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opening extract from

The Boy in the Biscuit Tin

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CHAPTER 1

Magic For Beginners

"ASTONISH YOUR FRIENDS AND CHARM YOUR GIRLFRIEND
WITH THESE INCREDIBLE MAGIC TRICKS!"



"Francis?" said Ibby. "Can I come in?"

There was no reply, so Ibby knocked twice and opened the door. But to her surprise the room was empty. There was only a black top hat rolling gently on the carpet as though its owner had departed in a hurry.

Ibby checked in the wardrobe and under the bed, then she went to the window and looked out. But there was nobody there. Francis appeared to have vanished.

Ibby went downstairs again and found Aunt Carole and her parents in the front room, having tea.

"Here she is!" said Aunt Carole, smiling. "Did you find Francis?"

"No," said Ibby. "He's disappeared."

"He's probably just hiding. Here – have a biscuit."

"Thanks," said Ibby, and she took a chocolate-covered wafer and a glass of orange juice, and went and sat beside her mother on the couch.

"You're quite a young lady now, aren't you?" remarked Aunt Carole. "Your hair's getting ever so long."

"Too long," said Ibby's mother, tucking Ibby's hair behind her ear. Ibby had a pale, rather serious face and long fair hair, which she liked to wear loose like her friend Shareen. (Her mother made her wear it back for school. She said it looked untidy otherwise.)

"Are you still a big reader?" asked Aunt Carole.

"Oh, yes," said Ibby's father. "Ibby always has a book on the go, don't you, Ibby?"

"I wish the boys liked reading," said Aunt Carole. And then the conversation moved on to

Alex and his website, and then to Francis and his karate classes.

Meanwhile, Ibby nibbled her chocolate-covered wafer and looked around. Aunt Carole's shelves were full of tatty books, and there was a vase of peacock feathers, a sheep's skull, and other things that Aunt Carole and the boys had collected on their walks.

Normally, Ibby liked staying at her aunt's house. But this time it was different. This time she was staying on her own.

"You won't be on your own," her father had told her. "Alex and Francis will be there too."

But Ibby didn't find this very reassuring. The last time she had seen her cousins was when they had all gone to stay at a bed and breakfast in the Lake District. Alex hadn't wanted to come on holiday at all, and had traipsed after them everywhere with his head down, playing an electronic game that beeped every time he scored a point. Francis, on the other hand, had barely been able to contain his excitement and had kept them all awake at night by slamming doors and running up and down the stairs. On the second night he had got his finger stuck in the shower drain, and everyone had come out

onto the landing in their dressing gowns to watch while the ambulance men carried him off with the shower tray still attached to the end of his finger.

Ibby's mother said Aunt Carole let the boys get away with murder, but Ibby's father thought Aunt Carole did her best. After all, he said, it couldn't be easy bringing up two boys alone.

