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Super Jake & the King of Chaos shows how, even in the most difficult times, a family's love is its own kind of magic."

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-BOOKLIST, starred review

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SOMETIMES MAGIC COMES IN THE MOST UNEXPECTED PLACES...

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When life revolves around stressed-out parents and ER visits for his special needs little brother Jake, eleven-year-old Ethan escapes into a world of top hats, trick decks, and magic wands. When he hears of a junior magic competition where the top prize is to meet his hero, Magnus the Magnificent, Ethan is determined to enter—and to win.

His hard work pays off and he makes it to the top five finalists. Then Jake falls dangerously ill and Ethan's hopes and dreams are in jeopardy. As he searches for any sort of magic to save Jake's life, Ethan learns what is truly important . . . and what real magic is.

NAOMI MILLINER is the author of *The Trouble with Secrets* and coeditor and contributor to *On All Other Nights*, a Passover anthology for middle grade readers.

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SUPER JAKE & THE KING OF CHAOS

BY NAOMI MILLINER

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Author's note: This is a work of fiction, but it is inspired by my family and our life with Jake. All names except his have been changed, and most characters, places, and incidents are the product of my imagination.

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CHAPTER ONE

It doesn't matter if my audience is made up of nine-year-old superheroes with plastic hammers and shields, or ninetyyear-old great-grandparents with white hair and walkers. Everybody loves magic. Especially me.

I've been doing magic shows for more than a year now, since the beginning of fifth grade, and I love every second of it. Today's show is in a living room decorated with pink streamers and pink balloons for a dozen three-year-old girls. Princess Jasmine is poking Pocahontas; Belle is whacking Sleeping Beauty with a balloon; and Snow White is screaming for her mommy.

Welcome to my world.

The birthday girl, Jenny, is a blue-eyed blonde dressed as Cinderella (except for the pink ribbons in her hair). Since I always do my research ahead of time, I knew what her

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costume would be. So, the first question I ask the group is: "Have any of you heard of Cinderella?"

Jenny gives me a giant smile while the girls around her shriek, "Jenny is Cinderella!"

I act surprised. "Wow! No way!" More shrieks. "Anyone know what Cinderella left at the ball?"

"Her glass slipper!" Princess Jasmine shouts.

"Exactly. And I happen to have a glass slipper right here in my hat. Who wants to see it?"

The twelve girls squeal and rush toward me for a better view. I raise my wand, tap it over my sparkly black top hat, and pull out...

"SpongeBob!" The girl dressed like Belle giggles and points.

I turn to my seven-year-old brother, Freddy, who's busy eating candy from my stars-and-moons-covered box.

Mom "suggested" I make him my assistant a few months ago when summer started and he had nothing to do.

"Ethan, why don't you put Freddy in your act?" Mom had asked.

Faster than you can say "Abracadabra," I gave a dozen reasons why this was a terrible idea. My favorite was, "What if I accidentally saw him in half?" No loving parent could possibly argue with that, right?

The next day Freddy pranced into the living room wearing a top hat, black shirt and pants, and a red bowtie. The top hat practically covered his eyes and the bowtie was crooked. It was like staring at myself in a fun-house mirror, everything exaggerated and strange-looking.

"Doesn't he look wonderful?" Mom gushed.

"He certainly does." Dad smiled, then put his arm around Mom's waist, pulling her close.

I usually hate sappy stuff, but it was kind of nice seeing my parents like that. They used to be like that all the time . . . until Jake was born and Mom got nervous and Dad got sad and everything changed. I guess I got a little sappy, too, because I agreed to give Freddy a chance. Turns out, my act's a lot funnier now (though I'll never tell him that).

Jenny and her friends laugh as I glare at Freddy and say, "Give me that candy!"

It's all part of our routine.

He shuts the box. "What candy?" He opens the box again, and it's empty.

I take the box, wave my wand over the lid, and the candy's back. I promise the girls they'll get plenty of candy soon, then ask the birthday girl what her favorite color is.

As predicted, she says, "Pink!"

