

The background is white with scattered grey stars of various sizes and orientations. Two horizontal grey stripes with a wavy, ribbon-like texture are positioned behind the main title. The title itself is rendered in a black, stylized, calligraphic font with a slight drop shadow.

SEVEN WHERE WITHAL way

SAMANTHA-ELLEN
BOUND

 **Affirm**
press



An Unexpected Visitor



Ferdinand fell out of the sky on the hottest day of the year, while Celeste and Esmerelda Barden were on the front porch eating ice-cream.

The landing was spectacular – no warning, not even a ‘good afternoon’. One second there was a speck in the sky, the next a splat on the ground, and then a great tangle of arms and legs sprawled out across the top of a luxurious velveteen robe.

Esmerelda, shocked, shot up from the step. Her ice-cream knocked against her nose and fell on the ground, where it melted into a milky muck in a matter of seconds. Celeste looked from the ice-cream puddle to her cousin – who still hadn’t moved – and then to Esmerelda, who began to cry.

‘Come on, Esme, don’t have a sook.’ Celeste used the hem

of her sleeve to wipe her sister's nose, then inched towards her cousin. 'Ferd? Are you alright?' Slicks of sweat ran down the back of her legs. It was so hot it hurt to breathe, but not as much as it seemed to hurt Ferdinand, who remained in the furry burgundy embrace of their robe, staring up at the thick blue sky.

'Ferd?' Celeste tried again. 'Are you hurt?'

Esme sniffled pathetically. 'Looks pretty dead to me.'

'That isn't helping,' said Celeste.

'But it was *Ferd's* fault I dropped my ice-cream.'

'Have mine.' Celeste shoved the cone into Esme's hand and went to crouch by their cousin.

'But you've already eaten half!'

Celeste sighed; she knew her little sister had an epic pout coming on.

'*And* it's vanilla!' Esme's voice rose higher and higher. Soon she'd have all the dogs in the neighbourhood chiming in.

'Keep it down.' Celeste clapped her hands in front of Ferd's unblinking eyes and tried to feel for a pulse. Nothing.

'Only boring people eat vanilla,' Esme insisted. She flung the ice-cream back at Celeste, but her aim was never very good at the best of times, and especially not on the hottest day of the year. The glob of vanilla ice-cream whooshed through the air and hit Ferdinand on the face.

'Esme!' said Celeste. 'Ferd might be hurt. An ice-cream to the face isn't a recommended form of first aid.'

Celeste knew it was very unlikely that Ferdinand was hurt.

Of course, that might seem preposterous, seeing as their cousin had just fallen out of the sky.

But Ferdinand was not an ordinary cousin.

In any case, Ferd also had a bit of a sweet tooth, because as soon as the ice-cream hit, their cousin's long nose began to twitch and all the fingers of their right hand began to flutter. Finally, out snaked a very red tongue to claim the ice-cream as its own.

Ferdinand sat up.

'Well then!' they said, looking around brightly. 'Celeste! Esmerelda! Hello! Hot one, isn't it? Lovely day for ice-cream.'

'It was,' Esme said sullenly. She wiped her mouth and looked shyly at her cousin. 'Hello, Ferdy. I'm glad *you're* here. Mum and Dad are away again and they made Celeste my babysitter but they couldn't have picked anyone more *boring*. I've never had less fun in all my life.'

'Not possible!' said Ferd, standing up in a big elegant rush of arms and legs and dusting off their attire – the burgundy robe, but also a very smart-looking navy-blue suit under it. Dislodged dirt, dead grass and a piece of orange peel fell onto the top of Celeste's tennis shoes. 'Celeste just isn't the boring type. When you get whacked with an imagination like hers, fun starts chasing after you.' Ferd leaned closer to Celeste and grinned, a smile full of charmingly uneven and perfectly white teeth. Sunlight sparkled off the star-shaped stud in their left ear and the iridescent hues of colour in their hair. It was rather hard not to be totally dazzled.

'Hello, then. Hot one, isn't it?'

'Yes, you've said that,' said Celeste, very patiently. With cousins like Ferdinand, it sometimes took a while before they started making sense.

'Did I?' Ferd scratched their head. 'Sorry. Fall from the sky, brain gets a bit addled, you know how it is. Give us a hug, then.'