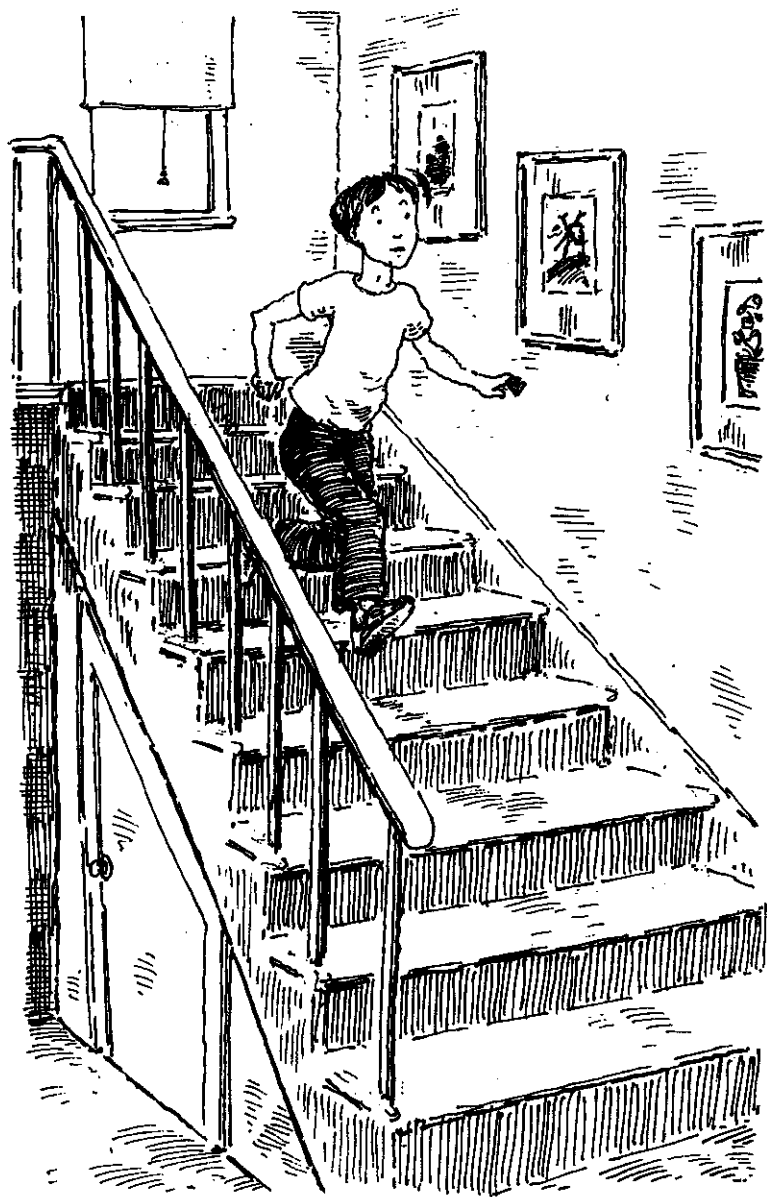
Especially boys like Alex and Francis, Ibby thought. But she'd said nothing.

Just then, Ibby's thoughts were interrupted by a crash directly overhead, and the sound of furniture being dragged across the floor.

"Goodness!" said Ibby's mother. "What's going on up there?"

But before Aunt Carole could answer, someone yelled "MUM?" and feet came pounding down the stairs. A moment later Alex appeared in the doorway. "Have we got any tins?" he said.

Alex must be practically a teenager now, thought Ibby. Unlike Francis (who was one of those people who can't help looking untidy) Alex was one of those people who can't seem to help looking smart. His dark hair was longer on top and parted in the middle, and when he ran



his hand through it, it always fell neatly back in place. (Francis had dark hair too, but his always stuck straight up in front as though a cow had licked it off his forehead with a big wet tongue.)

"What sort of tin do you want?" asked Aunt Carole.

"Something with a lid."

"Will a biscuit tin do? There's one in the pantry on the top shelf. But put it back when ..."

But Alex had already gone.

"Well," said Ibby's mother, getting up. "I suppose we'd better be off. We've got to register by four o'clock."

Ibby's heart sank. So this was it. Her parents were leaving her here for four whole days while they attended a technical writing conference in Cardiff.

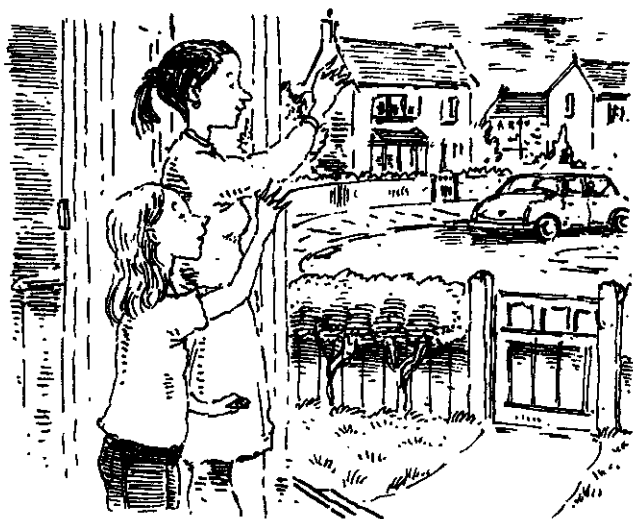
"Be good," said Ibby's mother.

