In loving memory of Lucie Bates and Rosalind Hayes

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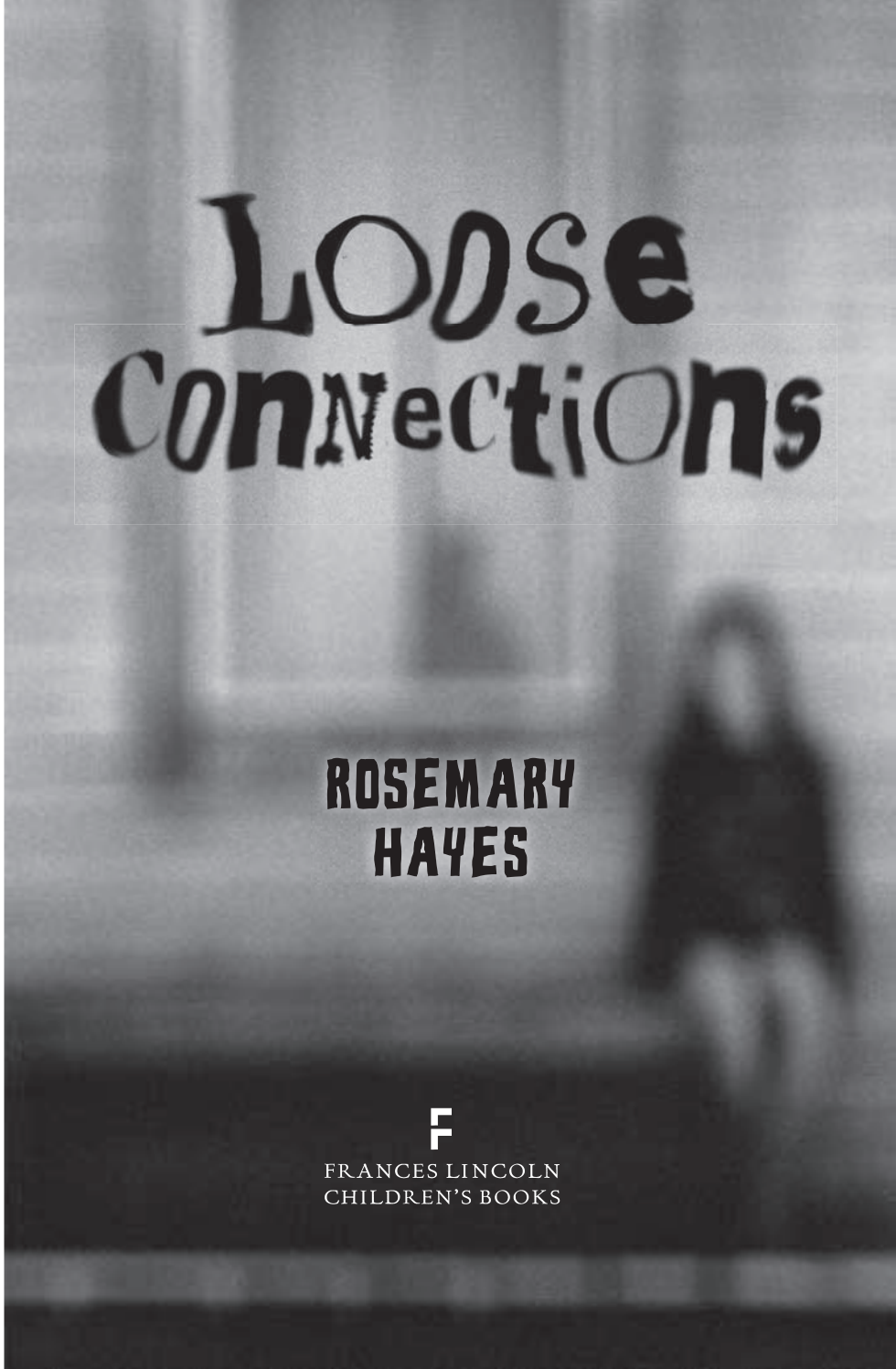
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Chapter One

'What is THAT?' Tom made a gagging sound and poked at the soggy grey heap. 'What IS it? It's all slimey.'

Jake shrugged. He peered inside his lunch box. 'It's Gran,' he said.

