

Magic Jane

by Roz Warren

Jane sits on the floor in the children's section, a stack of paperbacks on the floor beside her. Ten years old, in jeans and a striped T shirt, Jane's cropped brown hair and bangs frame a face that is clever rather than pretty. She's come to the bookstore with her father, who is downstairs looking at grown-up books.

These Saturday bookstore visits are a dream come true for Jane, the only good thing to come from the divorce. Before the divorce, her parents rarely bought Jane books. Instead, she and her mother went to the library each Saturday morning, where Jane chose ten books, which she'd always finish reading before their next visit.

Then Jane's dad moved out. Now each Saturday morning he picks her up and they go to the bookstore.

"How many can I buy?" Jane had asked him the first time.

He smiled and ruffled her hair. "As many as you want, cookie."

Each week, Jane browses the "intermediate reader" shelves. When she's gathered as many books as she can carry, she'll sit on a quiet stretch of the carpeted floor with its happy pattern of puppies and clowns and dancing mice, and examine each book carefully. Although she can buy as many as she pleases, she only wants them if they're special, and not, as her mom would put it, mindless garbage. As she picks up each book, she removes the tiny plastic disk tucked into its pages. She's heard the bookstore staff call them "chicklets" because they're small and white like the gum. When you buy a book, the register people remove the chicklet. If they forget and you leave the store with a chicklet still in your book, a loud alarm sounds and everyone stares. That happened to Jane once, so now she removes the chicklets herself, ahead of time, just to make sure.

She's deep in her tasks of reading and choosing when her father comes to find her.

"How's my little book worm?" he asks. "Ready for a snack?"

She brings her books along to the bookstore's café. Dad always buys her a treat, whatever she wants -- even cookies or cake. Then they look at their books and talk about Jane's week.

Bookstore Saturday, she knows, is to make up for the awfulness at home before her dad moved out. Jane's father is actually two people. One is this kind, loving father who buys her books and cookies and lemonade, who asks about her week, then listens with smiles and encouragement. The other Dad is the one who shouted at Mom, calling her names that Jane doesn't want to think about. Now that he no longer lives with them, Jane would like to forget all about this Bad Dad.

There's already somebody sitting at their favorite café table, the round one by the window. A pretty blonde woman in a pale gray dress. The floor at her feet is crowded with what Jane's mom calls "fancy bags" -- shiny shopping bags from the nearby boutique shops. She's very thin, thin enough to be a ballerina. "Get that woman a cheese steak!" Jane's mom would say with a laugh. It's what she says whenever they see a painfully skinny runner, or a too-thin model on a poster.

The woman glances up from her magazine as Daddy guides Jane toward the table.

"Daddy," Jane whispers, "They're somebody already sitting --"

But the pretty woman is rising to greet them. "Jack!" she cries. She give Jane's dad a quick hug. . "And this must be Jane. Won't you join me?" She has a low, musical voice.

She's nothing like Jane's mother, who rarely wears dresses and never shops at boutique stores.

"I'm so happy to meet you," she says to Jane. "You look just like your father, pumpkin."

Jane scowls.

"Jane, this is Elena," her Dad prompts. "Elena is my dear friend."

Jane remembers her manners and thrusts out her hand. "Pleased to meet you."

"Oh Jack," she's adorable," bubbles Elena.

"Well, naturally," he jokes. "She's my daughter, isn't she?"

Jane knows she isn't adorable. She's many things -- strong, and good at soccer. And smart. And honest. And loyal. But she's never been adorable.

"Double cappuccino decaf?" Jane's dad asks Elena, who gives him a pleased smile. Without a word to Jane, he turns and goes to the counter to order.

The Saturday routine is broken. After stacking their books on the table, he and Jane are supposed to go to the counter together, where Jane will gaze into the large display case at the dozens of cakes, cookies and little pies, before finally choosing one treat. Instead, she's left at the table with Elena.

Jane sits down, then does what she always does when she's at a loss -- she picks up a book. But before she can start reading, Elena reaches over and rests her hand on Jane's. Her hand is firm and

cool, the nails pale and polished. Jane wants to pull her hand away but that would be rude.

"Let's have a girl-to-girl chat," Elena says. "Okay?"

Jane nods.

"Your father is a wonderful man, Jane." Elena's voice is low and solemn. "He's gone through so much. He serves every happiness, don't you think?"

A wary nod. Good Dad does deserve every happiness. Bad Dad, on the other hand, deserves to be punished. Of course, Jane would like very much to forget all about Bad Dad.

Elena releases Jane's hand. She removes a few packets of Sweet and Low from the container on the table, then slips them into a thin leather purse on the floor beneath her chair. Running a hand through her blonde curls, she gives Jane a confident grin. "How about it? Can we two girls agree that from now on we'll both take good care of your wonderful father?"

Jane meets her eyes. "You stole."

"What?" Elena asks. The warmth is gone from her voice..

