Opening extract from
Bad Magic

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This book begins with a bad word.

Can you guess which one?

WAIT! Don't say it out loud. Don't even think it to yourself. I get into enough trouble as it is.

In fact, if the only reason you opened this book is to find the bad words in it, you will be sorely disappointed. I learned the hard way to keep my writing clean.*

Alas, when the hero of this book, Clay, first pronounced this word that I just mentioned, or rather that I most definitively did NOT mention, this swear word, this curse word, this very, very bad word, this word that I am not repeating or in any way revealing, he didn't know there was anything wrong with it; he was only three years old.

Where would such a young boy learn such a grown-up word? I have no idea. *I* certainly didn't teach it to him.

Maybe his father yelled it when he stubbed his toe. Maybe his babysitter grumbled it into her phone when she thought Clay was sleeping.

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* Let's just say editors aren't the gentle bookish creatures people think they are, and leave it at that.

Maybe an older boy taught him the word because the older boy thought it would be funny to hear a three-year-old say it.

It really doesn't matter where Clay learned the word any more than it matters what the word was; it only matters that he said the word when he did.

At the time of this fateful event, Clay was in a crowded elevator, leaving his first dentist appointment. As his brother would tell it later, Clay was happily sucking on the acid-green lollipop he had been given as a reward for his good behaviour,* when all of a sudden he took the lollipop out of his mouth and hollered this terrible, terrible word at the top of his little lungs.

$$\text{"\#¿*\%!!!"}^{**}$$

Needless to say, everybody in the elevator was shocked to hear such foul language come out of such a

small child. A big kid giggled. An old lady frowned. Even her Pekingese lapdog seemed to whimper in distress.

Mortified, Clay's brother, who was twelve years older than Clay and who was in charge of Clay for the afternoon, leaned in to Clay's ear and whispered, "You can't say that – that's a bad word."

Clay looked at his brother in confusion. "Why? What did it do?"

Everybody laughed. The mood in the elevator, er, elevated.

But that isn't the end of the story.

On the bus ride home, Clay's brother couldn't get Clay's question out of his head. What did bad words *do*? What made them bad?

Finally, he had an answer: "Bad words are bad because they make people feel bad. That's what they do."

Clay nodded. This made sense to him. "And good words make people feel good?"

"Right."

"And magic words make people feel magic?"

Clay's brother hesitated. He was an amateur magician and said magic words all the time – mostly while practising tricks on Clay – but he'd never thought

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* Q: What do you call a dentist who hands out lollipops?
  A: A very shrewd businessman.
** Why do we use random typographical symbols to represent expletives? How the *&%*^#$ should I know? I do know, however, that these symbols are called GRAWLIXES. (For more on grawlixes, see the appendix at the back of this book.)

about them in this particular way. "Um, I guess. How 'bout that?"

"Accadabba!" said Clay, giggling. "Shakazam!"

Sometimes, between siblings or close friends, words take on meanings that can't easily be explained to other people. They become like inside jokes – inside words, as it were. After the elevator episode, *bad word* became Clay and his brother's inside word for *magic word*. Also for *code word* and for *password* and for any other word that had some unique power or significance. For any word that *did* something.

"Can you think of a bad word for me?" Clay's brother would ask before making a coin disappear behind his hand or before pulling a scarf out of Clay's ear.

"What's the bad word?" Clay would demand, blocking his brother's access to the refrigerator or bathroom.

As Clay grew older and became more and more adept at magic tricks himself (possibly more adept than his brother, although please don't tell anyone I said so), *bad word* maintained its special meaning.

"Hey, bad man, what's the bad word?" they would ask each other in greeting.

When they left coded messages for each other, they would leave hints about the bad word needed to decode the message.

When they did magic shows for their parents or friends, they called themselves the Bad Brothers.

Bad was their bond.

Then, around the time Clay turned eleven, his brother pulled off the biggest, baddest magic trick of all: he disappeared, with little warning and no explanation.

That was almost two years ago. And still Clay would sometimes wonder what he had done to drive his brother away. What had he said? What bad word had he uttered without knowing it?

And what bad magic would make his brother come back?