'It is *not*. Your gran doesn't look like that.'

'Oh yeah – ha ha. . .'

Jake looked closer. 'What d'you think? One of her specials?' Once it had been a sandwich. He lifted off the top layer. -'This one's new,' he muttered.

'*New!* Looks well past it,' said Tom.

Jake scooped some of the mess into his mouth. 'Hmm.'

Tom snorted. 'What is it? Honey and marmalade? Lettuce and chocolate? Mustard and jam? Hey, p'raps it's cheese and beetroot – you had one of them last week.'

Jake swallowed noisily, then screwed up his face and shook his head from side to side.

'YUK!' he spluttered. He punched the air with his fist. 'Tarararara! A great new flavour. I give you . . . banana and Marmite!'

Tom rolled on the ground, hugging his chest. 'Banana and Marmite. Gross!'

Jake snapped shut his lunch box. 'C'mon, you've had your laugh. Give.' He held out his hand.

Tom tossed him a muesli bar and an apple. Tom's mum was a health nut.

Jake rubbed the apple on his trousers and took a large bite. His own mum used to pack stuff like that in his lunch box – healthy stuff. He'd always moaned at her, begged her for crisps and chocolate and Coke, but now . . . now he'd eat salad every day, if only she was at home to make it for him.

He jumped up. 'Let's have a kick-about.' They ran across the schoolyard towards a group of boys.

Tom glanced at Jake, then he punched him on the arm. 'Hey,' he said. 'Your gran's great. Honest. I love her. She's a real laugh.'

'Mm,' said Jake.

She was once. She used to be the best gran in the world. But now. . .

Jake was a devil with the ball that day. He couldn't make a wrong move. He dribbled and feinted, passed and counterpassed, darted every which way all over the yard. He was too fast for them, too quick on the turn. He drove himself on even when his breath was coming in great heaving gasps.

When the bell went, he stopped and stood bent over with his hands on his knees, struggling to get his breathing under control again.

Tom came up beside him. He was red in the face, his hair plastered down with sweat.

'Hey,' he panted, clutching his side, 'you were awesome!'

Jake shrugged and looked away.

Later, on the way home, Jake was quiet. He didn't join in the shouting on the school bus and when he reached his stop, he heaved his backpack over his shoulders, pushed his way through to the front of the bus and got off.

'Bye, Jake. See you Monday.'

He raised his hand but didn't look back. Slowly he walked up Church Street, past the familiar houses and round the bend. He stopped at the park and shrugged off his backpack onto the ground. He took out his lunchbox and tossed the contents over

the railings and into the bushes; then he stood for a bit, watching some magpies quarrel over Gran's soggy grey sandwiches.

What's waiting for me at home?

He stared towards the sun and narrowed his eyes so that his sight became blurred; sometimes, when he did this, the images in his head were more real than what surrounded him – more real than the trees waving in the breeze and the solid pavement beneath his feet. Sometimes, if he imagined something hard enough, he could see it, feel it, hear it, almost touch it, even though he knew it wasn't there. And it had been happening more often since Gran. . .

But this time it didn't happen. He couldn't conjure up anything unusual; the trees and the pavement went on being solid and real, and the only sounds he heard were the noise of the squabbling birds and the distant rumble of traffic from the motorway. He opened his eyes wide, shook his head, picked up his backpack and walked on.

Just before he reached his house, he stopped again and flattened himself behind a tree.

Yes, there she was: sticky-beak Irene-next-door, waiting for him like some beady-eyed vulture. She was pretending to weed her garden – as if it

needed it. No weed would dare grow there! Jake watched her. Every few seconds she popped her head up and stared down the street.

Interfering old bag! Lurking in her front garden so she could pounce on him.

Jake waited. He'd wait all night if he had to. But then he heard a voice calling her and he saw her straighten up and stretch, give a deep sigh, take off her gardening gloves and disappear inside.

Kenny must want her.

'Thanks, Kenny,' muttered Jake as he sprinted across the street. He fished the key from his pocket and glanced quickly round the tangled front garden as he unlocked the door.

How had things got like this? It had all happened so fast. He'd hardly had time to blink, and everything had gone wrong.

He must keep it together – for Dad's sake. For Mum's, too.