"Just now. I saw. You took them and put them in your purse." Jane's voice rises. "That's stealing."

"Janie, mind your manners," says her dad, suddenly beside them.. Elena shoots him a grateful look. "Janie, honey," she says with a soft laugh. "it's not stealing. The store puts those little packets out for customers to take."

"But not to take home," Jane insists. "My mother says --"

“Jane. Drop it.” It's her father's warning voice. He places a large cup topped with white froth on the table in front of Elena, like an offering. Jane frowns. He didn't let her come with him to the counter. He didn't let her choose. But now, with a flourish, he places a huge piece of chocolate cake in front of her. Her favorite. And next to it, he sets a tall glass of pink lemonade.

“What do you say?” he prompts.

She grins. “Thank you , daddy.”

Jane eats the wonderful cake, enjoying each sweet, gooey mouthful. Between bites of cake and sips of lemonade, she waits for Dad to ask about her week. He and Elena chat, smiling and leaning toward each other. Jane wants to tell him about her soccer game, about the two goals she scored. And she wants to tell him about how Vanilla Mouse escaped from her cage last Monday while Jane was cleaning it, but how the next day Jane just happened to look up from her book to see Vanilla, tiny and white, strolling across her bedroom floor! She can't wait to tell Dad about how she recaptured Vanilla, whooshing the colander down to trap her. It had been Jane's idea to keep the colander by her bed, just in case. And Vanilla seemed glad to be returned to her cage, rushing to her water dispenser for a long drink.

But Dad doesn't ask about her week. A feeling rises up in Jane, despite the cake and being with her father, a great unhappy feeling that has to do with Elena, with being ignored, with the stolen Sweet and Low, and with her father's anger at Jane when she was just telling the truth.

“Excuse me,” Jane says, leaving the table. She walks back to the children's section, half expecting them to call her back. But when she glances back, they're talking, their heads close together.

“There's plenty of love to go around,” her mother always says when Jane frets that Mom might love baby Brian more than she loves Jane. “Loving one person doesn't mean loving somebody else less. Love is magic. There's always plenty of love if you open your heart.”

The pile of chicklets Jane had removed from her books is still there, a little white mound on the carpet. Jane picks them up and stuffs them in her pocket. She can barely feel them in there, they're so slight. She goes to the shelf of Narnia books, her favorites. She goes down the row of books, harvesting a little white chicklet from each.

Narnia books are about a magic world you get to by going through a special closet. Jane has tried this at home. When her parents would begin to shout and Mom would cry, Jane would escape into her own closet, pressing her face into the clothing, hoping to end up somewhere, anywhere, else.

Needless to say, that never happened.

Elena greets Jane's return with a smile. “There you are! We missed you.”

Liar, Jane thinks. Thief.

In the Narnia books, there's a witch who appears to be warm and friendly, but is really cold and evil at heart. Edmond, one of the heroes, is fooled by her, until his sister Lucy reveals the witch's true nature.

Magic has to do with learning the truth.

But Jane isn't in Narnia. She's in Narberth, Pennsylvania, where, if you press your way into the closet, all you end up with is clothes.

Pretty Elena, Dad's dear friend, is a thief. She is stealing Sweet and Low from the café. And she is stealing Jane's father.

When Jane sits down again, Elena asks her questions, about what grade she's in (fourth) and whether she likes school (yes, except for the homework) and if she plays soccer (Yes! She scored two goals her last game.) Then Elena and Jane's dad talk about a movie they want to see and about Elena's job, which is selling houses. Then they talk about the President. And Jane knows that her father isn't going to ask her about her week, because what he really wants to hear about is Elena's week.

It's as if Elena has cast a magic spell on Jane, making her invisible.

Magic Jane, invisible Jane, quietly leans over and slips a chicklet into Elena's purse. Thief! Liar! sings Jane's heart. She sits back and enjoys a huge chocolatey bite of cake, then a sip of lemonade. Nobody notices her. "It's not just a matter of being Presidential," Dad is saying to Elena, "it's really about trust."

When the thrill of that invisible act begins to fade, Jane slips another chicklet into Elena's purse. And then another. A minute later, she drops a tiny white disk into the pocket of the jacket draped over the back of Elena's chair, then one into each fancy shopping bag.

This is what magic feels like. Excitement. Clarity. Danger. Justice.

"Ready to go?" Dad asks, when Jane has finished her cake. "Which books have you decided on, cookie?"

"I want them all," Jane says.

After her dad pays for the books, the three of them stand together for a moment. "I'm so glad we met," Elena says to Jane. "I hope to get to you know much better, Janie."

"You will," Jane thinks. "Any moment now."

As they walk toward the exit, Elena carries twenty chicklets, in her pockets, her purse, in all of her fancy shopping bags, even in one of her shoes. "I think this visit has been a success," Jane's dad says as the three of them walk toward the door with big smiles on their faces.

