

The
Misadventures
of the
Magician's Dog

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FRANCES SACKETT



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To Alice and Sebastian,
who inspire and delight me.

And to my mother and father,
with gratitude and love.



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Prologue



That kid? Umm, really?

That's what I think the first time I see him. You would have thought the same thing. I look in my magic water bowl, and there he is, just beneath the surface of the water, lying on his bed and reading. Hair buzzed close to his scalp and round cheeks that still have a tinge of babyish pink even though he's maybe twelve or thirteen. Book held too close to his nose as if he needs glasses but no one's noticed. Not fat, exactly, but sort of smooshy: you know the type of kid I mean, the one who spends his lunch hour in the library playing chess; who looks as if he'd run and hide if a little adventure were to nip him on his bottom. Nothing wrong with a kid like that—but me, I need someone extraordinary. And this kid isn't it.

I eat a dog biscuit and keep watching because—let's be honest—I'm pretty desperate. He reads for another half hour, his expression never changing. Once he scratches his belly, and once he sneezes. I've seen goldfish that were more exciting.

I'm just considering drinking what's left of the water

in the bowl when, in the distance, a phone rings. The boy, hearing it, tenses: he marks his place in his book with his finger and sits up as if he's waiting. His door flies open. A girl, maybe ten, fills the empty space. "Peter, it's Dad! Come on!" Then she's gone.

But the boy—Peter, I now know—doesn't immediately follow. Instead, he waits a moment longer, his book clenched against his chest, his page lost. I try to understand what I'm seeing on his face as he stares at the spot where a moment before his sister stood. Excitement, anger, hurt, yearning? The emotions that flicker across his features seem too complex for a kid his age: a whole story unfolds in those few seconds, and it yanks at my heart in a way I don't expect.

Then he blinks, and his face settles once more into the empty passivity that it showed before. Only I now know how much is hiding behind it.

He stands up and walks out the door, not running like his sister. And for the first time in months, I feel a tiny spark of something that it takes me a minute to recognize as hope.

Maybe, I think, my tail thumping against the floor.
Just maybe.

I eat another dog biscuit and keep watching.

Chapter One



The trouble started at dinner the night before Peter Lubinsky's twelfth birthday.

"Next week we have a field trip to the natural history museum," Peter's ten-year-old sister, Celia, announced as she plopped into her chair. That afternoon she'd spent her allowance on a package of feather hair extensions, and now pink and purple feathers dangled in her brown curls. "We've been studying dinosaurs in science, so we're going to look at dinosaur bones."

"They're called fossils," Peter said.

"Whatever," said Celia. "It'll be totally boring. But I need you to sign my permission slip, Mom, or I'll have to spend the day at the office."

Peter's mom served Celia a heaping portion of green beans. Then she put an equally generous helping on Peter's plate, nearly covering his meat loaf. "May I have green beans, please?" asked Isabelle, who was six.

"You can have mine," said Peter.

"Ha, ha," said his mother. "Here, Izzy."

"So can I go?" asked Celia.

“Go where?” asked their mom.

“To the museum. Weren’t you listening?” Celia demanded.

Peter’s mom sighed. “I’m sorry, honey. Of course you can go to the museum. I’m a little distracted—I’m still trying to figure out what we’re going to do for Peter’s birthday tomorrow.”

Peter’s face reddened. “I told you. I don’t want to do anything.”

“I know you don’t want a proper party. But we have to celebrate somehow.”

“I’d really rather not.”

“But, Peter . . .”

“Ith addy omin ome or etey irthay?” Izzy asked through a mouthful of meat loaf.

“What?” said Peter.

“Swallow and ask again,” said Peter’s mother. “Talking with your mouth full is bad manners, honey.”

“And besides, we can’t understand a word you say,” added Celia.

Izzy swallowed, then repeated, “Is Daddy coming home for Petey’s birthday?”

Peter’s mother’s fork froze halfway to her mouth, and the skin suddenly seemed to stretch too tightly across the bones of her face. Still, she kept her smile pasted on—the one she had been wearing ever since Peter’s father had left two months earlier for an unexpected deployment, his third in the past seven years.

“Daddy won’t be home for Peter’s birthday, Izzy,” she said. “You remember. Daddy’s fighting a war. He’s

doing it for our country, and that's why he can't be here right now."

"Maybe we could ask the war if he could come home for our birthdays," Izzy said. "Maybe the war doesn't know Peter's is tomorrow."

Celia's hands clenched the edge of the table. "Don't be dumb. You know Daddy won't be back for a long time. He told us when he left."

"He didn't say anything about birthdays," said Izzy.

"Well, duh. He didn't have to. He said he wouldn't be home for at least a year."

"Celia," Peter's mother said in a warning tone.

"What? She knows we can't see him."

"I just want to see him for our birthdays," said Izzy. "Birthdays are important."

"Well, you can't," said Celia. "Not even for birthdays."

"Celia's being mean, Mommy," Izzy said. "Will you make her stop? Please?"

"No," said Celia. "Make *her* stop."

Peter's mother pressed her fingers to her temples. "Enough, Celia. Your sister had a question, and she was trying to get it answered. She deserves our attention."