They'd all wanted Dad to go; he'd been out of work so long and suddenly this great job had come up.

'They want me to go to America for six weeks training, but it's just when. . .'

Mum had interrupted him. 'I'll be fine. I'll be in the hospital. Go on. You *must* take it.'

'But what about Jake. . .?'

'Gran will be here,' said Jake. 'We'll have a great time.'

Dad had grinned. 'That's what worries me!'

Mum had taken Dad's arm and squeezed it. 'Please. Please say you'll take the job.'

And so he had.

At first, everything was fine. Gran was the same as ever. Noisy, funny, always up for anything, always interested in what Jake was doing.

Then something had changed.

Angrily, Jake kicked out at a patch of stinging nettles by the door.

Before – just a few weeks ago – Gran would have kept the garden tidy. She hated gardening but she would have done it. She would have moaned and muttered and sworn – but she would have done it.

He frowned as he took in the unmown grass and tall weeds.

Dad will be really upset when he gets back.

Jake sighed. Perhaps he'd have a go at it himself. Perhaps he could get Gran to help him.

No, she won't. She doesn't care any more.

He fixed a smile on his face and walked indoors.

'Hi, Gran!' he shouted.

Where will she be this time? What will she be up to?

A tiny lurch of dread cramped his stomach.

He walked slowly through each room, calling her softly. There were books and magazines all over the floor of the lounge and a trail of broken biscuits leading from the kitchen to the back door. A pile of unwashed dishes was heaped in the sink. Irritation welled up in him. All she had to do was stick them in the dishwasher and turn on the machine, for God's sake. It wasn't rocket science.

He opened the back door and went out into the garden. The grass was high – like a hay field.

She was standing in the far corner under the apple tree, munching biscuits and muttering to herself.

'Gran?'

She turned round quickly. For a moment she looked confused. Then her face creased into a smile and she came towards him holding out her arms.

'Jakey, love. Come here.'

Jake moved forward into her embrace. For a few moments, as she hugged him and he breathed in her familiar smells, nothing mattered any more. She was the gran he'd always known.

'How was. . .' She stopped and frowned, picking at her stained jersey.

'School,' finished Jake. 'School was fine.'

'And your lunch – did you eat your lunch?'

'All gone.' He thought of the magpies. *Hope the Marmite doesn't make them thirsty!*

He prised himself loose. 'I'm starving Gran. What's for tea?'

She followed him back into the kitchen and watched as he opened the fridge door.

'I went to the shops,' she said. 'I bought some of that . . . you know, that thing you like.'

'Burgers? Chips? Sausages?'

She didn't answer, and Jake peered hopefully inside the fridge.

'Ah,' he said. 'Milk.' The fridge was stuffed with cartons of milk.

Jake sighed. He'd written it down for her, for heaven's sake. This morning, he'd written a list for her, headed it THINGS TO GET FOR TEA, and underlined the heading. He wanted to shout at her but he knew it wouldn't do any good.

He closed the fridge and went to the cupboard. He found some eggs and a tin of beans.

'We'll have these, Gran,' he said, and turned towards the cooker.

One of the rings was red hot. He swore under his breath. Had it been on all day?

He opened the tin and tipped the beans into a saucepan. She was hovering beside him, wanting to help, forgetting how. For an awful moment he thought he might blub.

'Here,' he said, swallowing hard. 'You stir the beans and I'll do the eggs.'

She smiled, took the saucepan from him and set it on the hot ring. She stirred the beans slowly with a wooden spoon, calmed by the familiar action.

As Jake beat up some eggs in a bowl, he watched her. He stretched over her and turned down the heat as the beans started to bubble. She hadn't noticed.

'I had a visitor,' she said.

'Who was that, then?'

Gran rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue. 'That . . . that *woman*!'

Jake grinned. 'What woman, Gran?'

She pointed to the wall. 'Her. Her next door.'

'Irene?'

Gran nodded. 'That's the one. Can't stand her. Always coming in and fussing.'

'What did she say?'

'Can't remember. Can't be bothered with her.'

Jake laughed. 'Did you boot her out the door, Gran?'

Gran abandoned the beans. 'Yep,' she said. 'I showed her the door.'

'You're a star, Gran. We can manage fine without Irene, can't we?'

