

Chapter 1

“Let me get this straight, B,” George said, bouncing his soccer ball on his forehead. “All you have to do is spell a word, just some old random word, and you can make *anything* happen?”

Beatrix, “B” to her friends, flopped into the beanbag chair on her best friend’s basement rec room floor. “It’s not that simple, George,” she said. “Watch out! You nearly hit the lamp.”

George caught the ball. His thick, curly blond hair dangled over the rim of his glasses, but B could see the curiosity sparkling in his eyes. “W-I-N-D,” she spelled, and a little breeze swept through the room, riffling her friend’s hair.

George touched his forehead in amazement. “You really did that, didn’t you? I still can’t believe it.” He began pacing back and forth. “So,” he said, waving his hands wildly, “so, you could just spell ‘win’ and *bam*, our team could win the championship soccer game on Thursday? Just like that?” He wiggled his fingers.

B laughed. “No, I couldn’t. And I wouldn’t do a thing like that, even if I could.”

Clearly, George didn’t understand magic yet. And why should he? It was all so new to him. She hadn’t meant to tell him she was a witch — he had discovered her secret by accident. All the same, it was a relief not to have to hide it from him anymore, and to have someone to talk to about her magic. She tried to explain herself better.

“Just because it’s magic, George, doesn’t mean it’s like the movies. Real magic takes training and lots of practice. There are rules! Even still, things have a way of going wrong.” She held up her hands, and George tossed her the ball. “Believe me, I know.”

She tried bouncing the ball on her forehead, but

it got away from her and rolled across the broad room. George's huge yellow dog, Butterbrains, bounded after it.

"Show me another trick," George begged. "C'mon. One teensy little trick."

"They're not *tricks*," B said indignantly. "I'm not some circus performer. This is real."

"I know. Just one little . . . demonstration?"

"*Allllll* right," she said. "What do you want to see?"

George pointed at a lava lamp. "Make it, I dunno, float in the air or something." He fidgeted with excitement.

B focused on the lamp. "F-L-O-A-T," she said.

The lamp rose in the air and swung in a wide circle, as far as the power cord would let it travel. Butterbrains backed into a corner, his head cocked to one side. Now and then he gave a curious whimper, his tail thumping.

George crawled over to Butterbrains and tussled with him. "It's okay, boy! It's only B, the magic witch." He giggled. "This is just so stinking cool! I can't believe it. I can't *believe* it!"

B smiled. When George was excited about something, he had a one-track mind. *How long*, B wondered, *will it take him to get used to my magic?* She'd had a lifetime, growing up with parents and an older sister who were witches. True, their spells, like most other witches', were conjured by imaginative rhyming couplets, and not by spelling. Even so, minor magic such as floating objects had been commonplace in B's home for as long as she could remember.

Why not give him a little crash course?

"F-L-O-A-T," she whispered, concentrating on a plastic tote full of Wiffle balls and squooshy footballs. They slipped into the air silently and orbited over George's head.

"Whoa!" George paused his game with Butterbrains. "Lookit that!"

Butterbrains barked and jumped in the air, his body twisting as he tried in vain to snag the flying balls.

"D-A-N-C-E," B told a tub full of old, forgotten action figures George had long since outgrown.

Soon military figures were waltzing with monsters, and Greek heroes were tangoing with robots.

If George hung his mouth open any wider, he'd start drooling.

This was too much fun.

"B-U-I-L-D," she told a huge crate of interlocking blocks, and, clickety-clack, they flew out by the dozens to form themselves into a rainbow-colored replica of George's house, right down to the shrubs.

And still the lava lamp swung its wide arc, illuminating the bizarre party like a strobe light, while Butterbrains barked like a maniac.

"Oh, man," George said. "Think what you could do with this — the stuff you could pull off at school!" He doubled over laughing. "Just imagine, a school assembly, and you make the vice principal's toupee float all over the auditorium. *Attack of the bad hair monster!*"

B giggled. "No way! That's so mean. Besides, my magic is an absolute secret, remember? *No one* can find out about it."

“I know, I know,” George said, still laughing. “You’ve gotta admit, though, that would be an assembly to remember.” He pantomimed clutching at his head, as if his own hair had just flown away.

“Yeah, but you make me nervous, the way you keep bringing up ideas like that,” B said, watching as the clackety building blocks turned George’s house into a castle. “I would get in such huge trouble if the M.R.S. found out that you know about this.”

“The what?” George asked.

“The Magical Rhyming Society.”

George sat up, blinking at B. “There’s a Magical Rhyming *Society*? You mean, there are lots of witches, all organized and stuff?”

“Yup. Lots of them.” B aimed a G-L-O-W spell at a pair of glow-in-the-dark plastic swords. “What, did you think I’m the only one?”

Butterbrains ran in frenetic circles, barking at the bobbling balls, dancing figures, clashing swords, and building blocks, each in turn.

George shrugged. “How would I know? You’re the only witch I’ve ever —”

KNOCK.

They stared at each other, terrified.

KNOCK.

They stared at the whirlwind of toys.

George's dad's voice came through the thin door.

“What are you two doing to that dog?”