Their cousin had the most delicious scent – cinnamon and orange, with a touch of peppermint – and Celeste let herself be engulfed. It was the sort of smell that promised just a little bit of magic, and on a stinking hot day like today, magic was more welcome than a bath full of ice.

'Ah! Little Emma!' Ferd whisked out a pair of glasses from some inner pocket of the robe and balanced the spectacles on the end of their nose, peering down at Esme's face.

'You know what my name is,' said Esme. 'You said it before.' She giggled, though, because it was one of her and Ferd's games. Celeste always refused to take part.

'Yes, yes, of course, Ebony.' Ferd pushed the glasses up to the bridge of their nose and pretended to consider Esme in great detail. 'Three point five centimetres,' Ferd said, taking a slow walk around Esme. 'Three point five-seven,' their cousin adjusted. 'Fee fi fo fum, we've got a beanstalk on our hands.' Another glorious smile, full of dazzling teeth. 'Must be all that ice-cream.'

'Soon I'll be taller than Celeste!' Esme stood on tiptoes and stretched, like her bones were growing as she spoke.

Celeste rolled her eyes. ‘Big deal.’

‘It will be when I’m bigger than you and you can’t boss me around!’

‘Why did you fall from the sky this time?’ Celeste asked Ferd, purposely ignoring her little sister.

‘Were you trying to fly?’ Esme added, pushing in front of Celeste.

‘Physics continue to defy me,’ said Ferd, swinging arms around both Esme and Celeste and gathering them in close. ‘But in a manner of speaking, yes, I was flying. There I was, just giving Bonnie a bit of a rev – blowing off some steam, to be honest – when it struck me that I hadn’t seen my two favourite cousins in months. Well, high time I paid them a visit!’ Ferd sniffed and absent-mindedly played with a tuft of Celeste’s fair hair. ‘Easy to get carried away, up in the sky. Got all excited about the acrobatics, a few too many loop-the-loops. The grand old dame’s getting on a touch, now. She doesn’t like that fancy sort of work. Doesn’t sit right in her engine, so she threw me out.’ Another sniff, and then Ferd looked up at the sky. ‘Any minute now,’ Ferd said. ‘Any minute now ...’

In fact, it took less than a minute. Ten seconds later, Bonnie appeared out of the blue – a magnificent old bus, painted like a patchwork quilt. Her wheels were made up of thousands of enchanted feathers that quivered and flickered, generating enough energy to keep her afloat. Even from the ground, Celeste could see the shadows of all the junk inside,

pushing and jostling for space and the best view out the window. As the bus came in for landing, a cedar armoire lifted one of its doors, and all the coats and dresses within gave an enthusiastic wave.

‘There’s my girl,’ said Ferd, lifting an arm from around Celeste to blow the bus a kiss. ‘Knew she’d come back for me. Acts tough, but she’s a softie really.’

The bus rumbled and grumbled as it came in closer, as if to say, *well, you’ve got to get home somehow.*

‘Love of my life, fire of my soul,’ Ferd warbled to the bus, and Bonnie gave a toot as she came to a stop, hovering just a few centimetres off the ground. Celeste and Esme could hear the murmur of tiny feathered voices, calling out advice from the wheels.

‘Gently, now.’

‘Not so sharp on the left!’

‘Careful of that dog poo!’

The wheels touched down on the dirt, and a raucous cheer went up. A strong smell of wild lilacs leached from the exhaust as the dust from the Bardens’ driveway settled around the bus.

‘Hello, old girl,’ said Ferd. ‘Sorry to put you out. All is forgiven, can we say? From now on it’s a steady pace all the way and I will refrain from riding the clutch.’

Bonnie rumbled once in a very grudging way and the engine thrummed into amicable silence.

‘You take what you can get,’ shrugged Ferd, and took out a handkerchief from yet another pocket in the robe to waft a

bit of dust from Celeste's collar and a sprinkling of dirt from Esme's nose. 'What do we say, my parched raisins? My worst fear has been confirmed and all the ice-cream is gone, but I do believe I have an emergency supply back at Wherewi—'

'Yes, please!' shouted Esme. 'Can we go to your house? Can we?'

'Don't yell,' snapped Celeste. 'We can't go galloping off to a magic house that isn't even on Earth. You're not the one who's going to get in trouble when things go wrong.'

'We wouldn't be galloping, we'd be flying,' said Esme, quite logically.

'Maybe another time.'

'But there's nothing to do here! If we go with Ferd we can have an adventure.' Esme smiled winningly, although the effect was somewhat ruined by the dried ice-cream smeared around her mouth.