Ibby said nothing. She was always good.

"We'll be back before you know it!" said her father. Then they went outside and got into their car, and Ibby's father started up the engine and her mother wound the window down and blew a kiss.

Ibby and Aunt Carole waved from the front

step as the car went down the drive. Then it turned the corner and was gone.



CHAPTER 2

The Boy In The Biscuit Tin

"THE STEP-BY-STEP INSTRUCTIONS ARE EASY TO FOLLOW."



Ibby went back upstairs. Francis's bedroom door was firmly closed and there was a lot of banging and crashing coming from within. "Francis?" said Ibby. She knocked twice and went in.

"Shut the door!" barked Alex. "Don't let it get away!"

"Let what get away?" said Ibby, startled.

"I don't know." Alex was on his knees, peering under the bed. "Some sort of mouse, I think. With stripes."

“Stripes?”

Then out from under the bed darted a small figure – no larger than one of the people from Ibby’s dolls’ house. It ran across the carpet directly in front of Ibby’s feet, and disappeared under the armchair – but not before Ibby had recognized Francis’s scruffy brown head and stripy sweater. She stepped backwards with a cry of astonishment. *Francis?*

“Push!” yelled Alex, throwing his weight against the chair.

“Don’t!” shrieked Ibby. “You’ll squash him!”

But to her relief, where the chair had stood there was only a dusty square of carpet on which lay a green plastic soldier and a broken pen.

“Where’d it go?” said Alex, looking round.

“There!” said Ibby, pointing – and before Francis could disappear under a landslide of board games and jigsaw boxes, she pounced. When she stood up she was trembling, with her hands cupped close to her chest.

“Let’s see!” said Alex.

Slowly, Ibby opened her hands – and there was Francis, curled up in a ball.

There was a shocked pause. Then Alex said, “What is it?”

"It's Francis," said Ibby.

"Francis? What's happened to him?"

"He's shrunk."

"I can see that. But how?"

At the sound of their voices, Francis uncurled and started trying to scramble out of Ibby's hands. "Pass the tin!" said Ibby. "Quick!" So Alex brought the biscuit tin and, carefully, Ibby released Francis into it. Immediately he went rushing round and round inside the tin, trying to scramble up the reflective silver walls in a hopeless sort of way.

"What's he doing?" said Ibby anxiously.

"Why's he running round and round like that?"

"Small animals do everything quickly," said Alex. "They've got a higher metabolic rate. That's why they're always hungry. If shrews don't eat their own weight in worms every hour they can starve to death."

