

Make Me
DISAPPEAR

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*To my wife, Susan,
who makes every day magical*



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CHAPTER ONE

A BIRTHDAY WISH

Sam Sullivan’s living room was filled with three ghosts, two wicked witches, a princess, a firefighter, a cowboy, a pirate, a ballerina, and one authentic-looking magician.

It was Halloween, Sam’s favorite day of the year. Sam had worked on his costume for weeks, and he knew it looked good on him. He was dressed like a magician, complete with a black top hat he’d fashioned out of cardboard, a magic wand he’d made from one of his father’s broken golf clubs, and a black cape that added an air of mystery to his costume. Nobody would ever have known that Sam’s handsome cape had been a tablecloth just the week before. The final touch was a paper mustache taped to his upper lip, an absolute must for all the great magicians.

Sam liked October 31st more than any other day of the year—more than the Fourth of July, more than Thanksgiving, and even more than Christmas—because not only was it Halloween; it was also Sam’s birthday.

Sam’s father burst through the kitchen door carrying the biggest angel food cake Sam had ever seen. It had vanilla icing just the way Sam liked it and ten flaming candles that lit up the room.

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday to Saaa-aam, happy birthday to you! Yayyyy!” cheered the costumed children gathered in Sam’s living

room, their singing muffled beneath an assortment of Halloween masks.

“Make a wish!” hollered Sam’s father across the noisy room.

Sam thought it over. So many things to wish for! How could he possibly pick just one? Finally it came to him—the one thing he wanted most. He nodded his head, took a deep breath, and blew. He blew so hard that part of his paper mustache came loose, but the mighty puff extinguished all of the candles.

The other children cheered again, then scrambled to get their plates and get in line for cake.

“Did you make a wish, son?” asked Sam’s father.

“Yes sir,” Sam replied.

“What’d you wish for?”

“Can’t tell you, Dad,” Sam replied. “It’s a secret.”

His father smiled knowingly and patted Sam on the back. “Well, let’s hope it comes true,” he said. Then he took the magic wand from Sam’s hand and waved it over the angel food cake. “Okay, children,” he said with a twinkle in his eye, “make this cake disappear!”

The cake didn’t stand a chance against the ten hungry little ghosts and goblins.

Across the living room, Cynthia Chasen was frowning and shaking her head in disgust. She was finding it hard to believe that in a few months she was going to marry Sam’s

father, and things like Halloween celebrations and birthday parties would become a regular part of her life.

Sam's father escaped the attack on the cake and walked over to talk with Cynthia. "So, what do you think?" he asked her, smiling.

Cynthia turned to him and cocked her left eyebrow to show him that she was unamused. "You really want to know what I think?" she asked. "I think you're spoiling him rotten, Larry."

The proud smile vanished from Mr. Sullivan's face. "Why, because I buy my son a nice birthday cake?"

"The cake, the presents, the entertainment, this whole thing...it's too much." Cynthia shook her head as she watched the children devouring the cake.

Mr. Sullivan leaned over and whispered in Cynthia's ear, "And what about you? Did I spoil you with that big diamond ring?" He broke into a broad smile and pulled Cynthia's left hand up in front of their faces.

Cynthia couldn't help but smile back as she gazed at the enormous diamond ring on her finger, sparkling like the surface of the ocean at sunset. "It *is* beautiful, isn't it?" she giggled, kissing his cheek but never taking her eyes off the engagement ring. "And our wedding is going to be fabulous! The full orchestra is going to be so much better than the string quartet that Mimi Taylor had at her reception."

She was about to give Mr. Sullivan another kiss when the doorbell rang. Mr. Sullivan ran to answer it, leaving Cynthia

with her eyes closed and her lips puckered, waiting for a kiss that never came.

On any ordinary day, Mr. Sullivan might have been surprised—maybe downright shocked—to open his front door and find an old clown with a tattered suitcase standing on his front porch. But this was no ordinary day, and even though he'd never seen this clown before, he knew exactly who it was. “Chocko!” he hollered. “You made it! I was starting to get worried.”

The clown didn't say a word. He just stared back through the white greasepaint that covered his face. There were small black dots under his eyes that looked like tears, and he wore a bright orange nose that matched the color of his wig. His skin was thick with wrinkles, but it was hard to tell exactly how old he was under all that greasepaint. The chilly October wind made his plaid overalls flap back and forth as he stood mutely on the front stoop.

Mr. Sullivan wasn't quite sure what to make of an elderly clown who didn't talk. “Uh...won't you come in?” he invited.

The clown nodded silently and entered the house, struggling with his beat-up suitcase.

“Kids! Look who's here!” announced Mr. Sullivan to the children. “Chocko the Magnificent!”

In no time, Chocko the Magnificent had the undivided attention of every child in the room. He pulled one trick after another from his battered suitcase. The applause and cheering grew louder with each new illusion.