'Course we can. You and me. We're fine.'

Jake took the beans off the cooker and popped a couple of slices of bread in the toaster. As the toaster warmed up, a wisp of evil-smelling smoke drifted out. He killed the power and took the bread out. Then he turned the toaster upside down and shook it.

There was something black stuck at the bottom. He rummaged in a drawer and took out a skewer, then poked at the black stuff until he'd dislodged it. He picked up the charred lump and examined it closely.

Wonder what that was? Another of Gran's specials?

They sat down to eat, and suddenly Gran put her hand on Jake's shoulder.

'She says I'm going dotty.'

'Who?'

Gran jerked her thumb in the direction of the wall. 'Her. Her-next-door.'

'Did she say that to you?'

Gran shrugged. 'She thinks it. I can tell.'

Jake reached out and squeezed Gran's hand. 'Well,

she's wrong. And anyway, you've always been dotty. Nothing new there.'

Gran smiled. A real smile that spread all the way up to her eyes. The sort of smile that didn't happen much now. She withdrew her hand and put it up to stroke Jake's face.

'You're a grand lad,' she said.

It's not for much longer. If we can just hang on until Dad gets back.

They started eating.

'I miss the dog.'

Jake frowned. Whose dog? His dog, which had died last year? Mum's dog she'd had when she was little? One of the dogs Gran had had when she was growing up?

'Which dog's that, Gran?'

'Bramble, of course. You know. You remember Bramble.'

Gran's first dog. The one she'd been given on her tenth birthday. The one she was always going on about. No good telling her Bramble had died long before Jake was born – even before Mum was born.

'Sure. I remember Bramble.'

Jake relaxed. She'd be away now, talking about the past. About her childhood in the country, about her

brother and her parents and all the animals.

As she chatted on, he let his mind wander.

Everything had been great until about two weeks ago. Then one day he'd come in from footie practice and found her walking round the house in her nightclothes at six in the evening. And she'd not recognised him. She'd really scared him that day. She'd kept calling him Sam. Her brother was called Sam.

Maybe he should have phoned Dad when it happened, but he hadn't. He knew Dad would rush home from America and then they might not give him the job at all – they might think he was unreliable.

Jake had decided that Gran was just overtired.

But that night, he'd had one of his vivid dreams, the sort that don't go away when you wake up the next morning. The sort of dream that merges with reality so that you keep reliving it. That night, he had had the strongest feeling that there was someone in his bedroom; not Gran, not his mum or dad, but another presence. Not a frightening presence – a comforting one. He'd had these experiences a few times before, but he'd never told anyone about them. It was usually when something sad had happened; he'd had one when Grandad died – and when Mum lost the last baby.

Then the next day, Gran had seemed fine. She'd got up, packed his lunch and waved goodbye when he left for the school bus. But things were not the same.

As Gran droned on, Jake glanced up at the calendar hanging on the wall. Another three weeks until Dad came home. He took a deep breath. No. He *wasn't* going to tell him. They'd manage somehow. He couldn't tell Dad – and Dad had said he mustn't worry Mum; so there was no one he could tell. Except Tom, maybe.

But hey, perhaps Gran would get better. . .

Who am I kidding? She isn't going to get better.

The phone rang, and Gran jumped.

'I'll get it, Gran.'

Jake picked up the receiver. 'Hi, Dad. How are things?'

Gran looked at Jake. 'Who's that?' she said loudly.

'It's Dad. Sends his love.'

He cursed silently. The last few times Dad had called, he had pretended Gran was out.

'Yeah, we're fine. Everything's fine.'

Jake chatted on – about school, about footie, the words tumbling over themselves. When he'd run out of things to say, he handed the phone to Gran.

'Dad wants a word,' he said.

This is it. Dad will know something's wrong.

'Hello, love,' said Gran, smiling into the phone. 'Yes, I'm well. Yes, Jake's a real help. He's a grand lad. You don't need to worry about us. We're managing just fine.'

Jake stared at her. She sounded completely sane. Yet only an hour ago she hadn't even been able to cook a simple meal.

Gran put the phone down and smiled at him.

'That was Sam,' she said.

His dad was called Michael. What could he say? He started to put the plates in the dishwasher, the ones they'd just used and all the others piled in the sink.