'Oh yes,' said Ferd. 'Got some new residents since your last visit. Adventure is going to personally greet you at the front door. Wearing a bonnet, I daresay. Very fancy.'

Celeste looked longingly at the bus. The truth was, she wanted an adventure as much as anybody – probably more – but she was the older sister, and older sisters were in charge. Especially when the grown-ups that *should* have been in charge were off volunteering for the summer in some far-flung part of the world. And especially given what her parents had told her before they'd left, that now – with her teen years not far off – was the time for her to start

thinking about responsibility. Hooray! She would be able to practise by helping Gran run the house and looking after her sister and making sensible and mature adult decisions. It had practically been rammed down her throat how much fun that would be.

Celeste thought it sounded very un-fun; in fact, it sounded like the last thing on Earth she wanted to do. If it was the only thing to do on *Mars*, she still wouldn't choose it. But when it came to – you know, her *life* – it seemed she still wasn't grown-up enough to get much of a say.

Celeste surveyed their front yard – dry, and mostly dead after such a long, hot summer (and from her sometimes forgetting to turn on the sprinklers). She struggled to get control of her face, which she knew must be reflecting the feelings she'd been fighting with for months – anger, frustration, rapidly dwindling patience. When she looked up, Ferd was also pondering the barren state of the front yard, but her cousin was sneakily watching her, too.

'What's the grey matter saying?' Ferd asked. Esme was pulling on the sleeve of Ferd's robe, trying to drag both of them towards the bus, but Ferd patted her congenially on the head and raised an eyebrow at Celeste.

'Well, it's just, we're meant to stay away from your house. Mum even made a point of saying, before her and Dad left, "Don't go running off with your cousin. Absolutely not! Danger! Stay away! Poison: do not enter!" You know. That sort of thing.'

'Sounds serious,' said Ferd.

'They're not here, stupid,' said Esme. 'They never are. So they won't find out.'

'What about Gran?' said Celeste.

'Lovely woman, shame about the foot odour,' said Ferd.

'What about her?' said Esme. 'She's having one of her naps. She'll never know.'

'You just have the answers to everything, don't you,' Celeste snapped. 'What if she wakes up and finds us gone? She'd be worried out of her mind.'

'We'll leave her a note,' said Ferd.

Celeste folded her arms across her chest, but that felt too defensive, so she changed to hands on hips. That wasn't much better, but it was too late now and she had to commit. 'Of course I want to come,' she told her cousin. 'I love the house. I've been wanting you to visit for ages. But I'm supposed to be "exercising good judgement and acting mature".'

'How old are you now, Celeste?' asked Ferd.

'Eleven,' said Celeste.

Ferd turned to Esme. 'What do you think about eleven-year-olds exercising good judgement and acting mature?'

'I think they're the most boring things in the world,' said Esme.

'Hmm,' mused Ferd. 'What an unfortunate burden. To be the most boring thing in the world.'

Esme tugged on both of their hands. 'Come *on*. I want to go to the house. Who are the new guests? What Realm do

they come from?’ She grinned wickedly at Celeste. ‘Besides, I know why *you* should go. Because you might see ...’ Esme gave an exaggerated shimmy of her shoulders, ‘... Loooo-gan.’

Celeste flushed and tried to look cool and not fussed at the mention of Ferd’s young assistant. She crossed her arms again, this time with more purpose. ‘Mum and Dad said no.’

‘Boring,’ said Esme.

Celeste looked down at the dirt and bit her tongue.

‘Where are your parents this time?’ Ferd asked.

‘Some island in the Atlantic Ocean,’ Celeste sighed. ‘Documenting the erosion of coastal grasses and rehabilitating the native flora.’

Ferd pretended to fall asleep and woke up with a snort.

‘Fascinating! Very important work! You just never know when grass is going to up and leave, do you?’ Ferd looked down at Esme and grinned. ‘I stuck down every single blade of grass to make a lawn once,’ their cousin revealed. ‘By hand.’ There was no more explanation, like this sort of event was too commonplace to even bat an eyelash over.

‘Superglue or craft?’ asked Esme, her eyes big and full of adoration.

‘Sticky tape,’ said Ferd. ‘Except for the last half-metre on the left side. That was Blu Tack. Under my nails for weeks.’ Ferd waggled fingers at Esme like the Blu Tack might still be there, and Esme giggled and grabbed the hand in question, studying it for any remaining offenders.