Sam was thrilled with the magic show. His eyes were bright with amazement as Chocko produced silk handkerchiefs, white doves, and even a rabbit from a magic box on his performing table. At one point he pulled a bright red silk handkerchief out of his pocket, to which there was attached a blue handkerchief, and then a green one, and a yellow one, and another, and yet another, until he was holding a long snake of handkerchiefs in every color of the rainbow. He held the multicolored cloths high over his head, then whipped them around like a cowboy twirling a lasso. Suddenly, right before everyone's very eyes, they vanished—*poof!*—into thin air.

The children cheered at the magician's marvelous disappearing trick. Sam clapped louder than anyone.

Mr. Sullivan occasionally circled the group to snap a few pictures with a Polaroid camera, the kind that delivers photographs instantly. Sam's mother had found it in a second-hand store and had been delighted to discover that it still worked. Sam asked his father to take pictures with the old thing at every special occasion. Looking at the photos it spit out made him feel closer to his mother.

Finally it was time for Chocko the Magnificent's grand finale, the best trick in his bag. The old clown still hadn't spoken a word. Now he beckoned Sam from the audience so that Sam could help get him into a straitjacket.

Sam knew exactly what to do, having seen other magicians wrestle their way out of the canvas contraptions. It reminded him of someone turning around and putting his

arms into a coat backwards so that the zipper was behind his back. Sam helped Chocko pull the straitjacket over his arms and then zipped it up and fastened the leather straps as tightly as he could. He tugged on them to make doubly certain the buckles were secure.

Chocko motioned with his head to a pair of handcuffs on the floor.

“The manacles?” asked Sam, hoping he had impressed Chocko by calling the handcuffs “manacles,” as any real magician would. All he got from the old clown was a nod.

As Sam reached for the manacles, Chocko sat on the edge of a chair and put his feet up in the air. Sam quickly got the message and attached the cuffs to Chocko’s ankles. The cold metal snapped into place. Sam couldn’t imagine anyone getting out of them without a key.

Next Chocko motioned to a large canvas bag on the floor with the words “U.S. Mail” stenciled in black on the side.

Sam didn’t understand what Chocko wanted him to do. “Is there something in the bag you want?” he asked.

Chocko shook his head as Sam picked up the mail bag and discovered it to be empty.

“You want me to get in the bag?”

Chocko shook his head harder this time, the orange strands of hair on his wig moving wildly from side to side like the brushes at a carwash.

The other children giggled as Sam stopped to think of another possible solution. An idea popped into his head. “Oh!” he exclaimed. “You want me to help *you* get in the bag!”

Chocko nodded and rolled his eyes, as if he couldn’t believe it had taken the boy so long to figure it out.

Sam opened up the enormous mail bag and helped the clown climb inside. First he slid the bag over Chocko’s handcuffed legs. Then, as Chocko stood up, Sam pulled the bag up over the clown’s body, which was tightly strapped into the straitjacket. Sam stood on the chair to pull the bag the rest of the way up, over Chocko’s sad smile, his orange nose, his painted black teardrops, and finally his mop of a wig. There was a drawstring at the top of the bag, which Sam tied off in a double square knot. The whole thing looked like a giant bag of marbles.

Chocko had remained motionless up to that point, but suddenly there was movement from within the bag. At first it was slow—just a wiggle here and a bend of the knees there. But then it got faster. Chocko started hopping around, jerking from side to side, bending at the waist, twisting violently.

All of the children squealed with delight as Chocko struggled to get free—all of them except Sam, that is, who began to grow concerned.

Without warning, the man in the bag lost his balance and crashed across the table he had used for his other tricks. Coins went rolling, rubber balls went bouncing, silver rings

jangled to the floor, four white doves fluttered across the room, and the rabbit took cover under the living room couch.

Sam grew increasingly worried as the other children howled with laughter.

Chocko was on the ground, looking like a giant gray caterpillar, rolling around in an effort to escape. It seemed to go on forever.

Finally Sam couldn't stand it any longer. He ran over and untied the drawstring on top of the mail bag. Then he jerked the bag down with all his might to give the old clown some air. Chocko's wig had come off, exposing a head of matted gray hair. His makeup was smeared, the black and white greasepaint running together like oil paints on an artist's palette.

Nobody said a word. They just stared in shock at Chocko, who looked anything but magnificent.

It was Chocko who finally broke the awful silence. "I could have gotten out by myself!" he shouted at Sam. "I didn't need your help!"

Mr. Sullivan rushed across the living room. "What's the matter? What happened?"

"Nothing!" snapped Chocko. "Show's over! Get me outta this thing!"

Sam's father unbuckled the straps on the straitjacket as quickly as he could. The old clown flung it off his arms and hurled it into his suitcase. He produced a key seemingly from nowhere to pop open the handcuffs around his ankles.

Then he gathered up his collection of balls and coins and rings and doves and marched out the front door without saying another word.