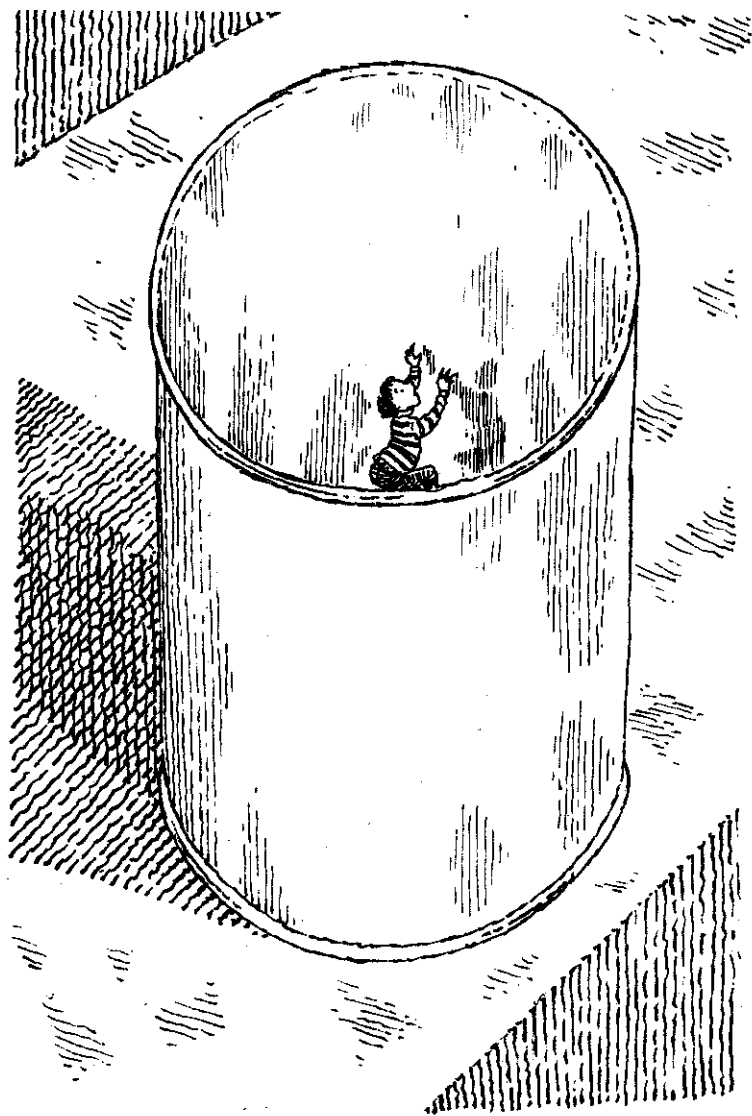
"They starve to death in an hour?" said Ibby, shocked.

"Or quicker, even."

"Let's put the lid on. Perhaps he'll go to sleep."

"We can't do that! He'll suffocate!"

Alex ran downstairs and came back with a



chocolate biscuit, a saucer of water, and a few lengths of toilet paper. He arranged everything in the tin, whereupon Francis promptly knocked over the water, ignored the biscuit, and began bundling up lengths of paper.

"He's making a nest," said Ibby. "Look!"

But Alex was looking at something else.

His gaze had fallen on a long black box, lying on the floor. On the front of the box it said: Magic for Beginners, and there was a picture of a white rabbit jumping out of a black top hat.



Beneath the picture it said:

ASTONISH YOUR FRIENDS AND CHARM YOUR GIRLFRIEND
WITH THESE INCREDIBLE MAGIC TRICKS! THIS BEAUTIFULLY
PRESENTED SET INCLUDES A TOP HAT, CLOAK AND ALL THE
PROPS YOU NEED TO PERFORM YOUR VERY OWN MAGIC SHOW.

"I knew it," said Alex.

"Knew what?"

"He's been doing magic!"

"Magic sets don't do real magic," objected Ibby. "They're all about sleight of hand and false bottoms, and things ..." She trailed off uncertainly. She had just remembered the black top hat rolling gently on Francis's bedroom carpet.

"It's the only explanation," said Alex. He broke off a tiny piece of biscuit and held it over the tin, making kissing noises. Presently the mound of paper trembled, and a hand appeared. It took the biscuit and withdrew.

"Right," said Ibby suddenly. "I'm going to tell Aunt Carole."

"No! We can't do that!"

"Why not?" said Ibby, hesitating.

"Well – think of the shock it would give her! And she won't be able to *do* anything, will she?"

"She might," said Ibby, but she looked unsure.

"She won't," said Alex firmly. "She'll rush him straight to hospital. They'll do all sorts of tests on him and then when nothing works they'll take him to a laboratory and put him in a cage

with lots of white rats.”

“They wouldn’t!”

“Yes, they would. That’s what always happens in cases like this. It’ll be on the news and in all the papers and he’ll be known for ever afterwards as ‘The Boy in the Biscuit Tin’.” Alex put his arm round Ibby’s shoulders and led her back to the bed, where she sat down reluctantly.

“So what do you think we should do?” she asked.

“Make him big again, of course.”

“How?”

“With the magic set.”

“Oh! Do you think we can?”

“Of course we can,” said Alex reassuringly.

“Where are the instructions?”

