

Ruth Symes

Bella Donna



Illustrated
by Marion
Lindsay

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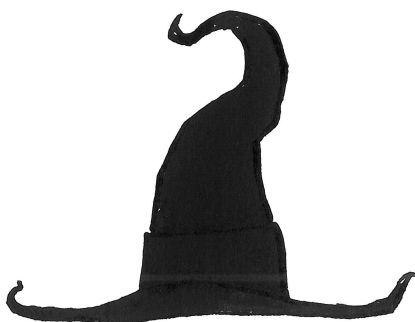
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Chapter 1

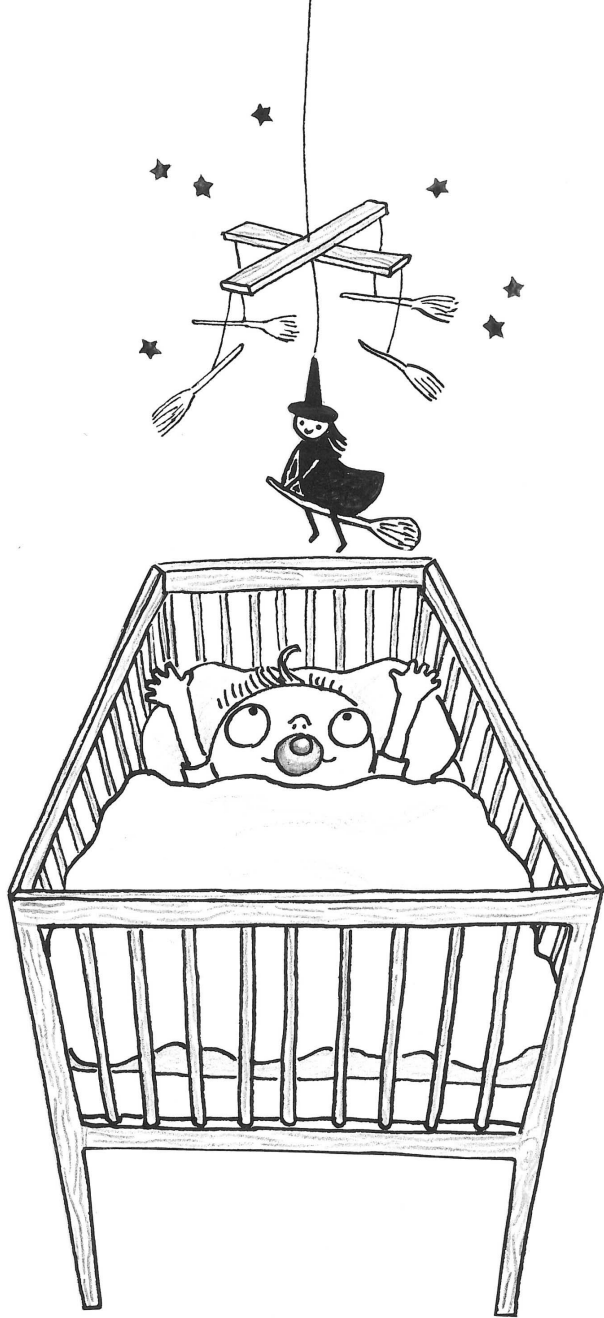


I wanted to be a witch from the day I was born. Or at least I think I did. Of course, I can't remember actually being born. I can't even remember being left on the doorstep of Templeton Children's Home when I was a

baby – although I can remember further back than anyone else I know.

My first real memory is lying in my cot and looking up at a painted wooden lady with a pointy hat and four broomsticks flying around her. The witch mobile had been left alongside me on that doorstep. It kept me amused for hours. My little hands and feet never tired of stretching up to try and touch it.

It was a wintry night and there was a storm outside. I was awake, just looking at my witch mobile dancing in the moonlight. Sam, the baby in the next cot, started to snore – babies snore an awful lot and make snuffly blocked-up-nose noises. I looked at the dummy stuffed in his mouth. Every now and again he'd suck contentedly on it. As I looked at Sam with the dummy in his mouth I wanted that dummy. Oh how I wanted it! I wanted it more than I'd



wanted anything before. I don't know how or what exactly happened, but one moment I wanted the dummy really *really* badly and the next moment I had it! And I was sucking on it as hard as I could. Even with Sam's dribble all over it, it was lovely. It took my mind off hunger, it took my mind off everything. It made me start to feel happy and sleepy.