Freddy starts pulling plastic rings and bracelets from my

Sorcerer's Apprentice hat: red, blue, purple. As the girls dive for the jewelry, Freddy cries, "Hey, there's no pink here!"

"Are you sure?" I ask. "I know I had something pink. Where did it go?" I turn my back to the audience, pretend to search, then turn around, one hand on my stomach and one over my mouth.

"Ethan?" Freddy asks. "You look kinda funny. Are you okay?"

I shake my head and scrunch my face up like I'm gonna be sick. Then I open my mouth and pull out a forty-six-foot-long coil of pink paper. Jenny and her friends laugh until their faces are pinker than the paper.

The show's gone perfectly, and I feel great. Freddy and I finish with our usual crowd pleaser: a magic hat full of lollipops. After the girls grab all the candy they can hold, they follow their moms and dads to another room for cake, and Freddy tags along with them.

I toss the last few items into my magic bag, then join the others. As Jenny's mom lights the first candle, the doorbell rings. Since the candle lighting is in full swing, I offer to get the door.

I squeeze my way through a waist-high maze of cardboard crowns and glittery tiaras and open the front door to see my mom. And Jake.

My great mood vanishes, because I know what's going to happen. In two seconds flat, my tricks will be as forgotten as the candy wrappers in my hat. Everyone will stare at Jake and try to figure out what's wrong with him. And, if things go really badly, someone will say something dumb and Mom will start crying.

"I thought Dad was supposed to pick us up." Without Jake.

"I know. But I wanted to see the little girls all dressed up. Besides, it was a good excuse for Jake to wear his new shirt. Isn't it cute?" Mom leans over and kisses him on the forehead.

Jake's wearing a Cookie Monster shirt, silently taking in the action all around him through his turquoise-framed glasses.

"Hey, Jake." As I lean over his purple-and-green Kid Kart—a cross between a stroller and wheelchair that helps him sit up—and ruffle his soft curls, somebody tugs at my shirt: it's birthday-girl Jenny.

"Who's that?" she asks.

And, here we go. My shoulders tense and my stomach tightens. "My other brother, Jake." I look around the room, hoping no one else will come over.

"How old is he?"

"He'll be two soon."

"Hi!" Jenny waves at him.

Jake watches her with his usual calm expression, only she wants more. People always do. She waits for him to answer or at least wave back.

He doesn't. He won't.

She tries again. "Hello?"

Jake is silent.

"Are his ears okay?" Jenny asks.

I want to leave. Now. I don't even care about my pay. I look at my mom. "Y'know, I don't feel so good. Can we—"

"Jake's ears are fine," Mom tells her. "But his brain was hurt before he was born, so some things are hard for him. Like waving or saying hello."

I hate when she does that. Why can't she just say his hearing is fine and leave it at that?

Jenny stops waving, looks at Jake for a few seconds, and runs away. Typical. Sometimes people a lot older look like they want to run, too—like brain damage is contagious or something.

"Jakey!" Freddy flies over, pink frosting all over his face, and gives Jake a hug. "I like your new shirt. Are you a Cookie Monster?" He squeezes Jake's hands and Jake rewards him with a big open-mouthed grin.

I feel another tug on my shirt. Jenny's back, and there's something in her hand: a Sleeping Beauty Band-Aid.

She holds it out for me to see. "For Jake's hurt brain," she says.

Mom takes the Band-Aid. She presses her lips together and her forehead crinkles, and I can tell she's about to cry. I close my eyes, wishing I could disappear, like the candy in my trick box.

"Jakey likes Spider-Man better than Sleeping Beauty," I hear Freddy say.

I open my eyes.

Jenny cocks her head like a puppy. "How do you know? He doesn't talk."

"Sure he does," Freddy tells her. "You have to know how to listen." He grabs Jake's hand and helps him wave. "See? He says hi."

By now, Mom has pulled herself together. She bends over to give Jenny a hug and wishes her a happy birthday while I do a major exhale. I feel like Houdini—another narrow escape . . . for now.