Chocko was outside at his car, putting his battered old suitcase into the trunk, when Sam ran out after him.

“You forgot some stuff!” called Sam as he hurried to the car. In one hand he was carrying the rabbit, which had hopped under the sofa. In the other hand he had Chocko’s black magic wand. He was trying to hand the clown the wand when suddenly a bouquet of colorful paper flowers shot out from the end of it. “Wow!” he exclaimed. “How did that happen?”

“None of your business,” snarled Chocko. “Just give me the wand and be off.”

Sam nodded and obediently held the wand out to Chocko, but something about it caught his eye. The initials B.L. were carved into it. “B.L.? Who’s B.L.?” he asked.

“Nobody,” barked Chocko as he jerked the wand out of Sam’s hand and tossed it into the trunk. He slammed the trunk lid and fumbled with his car keys as walked to the driver’s side door of the car.

Sam hated that the clown was angry with him, but the magic Chocko had done before that last act had been truly impressive. Sam decided to tell him so. “Your show was great. I really mean it,” he said. “I’d sure like to know how you made all those things disappear.”

Chocko frowned. “Wouldn’t everybody,” he muttered. He got in his car, slammed the door, and drove off.

Sam watched him go. He didn’t know whether to feel glad to have seen such an incredible magic show or sad that the clown who could do such magic was leaving so upset.

“Come back inside, Sam!” yelled Mr. Sullivan from the front door. “Time to open your presents!”

Sam took one last look down the empty street where the old clown had sped off, then ran across the lawn toward the front door.

“Not on the grass!” bellowed his father.

Sam stopped in his tracks. He’d been so distracted by the angry clown with the fantastic magic tricks that he’d forgotten one of his father’s strictest rules: never walk on the front lawn. Sam knew he’d made a mistake. He tiptoed back to the driveway, taking gentle little steps like someone walking across thin ice.

His father looked disappointed. “Come on, son,” he said. “You know you’re not allowed on the lawn.”

“Sorry, Dad,” replied Sam, hanging his head in shame.

Cynthia appeared in the doorway next to Sam’s father. She frowned and shook her head as Sam walked through the door past her. When his father wasn’t looking, Sam frowned back at her.

Sam had always known that Cynthia didn’t like him, but he didn’t care because he’d never thought much of her

either. He didn't understand why his father wanted to marry her, but he guessed that it was because his dad was lonely. It had been three years since Sam's mother had died, but Sam still missed her every day. He figured that his father did, too. Maybe he just needed somebody to keep him company.

The rest of the party went well, but as soon as the other children left and the mess was cleaned up, Sam headed upstairs to his room. He wanted to get a good night's sleep because the next day he planned to do a little investigating into Chocko the Magnificent.

CHAPTER TWO

BLACKWELL LAVEQUE

Sam knew exactly which shelf in the public library to find all of the books about magic. After all, he'd checked out every one of them at least once, and some as many as three times. He marched down the row with the magazines, past the reference books, through the shelves of books about gardening and famous people, and finally to the shelf with the magic books. He pulled out every volume on the subject they had—seventeen in all. Then, careful to be quiet, Sam carried the huge stack across the library to a big wooden table with lots of room. He separated the books into four neat piles, then sat down and began his search. He wasn't sure exactly what he was looking for, but he knew that whatever it was, he would find it somewhere inside one of those books.

Sam flipped the pages of every book, one by one. Two hours later he was down to the last one, but he still hadn't found what he was looking for. His eyes were tired, his throat was dry, and it was getting late. But then, suddenly, there it was right in front of him: the very thing he had hoped to find.

It was a page of black-and-white photos of the greatest magicians of all time: David Devant, Alexander Hermann, Buatier de Kolta, Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, Harry Houdini, and the magician that Sam had been most interested

to see: the Great Blackwell LaVeque. Blackwell LaVeque, “B.L.”—just like the initials on the wand.

Sam pulled out one of the Polaroid photos of Chocko that his father had snapped at his party and held it next to the picture of Blackwell LaVeque in the book. Take away the funny wig, the orange nose, and the wrinkles, and there was no doubt about it: Chocko and Blackwell were one and the same. “Yes!” Sam cried, unable to contain his excitement over his discovery.

“Shhhh!” hissed the librarian, holding her finger to her lips.

Sam clamped his mouth shut and shot an apologetic look at the librarian. Then he scooped up the books and returned them to their proper place on the shelf. In no time he was out the door, running down the sidewalk as fast as he could.

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There were three places in Sam’s house that he wasn’t allowed to go—three places that were most definitely off limits. One was the dining room, where the fine crystal glasses and china plates were kept in a glass cabinet. The second was the workbench, where his father kept all of his fancy tools that he never used. And the third, and without a doubt the most forbidden, was his father’s study. Sam remembered the tongue-lashing he’d gotten when he’d walked across the front lawn, so he could only imagine the penalty if he got caught in the study. Despite that, however,