Of course Sam wasn't exactly pleased to have lost the dummy and he started screaming. He wouldn't shut up for ages – he was trying to tell Nurse Harrigan that his precious dummy had been stolen, but she didn't understand.

I carried on sucking happily and looked at my witch mobile. The witch danced about in the moonlight and seemed to smile at me.



You'd have thought all the babies at Templeton

Children's Home would have been adopted super fast and lots of them were – but not me. And not Sam either.

By the time we were five, lots of people had wanted to adopt me because I was sweet and cute, and lots of people had wanted to adopt Sam too – but we didn't want to be adopted by just anybody. We wanted our Forever Families to be perfect and if that meant waiting a little bit longer than everyone else . . . well, then we'd wait. None of the children were ever asked to go and live with someone they didn't want to live with – that wouldn't have been fair.

One day we had a meeting in our den, which was the old greenhouse at the back of the children's home. Sam had found it by accident when he was following a ladybird to see where it lived. You had to go through a load of stinging nettles and brambles to get to it and it wasn't

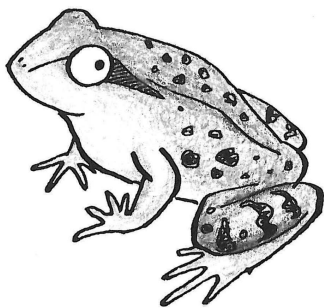
exactly a place many people would want to visit – so it was perfect for us.

The windows were either broken with plants poking through, or were covered with green sludge. Only the hardiest of plants – weeds – survived.

I spat on the palm of my hand and then Sam spat on his palm and we pressed our two palms together and made a pact that we wouldn't settle for second best.

I, of course, wanted a family that didn't mind me wanting to be a witch. Sam wanted a Forever Family who liked worms and bugs, like he did. Sam was always getting covered in mud or soaked in puddles or dirty pond water in his quest to find a toad or a spider or some other creepy crawly thing. Once Nurse Harrigan even found a frog in his pocket – he said he was rescuing it.

Nurse Harrigan
had told Sam more
than once that he'd
have to change his ways if
he wanted to be adopted, but Sam didn't listen.
He was sure there was a Forever Family out
there, somewhere, that would like him just the
way he was. And if he liked them too then
they'd be the people he'd choose to adopt him.



And I was sure there was a family out there
who wouldn't mind me wanting to be a witch.
And that would be the family I'd choose to
adopt me.

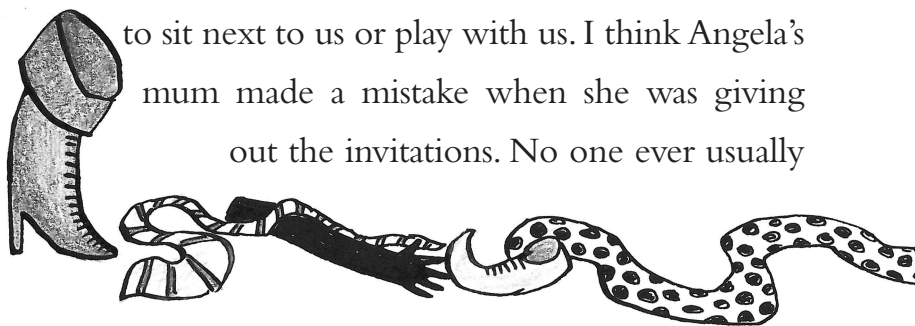
It was just taking them a little while to find
us, that was all.



Remember Sam's dummy? Well, a few other
strange things happened over the years that I

couldn't explain. The first one was just after we'd started nursery. I loved my nursery teacher, Miss Willow, and I thought I would like her to adopt me. But then I was painting a picture of a witch one day, and she said she didn't like witches. The moment she'd said that, black paint splattered all down her floaty pink dress. I don't know how it happened. One moment the paint was in the pot and the next moment it had all flown out and landed on Miss Willow. She wasn't pleased and told me I was a very naughty girl. It wasn't my fault though. I hadn't done anything.

Then, when we were six, Sam and I got invited to Angela's fancy dress party. Angela was in the same class as us at school but she didn't really like me or Sam much and she didn't talk to us or want to sit next to us or play with us. I think Angela's mum made a mistake when she was giving out the invitations. No one ever usually



invited us to anything. Sam was really excited because he'd heard that Angela had a pond in her garden, with lizards in it. I was really excited because I'd never been to a party outside the children's home before, let alone a party where I could dress up as anyone I liked. We had a dressing-up box at Templeton and inside it there was a witch's hat and dress. I knew what I was going to the party as.