'I'll do that, love,' said Gran. 'You go and do your. . .'

'OK, Gran. I'll go and do my homework.'

He watched as she picked up a plate and went towards the machine. The plate never made it inside. She put it down again and wandered off to look out of the window.

Quickly, Jake stacked the dishwasher and turned it on, then went upstairs to his room.

He didn't start his homework. It was Friday night. It could wait. Instead he went online and chatted to his friends. Tom was going on about the holiday football course run by the local team.

'It'll be great,' he said. 'If you play like you did today, they'll select you for the juniors.'

'Dunno if I can do the course.'

'WHAT?'

'Not sure if I can make it.'

'What the hell. . .? You've been on about it all term.'

'I know. I want to.'

'Then do it.'

'It's not that easy. There's things.'

'What things?'

'Things at home.'

Tom didn't reply. In the silence, there was a ping. An email from Mum. Jake felt a tiny prick of fear as he opened it. He held his breath.

'*Hi Jake. How was school? Everything fine here. Longing to see you tomorrow. Is Gran OK? Love you. Mx*'

He let out his breath. So long as everything was good with Mum, he'd cope. But he was dreading tomorrow.

'*Yep. All OK here too. CU tomorrow.*' He hesitated, then added '*Love you too. Jx*'

His eyes started to mist over as he hit Send. Angrily, he rubbed his fist into them and sniffed.

Don't be such a wuss.

He sat back in his chair. More stuff was coming in from Tom, but he ignored it.

How would they get to the hospital tomorrow? Gran had driven him last week but it had been pretty scary. And she seemed worse now.

Could he persuade her to go on the bus? It would take forever but it would be safe, at least, and he wouldn't have to sit beside her having a nervous breakdown every time she jammed on the brakes or swerved across the road.

Then there was the Saturday supermarket run. They'd have to take the car for that.

Last week, Gran had forgotten her PIN number when they came to pay and there had been an embarrassing scene at the checkout. She'd remembered her number in the end, but only after they'd been through all her special numbers – her wedding date and every family birthday – so now he knew her PIN, and so did all the staff at Tesco's.

He went offline, got up and stretched. Then he flung himself down on his bed and stared up at the ceiling but he couldn't relax; there was so much crashing and thumping downstairs.

He heaved himself off his bed – better go and see what she was doing.

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Gran was in the lounge, sitting on the floor surrounded by photo albums.

'What's up, Gran?'

She looked at him and smiled. 'I'm looking for the photos of Bramble and the other animals,' she said. 'And the ones of Sam when he was little.'

Jake took the album she was holding and closed it.

'Those photos won't be here, Gran. They're at your house. These are photos of us – me and Mum and Dad.'

She snatched the album back from him. 'No!' she said. 'No, they're here. I've seen them.'

Jake sighed, and sat down beside her. Together they turned the pages until they came to a photo of his own dog that had died last year.

'Is that the one, Gran?'

She frowned. 'Yes. Yes, I think so.' She peered at it closely, chewing her lip. 'Though I don't remember him looking like that.'

Jake closed the album. went over to the television and checked the listings.

'Hey, Gran. Here's something you'll like.' He switched on. There was a long costume drama just starting.

'Oh, good!' She settled herself happily on the couch, immediately enthralled, while Jake picked up all the books, albums and magazines and shoved them back onto the shelves.

'I'm going out the back, Gran. To kick a ball around. OK?'

She didn't answer. Her eyes were glued to the screen.

Chapter Two

Jake walked outside with his football and dribbled it round the back garden. But it was no fun on his own. After a bit he sat down against the fence and took his mobile from his pocket. Three missed calls. All from Tom.

He pressed Reply. Tom sounded cross.

'What *is* it with you? You drop this bombshell about the footie course and then you cut me off.'

'Look, I'm sorry. Things aren't so great here.' Jake felt a lump rising up in his throat.

There was a pause. Then Tom spoke again. 'Why don't I come round yours tomorrow?'

'No, we're going to the hospital tomorrow.'

'Oh yeah. I forgot. When you get back, then?'

'Yeah. Maybe. I'll call you.' Jake snapped his phone shut and put it back in his pocket.

'Jake! Jake, is that you?'

Jake swore under his breath and looked up. It was