‘Here’s something I prepared earlier,’ said Ferd, loping over

to the front door, Esme still attached, and pinning something over the 'Welcome' plate.

'What is it?' asked Celeste.

'Note for Gran,' said Ferd, turning their brilliant smile back on Celeste. 'Says I'll have you back by teatime. Give or take an hour. Hmm.' Ferd consulted an imaginary watch, head tipped to the side. 'Or two. Time can get a bit mischievous when you're doing the old hop, skip and jump through portals. All that energy scattering, different worlds trying to align ...'

'Or just have us back never!' exclaimed Esme, latching on to her cousin's arm and hugging it to her chest. 'That would be better! We'll come and stay with you forever.'

'We can't leave Gran behind, silly,' said Celeste. 'Who would eat all her mushroom soup?'

'She can come and live with the Giant at the House,' said Esme. 'He seems lonely. And like he wouldn't mind smelly feet.'

'Hugin bathes three times a day,' said Ferd. 'One full bar of soap per wash. Terribly expensive.'

'Maybe he can lick himself clean like a cat,' said Esme.

'Oh no,' said Ferd. 'We've got a cat who could do that for him.'

Esme giggled again and hid herself in the voluminous folds of Ferd's robe. 'Yuck.'

Ferd scooped her up. 'Yuck indeed.' Then Esme was tipped upside down and tickled, while she laughed and squirmed in delight.

'I can see your undies,' Celeste said.

Ferd put Esme down and pulled out a pair of underpants from yet another pocket in the robe, and then proceeded to wear them proudly. As a hat.

'And now you can see mine, too.'

'That's extremely embarrassing,' said Celeste, but she hid a smile. 'Gran would chase you out of the front garden with her soup ladle if she saw how you were carrying on. What would the neighbours think?'

'I'll tell you what they'd think,' said Ferd, chasing Esme around the front yard. 'They would think, those two are having such lovely fun, I think I'll wear my brassiere on my head, too.'

'Come and join the undies club!' Esme sang out. 'No boring people allowed!'

'I'm NOT BORING!' Celeste shouted.

'You're a rotten, stinking, no-good, boring old bore!' laughed Esme, putting on a posh accent and ducking away from Ferd. 'What a big old boring nothing you are! All those books you're always reading about kids having adventures, and then you're too boring to even go on one yourself!'

'I'll tell you what I'm bored of!' Celeste protested. 'Looking after you for this whole stinking summer! Eating mushroom soup every night! Hearing you complain about everything! And you know what? I *am* bored of being sensible and doing everything I'm told! And most of all, I'm BORED OF BEING TOLD I'M A BORE, BECAUSE IT'S NOT TRUE!'

‘That’s the spirit!’ said Ferd. ‘Let it out! Think about the what-ifs, the could-have-beens, the magic missed! There’s lots going on at the house right now; I might be preoccupied for a long time!’

Esme clapped her hands and made a beeline for the bus.

‘Don’t you dare, Esme!’ Celeste called to her back. ‘Come back. *Right now!*’

‘What? I can’t hear you!’ Esme squealed as the armoire flung open its drawers and various undergarments started beckoning her on board.

The bus doors opened by themselves as Bonnie’s engine roared to life.

‘That’s my cue!’ said Ferd. ‘Better not keep BonBon waiting!’

Celeste clenched her fists and pushed back her exasperation, the same way she’d pushed it back all summer. Even when she felt ready to burst from it, even though all her insides felt all ragged and scraped from trying to swallow down every responsibility and chore she’d been given.

She tried one more time. ‘Esme! You better not get on that bus!’

Esme got on the bus.

Celeste took off after her sister. Their cousin leapt into the driver’s seat as Bonnie began to inch off the ground. ‘You better hurry if you’re coming!’ Ferd called. ‘It’s time for Bon’s afternoon nap, and trust me, you don’t want to keep her waiting!’

SEVEN WHEREWITHAL WAY

‘We’re not coming!’ Celeste shouted back. ‘Esme, get off the bus!’ She leapt up the steps to drag her sister off, but Bonnie had other plans. The bus let out a cheeky *vroom* and the door slammed shut behind Celeste. The very next second they were in the air, zooming towards the house called Seven Wherewithal Way.

Kidnapped by a bus. What a way to start an adventure.