When we got to the party Sam ran off to the pond and I found out that I was the only one dressed as a witch. Every other girl was either a fairy or a princess.

‘You’re It, Bella Donna,’ Angela said later on, when we were playing hide and seek. Everyone ran away and hid while I closed my eyes and counted to a hundred.

‘Seven . . . ten . . . twenty-three . . . thirty-six, ninety-two . . .’ Near enough – I was only six and not very good at maths. But it was very easy to find them. As soon as I opened my eyes all I had to do was concentrate and I just knew where they were – it was like magic.

‘Angela up a tree. Sarah and Jane behind the bins. Tracey in the toilet,’ I shouted from where I was standing.

The other children weren’t pleased.

‘You cheated!’ someone said.

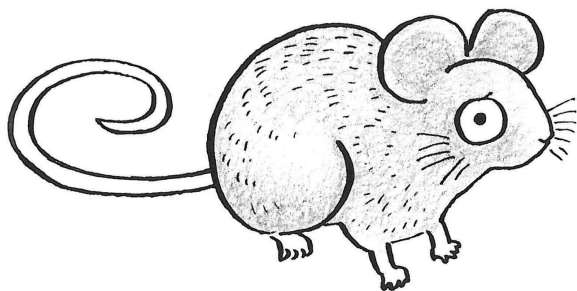
‘No, I didn’t.’

‘You must have been looking. There’s no way you could see us behind the dustbins.’

I hadn’t been cheating – I’d just known.

‘What would you like in your sandwich, Bella Donna?’ Angela’s mum asked me when we went inside for the birthday tea.

‘A mouse,’ I said. ‘Witches like mouse sandwiches and bug jelly.’



‘Urgh! Yuck! You’re horrible, Bella Donna,’ the other girls said.

‘Your name even sounds like a witch’s name,’ Angela said.

‘Good!’ I grinned to show my blacked-out front teeth – I’d used Angela’s mum’s mascara that I’d found when I went to the bathroom. There was also some deep purple eye-shadow and black nail polish in the bathroom cupboard that I’d been tempted to try, but I hadn’t.

‘Most of all I’d like some snot ice cream,’ I continued. ‘Lovely and green, yum, yum, yum!’

‘I think I’m going to be sick,’ said Angela.

I laughed my witch’s cackle that I’d been practising especially for the party.

At that moment, Sam came in from the garden dripping with pond water and holding a lizard.

‘I found one!’ he said.

‘Quick – put it in my sandwich,’ I said. (Although of course I wouldn’t have eaten a lizard really – I was only joking. But it was fun to see everyone squirm.)

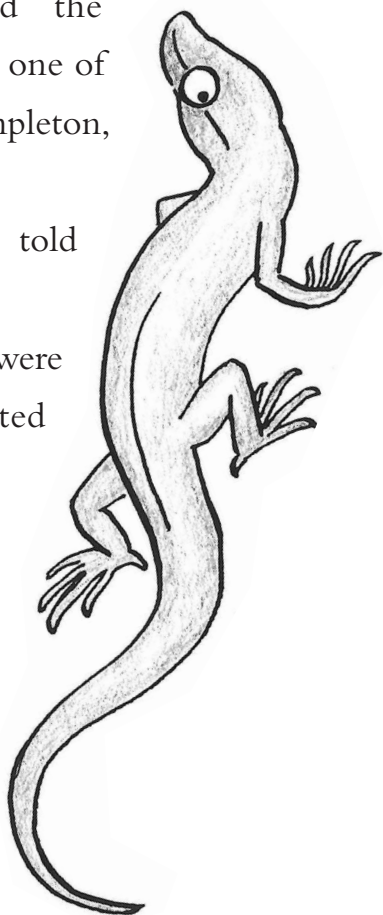
Angela's mum phoned the children's home and Maisie, one of the house parents from Templeton, came to pick us up.

'We're so sorry,' Maisie told Angela's mum.

'If I'd known what they were like, I'd never have invited them,' she replied.

Maisie looked at me suspiciously. 'One minute,' she said, and her lightning fingers pulled the eye-shadow and nail polish out from under my witch's hat and gave them back to Angela's mum.

