

The Loophole

by Alison Rutstein

'Knock Knock!'

I quickly sit on my phone.

'How's the project going, Tali love?'

'Great thanks, Mum. Did you know that some snakes are born with two heads!?'

'That's fascinating, Tali. Finish up please, dinner's almost ready.'

Phew! I think I got away with it. Mum thinks I'm doing research for a school project. I *am* doing research, but not for school. I'm trying to find a loophole. That's when you find a way to get around something, so you don't get in trouble.

It all started when my cousin, Noah, got a pet rabbit last month. Now, my phone constantly pings with all the photos and videos of Winston he sends me. Winston is off-the-charts cute. Even when doing something really ordinary, like eating cauliflower stalks, he does it in the most adorable way.

So then, I dove down the rabbit hole of rabbit videos. There are entire YouTube channels devoted to rabbits; rabbits in fancy dress, show-jumping rabbits, even rabbits driving little rabbit-sized motor cars!

But Noah lives in Melbourne, where rabbit-loving children are free to buy bunnies, whenever they want. Whereas I live in Queensland, where rabbits are considered public enemy number one, well, a pest species anyway. So, you are *definitely not* allowed to own one.

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Mum doesn't understand why I'm so devastated. Even though she had a pet rabbit as a child, who lived in a hutch in her back garden. But I want an indoors rabbit, like Winston - he's fully house-trained and even sleeps in Noah's bed! (although I don't think Auntie Sarah knows). I would *never* complain about going to bed if I had a rabbit.

Mum says we already have too many pets. She means our three chickens. We hatched them from eggs during lockdown. Leia's my favourite, she jumps onto my lap when I call her and likes to bury her head under my armpit. But it's not the same at all - you can't house-train a chicken and you definitely can't snuggle up with a chicken at bedtime.

So that's why I'm looking up loopholes. I thought about encouraging Mum to move to Melbourne, but she always complains it's too cold whenever we visit Auntie Sarah. Anyway, I don't want to change schools - I'd miss my best friend, Abby. Also, I think I've got a really good chance of scoring the lead role of Pirate Snowbeard in this year's school play.

I've found it. The loophole! I got the idea from Abby's birthday party on Saturday. Her mum hired a magician, a proper one, not one of those lame ones who stuffs hankies up their sleeves and has a comedy droopy wand. And guess what? She pulled a rabbit out of a hat! A real-live rabbit! My eyes almost did that cartoon thing of popping out of my head.

I was so excited that, straight after cake, I raced home to do some research. I didn't even collect my party bag. And here's the loophole - you *can* own a rabbit in Queensland - *if* you have a magician's licence!

Yesss! I punch the air with excitement. And then, remember the teeny, tiny hitch that I am not a magician and therefore do not possess a magician's licence. I do actually know a pretty good card trick, which Gran once taught me, but that's not enough to call myself a magician ... Yet!

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At school the next day, I can't wait to tell Abby my idea, and because she's such a great best friend, she offers to lend me her magician's kit she bought with her Hanukkah money. It comes with a wand, cape and hat, so I will totally look the part too.

And then something else unbelievably exciting happens. In assembly, Mrs Silver makes an announcement. For the first-time ever, there's going to be an end of term talent show - Graceville's Got Talent! Abby and I grin at each other. 'Abracadabra,' she whispers.

Now, I have the perfect opportunity to prove my magicianship! And win the talent show!

Sadly, it's not proving that easy. I don't want to sound ungrateful, but the magic tricks turn out to be a little disappointing. After two hours, I've only just mastered the disappearing coin-in-handkerchief trick. It's not impressive. It's definitely *not* in the same league as sawing people in half or pulling rabbits out of hats, which, of course, I can't do ... Yet!

But when I empty the food scraps from dinner into the chicken coop, I have a brainwave.

What if I pull a *chicken* out of a hat?!

Instead of boring maths homework, I do some serious research. But it turns out my teacher is right. You can't get all the answers from Google. Three hours later, I still have no idea how to pull a chicken out of a hat.

Mum's always telling me, when things get tricky, I should think outside the box. Or outside the hat in this case! Pulling chickens out of hats may be overly ambitious. But what if Leia is my magician's *assistant* and I call her *Madame Leia!* - I won't risk sawing her in half, though.

I have four weeks until the talent show, so there's not a moment to lose. I'm still struggling with the magic tricks (Abby's kit is useless), so I start by working on the magician's *assistant*

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parts. I research chickens and I am amazed. It turns out that chickens are super-intelligent – they can do maths and solve puzzles, they have fantastic memories and can even play the piano! I feel terrible for underestimating them all this time. Soon, I have a long list of ideas for our act: jumping through hoops, running along tunnels, flying onto my shoulder, maybe even some dancing (we don't have a piano).

Every day after school, Leia and I work on our routine. Gradually, I make the hoop jumps higher, the tunnels longer, and I perfect my pirate voice as Leia flutters onto my shoulder (this will come in handy for the school play!). I'm grateful Mum signed me up for hip hop classes in Prep because I come up with an awesome dance routine and Leia slaloms in and out of my legs almost in time to the beat. She seems to have a real ear for music, so I have another brainwave of setting the whole routine to a rap/pop playlist.

With only days left until the show, I realise I've been so busy teaching Leia tricks, my show doesn't have any actual *magic* in it. Which kind of scuppers my original plan. But right now, I'm focussed on winning this talent show!

The big day's here and I'm feeling pretty wobbly about getting up in front of the whole school. I take long, deep breaths. Leia and I have been practising for weeks, we've got this. I check out the other competitors, I count ten singers, four dancers, two gymnasts, six recorder players, and I think Charlie Bennett is telling jokes. There is not a single other chicken! Excellent – our routine will be completely original.

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We're last on, so I watch all the other acts. As we get to recorder player number three, the audience are getting decidedly restless. People start to whisper, and Mrs. Silver has to remind everyone to be quiet.

Finally, it's our turn. We step on stage. I gulp as I look out at the sea of faces in the hall, most of whom are looking pretty bored. Not even watching the stage!

'Let's do this, Leia,' I whisper.

But, oh no, she's totally freaked out. I think she has stage fright! I pick Leia up and she buries her head under my armpit. Just then, Abby starts the music and Leia clucks loudly. That gets everyone's attention. Leia's whole body relaxes as she hears her favourite tune and her hours of training come back to her.

My act goes like a dream. Except for when Leia pooped on my shoulder, but everyone found that hilarious. The dancing was definitely the highlight. Leia handled the thunderous applause like a pro. I think she's a born performer, and I sigh with pride as we take a bow.

Then, Mrs. Silver announces the runners-up. I hold my breath. Two of the recorder players come on stage to receive their certificates.

'And the winner is ...' I squeeze Leia a bit too tightly and she squawks in protest.

'... Charlie Bennett!'

My heart sinks. All our hard work for nothing.

Then, Mrs Silver clears her throat.

'We have one more special prize – the Students' Choice Award. Which goes to ...'

Tali and her fabulous chicken, Madame Leia!'

I can't believe it! I won! *We* won! I give Leia a big kiss!

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And yes, I realise I'm not a magician, and I won't be able to get a rabbit. But I do have one very cool chicken.

I sent Noah the video.

Now, he wants a chicken too!