for sensible, brown, wide fitting flatties.

'No,' said Mesmeranza, firmly. 'Shoes are vitally important. What have I always said, Fly? Get the shoes right, and everything else smoothly follows. We don't all go round with Yeti feet like you. So the list now reads: Shoes, Cake, Disguise, Boy.'

Miss Fly began worriedly crossing things out. 'So where do I put Cottage?'

'At the very end. The cottage will be the culmination of everything else.'

'So it's at Nubber Five now?'

'No. I haven't finished. *Number* Five, notice how clearly I say that, *Number* Five is Find Hypnospecs. They'll be up in the attic, in amongst Grandmother's things in one of the old chests. I shall need them when I interrogate the boy. They haven't been used for years. I'll try them out on a footman, just to be sure they're working properly.'

'You can't do that,' said Miss Fly. 'You can't hypnotise the footben.'

'Yes, I can. I can do what I like. I'll choose an old doddery one, so it won't matter if something goes wrong. I must have the Hypnospecs. They're vitally important to the Plan.'

'How do they fit in again?' asked Miss Fly.

'Don't you *listen*? I've told you a million times.'

'I've forgotten. You've had so many plans, I get confused.'

'I don't know why, it's very simple. Wearing a brilliant disguise, I come upon the boy unexpectedly in the woods. I befriend him, pick his brains of useful information, then use the Hypnospecs to wipe his memory. That's it. On to the next phase.'

'Have you decided on the disguise?' enquired Miss Fly, wearily.

'Ah. Now, I've given that a lot of thought. I'm still debating. It's essential he doesn't recognise me from the last time, when I was the old tomato seller. What a sight I looked. I borrowed your shoes, remember?'

'Yes,' said Miss Fly, shortly.

'That was the finishing touch, your shoes. My, did I look frumpy.'

'They're very cubfortable,' Miss Fly told her. 'By shoes.'

'Comfortable,' agreed Mesmeranza, 'but hideous. This time I'm thinking upmarket. I'm thinking Rich Lady Lost In The Forest. Different clothes, different voice, better shoes. And I shall wear Grandmother's Hat Of Shadows, just to be on the safe side. I think that's up in the attic too. It's a filthy tip, I hope you've got overalls.'

'*Be?*'

'Yes, you. You don't expect *me* to go rummaging around up there, do you? That's one of your jobs, along with ordering the next cake. Tell Mrs Chunk to make it a chocolate one this time, it's good to have variety. Write it down, then. Why aren't you writing it down?'

'I'b just thinking.'

'Well, don't. *I* do the thinking round here. I come up with the ideas.'

'But I'b just thinking. The poisoned tobato didn't work, did it?'

'I'm very aware that the tomato was a slight error of judgement.' Mesmeranza gave a scowl. 'You'll notice I'm not repeating it. Anyway, how was I to know the wretched boy didn't like tomatoes? Stop raking over old history and write down cake.'

'But I was just thinking. Shouldn't it be sweets?'

'What?'

'Sweets are traditional.'

'Far too obvious. Sweets, gingerbread, apples, poisoned combs, they've been done to death. Cake is new. It has a wholesome, innocent quality. Nobody suspects cake.'

'Not everybody likes cake, though,' observed Miss Fly.

'Demelza does. I've already left three on her doorstep. She chomped through those happily enough.'

'But it's not her you have to convince, is it? It's the boy. Assubing he's looking after the cottage again, which you don't know, do you?'

'That's the whole point of *interrogating* him, Fly. I intend to find that out. Although no one else would feed that beastly cat and he's the only neighbour, so she's stuck with him. No, I'm positive it'll be the boy again.'

'The boy who wouldn't take the tobato.'

'Yes, *yes*! But I'm not *offering* him a tomato, am I? This time it's *cake*! He'll open the door and find a lovely, freshly baked cake sitting on the doorstep. A humble gift left by an anonymous admirer. Are you telling me he won't take it in? Especially if it's raining. No one leaves a cake out in the rain.'

'But how do you know it'll be raining?'

'I shall make it rain,' said Mesmeranza, witheringly. 'I'm a witch. I can do that.'

'But he bight not be feeling like something sweet. He bight prefer a healthy alternative . . .'

'*He'll like cake!*' screeched Mesmeranza. Furiously, she slammed the catalogue shut. 'I've started now. I

can't change tack in the middle, can I? Now I've established the idea of *cakes* appearing on the doorstep. Like it's a normal thing. Don't you think it'd look suspicious if there was a – a box of *root vegetables* or something?'

'Better for you,' ventured Miss Fly. 'Root vegetables.'

'*We're going with cake! Write it down!*'

Miss Fly wrote it down, sniffing sadly.

'Number Six,' went on Mesmeranza, 'Hair Appointment. I think I'll wear it up. I'll need to try it with the Hat. Actually, hair should be Number Two. Or perhaps Three, after I've decided on the disguise. So it's One, Shoes, Two, Disguise, Three, Hair, Four, Cake, Five, Boy, Six, Hynospecs, Seven, Hat. Although the Hat should really go with the disguise, which is Number Two. Number Seven–'

'Wait, wait, I can't keep up . . .'

'Number-Seven-Look-For—The-Bad-Weather—Umbrella-Number—Eight-Find-Grandmother's-Wand,' rattled off Mesmeranza, adding, 'Mind how you handle it. It might look harmless, but don't let it fool you. Latent magic build up, might take your hand off, which would be a waste of good power. Be careful of the umbrella too, we don't want a flood.'