'I don't know how they got there,' I said, shocked. I really, really didn't know how they'd



got under my hat. But neither Maisie nor Angela's mum believed me.

'It's all your fault!' I told Sam on the drive home. 'Stupid lizard hunter.'

'It's all your fault for wanting to be a stupid witch all the time,' Sam shouted back at me.

Maisie took us straight to Nurse Harrigan's office. Nurse Harrigan had been promoted and was now the Matron.

Maisie knocked on the door and Nurse Harrigan shouted, 'Come in.'

Sam and I stood in front of Nurse Harrigan's desk. She was very, very cross. 'You have let down this children's home and I am very disappointed with you both,' she said.

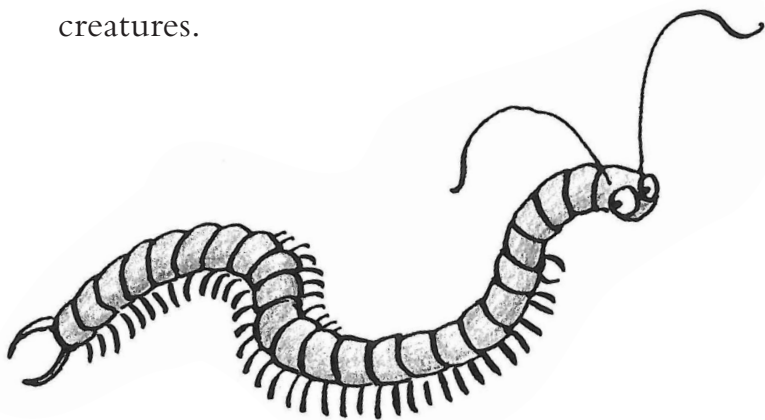
Sam and I looked down at our shoes.

'From now on Sam, you may not play with lizards, worms or any other creatures.'

'But they're my friends . . .'

‘Do you want to be adopted?’

‘Yes, Nurse Harrigan,’ Sam said. ‘But —’ I knew he was about to tell her he only wanted to be adopted by a family that liked him playing with lizards and worms and other creatures.



‘Then you’ll do what I say,’ she interrupted.

‘Yes, Nurse Harrigan,’ Sam said. I saw him cross his fingers behind his back, so I knew he didn’t mean it.

‘And as for you, Isabella . . .’

I wanted to remind her that I like to be

called Bella Donna, but she stared at me so fiercely I only managed to squeak out a small yes.

‘From now on you may not tell anyone you want to be a witch,’ Nurse Harrigan said.

How was I supposed to find my Forever Family if I wasn’t allowed to say I wanted to be a witch? I didn’t want to be adopted by someone who didn’t like witches by mistake, did I?

‘But —’

‘No buts, and no talking about witches! Have I made myself clear?’

I crossed my fingers behind my back, like Sam.

‘Yes, Nurse Harrigan.’



Over the next three years Sam decided he didn’t want to be adopted by two more

families because they didn't like animals and certainly not creepy crawly animals like lizards and worms. I decided not to be adopted by three different families because they just weren't right for me. The last family, the Bolsons, had been horrible and made me stay at the dining table until I'd eaten every single bit of brussel sprout and cabbage on my plate when I went to visit them for the day.

'Greens are good for you,' they said.

I poked my fork in a bit of cold brussel sprout and wished it would disappear. I'd been sitting at the table for two hours!

I told Mrs Bolson I'd put a spell on her so she got a warty nose, and then I told Mr Bolson that I'd sprinkle mouse droppings on his cereal when he wasn't looking. They weren't so keen on adopting me after that. I certainly didn't want to be adopted by them. I

hadn't even wanted to visit the Bolsons in the first place. I'd been sure they weren't right for me, but Nurse Harrigan had said I should at least give them a try. 'Sometimes people can surprise you,' she said. Big mistake.

I began to wonder whether I would *ever* find my Forever Family.

'They must be out there somewhere,' Sam said to me when I got back that night.

I wasn't so sure. Maybe my Forever Family didn't even exist, or maybe they'd adopted someone else by mistake and didn't need to adopt me any more.

But luckily that was just where I was wrong. Soon after, someone turned up at the children's home, someone who was completely different from anyone I'd ever met before.

As soon as I saw Lilith walking up the driveway I knew she was special and I wanted

her to be special for me. I wanted Lilith to be my very own Forever Family, whatever it took.