Celia opened her mouth as though she was going to argue, but instead she began to cry, angry sobs that filled the kitchen. Then Izzy started to cry, too, although hers were silent tears that trickled down her cheeks and puddled under her chin. Peter's mother just sat there, saying nothing, as if she had run out of words.

I have to say something, Peter thought. It wasn't a role he relished. Peter was the quiet one, the one who avoided

drama and conflict. He wasn't the one who spoke up in a crisis. *Say something*, he ordered himself as he watched the steam drift up from his green beans.

He opened his mouth, hoping words would just spill out.

"I know what I want for my birthday," he said.

It wasn't exactly a showstopper. No one even turned.

"I want a dog."

What had his mouth done? He hadn't meant to say the words and yet there they were, and he could do nothing to unspeak them.

His mother, Celia, and Izzy all gaped at him. Then Celia began to laugh. She laughed so hard that for a moment Peter was afraid she would choke and he would have to call 911.

"But, Peter!" she exclaimed, once she could speak. "You're scared to death of dogs!"

"I'm not scared of dogs," Peter lied.

"Oh, yes, you are," said Izzy, her tears forgotten. "Remember when we were out walking and that German shepherd wanted to play with us? You picked me up and carried me all the way home, even though I told you he was just being friendly."

"That dog might have hurt you," Peter said. "Did you see how big his teeth were? But I'm not scared of all dogs."

"Uh-huh. Right," said Celia.

"I'm not scared of dogs," Peter repeated. "Otherwise, why would I want one for my birthday?" He turned to his mother. *Say no*, his gaze begged; his mother didn't like dogs, either, and surely she was about to explain that

a dog was too much responsibility and he was going to have to pick something else.

“Oh, Peter,” she said, “really? I don’t know. A dog is a lot of work. . . .”

“Please?” begged Celia.

“Oh, please, please?” added Izzy.

Peter could see from his mother’s expression that she was wavering. “It’s really what you want for your birthday?” she asked.

From across the table, Celia’s narrowed eyes challenged Peter to admit the truth.

“It’s really what I want,” he said.

Peter’s mother smiled, and this time it was a genuine grin that erased the tiny lines of tension that usually crept from the corners of her eyes. “All right, then. Let’s do it. Tomorrow morning after breakfast, we’ll go to the dog rescue center and bring home the dog you like the best.”

Izzy and Celia erupted at the news.

“What will we name him?” Celia demanded.

“What color will he be?” Izzy wondered.

Peter hoped their questions masked the fact that he himself had become very quiet.

That night in bed, Peter lay awake for hours, trying to figure out how he could avoid adopting a dog. He still didn’t understand how those dreadful words had escaped from his mouth in the first place. Since they’d moved to Arizona last spring, he had often found himself saying the wrong things—to his mother, to Celia, to the kids at his new school, where his few attempts

to make friends had failed miserably. But asking for a dog! That was something entirely different, and entirely worse.

Toward dawn he decided he had no choice: he needed to tell his mother and sisters he had changed his mind and he didn't want a dog after all. Celia would make fun of him, and Izzy would be disappointed. But at least he wouldn't have to have a dog.

He had just settled into an uneasy sleep when he heard his door swing open.

"Petey?"

"Yeah, Izzy?"

"Can I get in with you?"

"Yeah."

Izzy climbed in next to him. Her toes were tiny ice cubes against his knees.

"I wanted Daddy to come home today," she said.

"I know. I wish he could be here, too."

For a moment the room, shadowy in the early-morning light, was silent, and Peter wondered if Izzy had gone back to sleep.

"Why did he go back to the war?"

"I don't know. I guess because the air force told him to."

"A lot of the kids at school have dads who are at war, but the dads on TV always live with their kids," Izzy said.

"Families are different," said Peter. "That's just what Dad's job is. Flying planes for the air force, I mean."

Izzy's breathing slowed; Peter could tell she was settling down and that soon she really would be asleep.

“I’m glad you want a dog,” she said, her voice sounding far away. “I know I’m going to love him. And I think . . . I hope he’s going to like me, too.”

“Go to sleep, Izzy,” Peter said.

How bad could it be, having a dog? Peter asked his reflection in the window of the family’s minivan the next morning. Most dogs did not bite their owners’ fingers. Most dogs did not pee on their owners’ possessions. Most dogs did not eat their owners’ little sisters.

It could be bad, his reflection said. With the luck you’ve been having, it could be sister-eating bad.

It was clear to Peter what he ought to do. He ought to tell his mother to go back home so that they could celebrate his birthday by having too much cake and ice cream, like any normal family. But how could he tell her when every time he turned his head to speak, he saw Izzy perched on the seat behind him, her eyes shining? She looked happier than she had since their father had left.

He drummed his fingers against his knee and tried not to think of what was about to happen.

And then, more quickly than seemed possible, the minivan was pulling into a parking lot he’d never noticed before. The sign above the dusty stucco building said CANINE RESCUE CENTER, with the faded C, R, and C all painted white with black spots.

Peter’s mom put the car into park. Then she turned to Peter. *She’s going to ask me if I want to go through with this,* Peter thought. *What am I going to say?*

But she didn’t ask. All she said was, “Let’s go, honey.” Peter went.