

## **6** Farley Drexel Meets Rat Face

In August, Turtle needed his yearly checkup and shots. Mom and Dad asked around and decided on The Ark, an animal hospital near the highway. To get there we drove through town, on a bridge over the lake where Alex and I dug worms, up a long hill, and all the way out to the traffic circle. It seemed to me they could have found some place closer.

Turtle always shakes when he goes to the vet's. I don't know how he knows he's going to get his shots, but he does. I tried talking to him softly, telling him it would only hurt for a second, but he whined and cowered in the corner anyway.

On the way back, we stopped off at Sandy's Bakery near the traffic circle. They make the best



brownies I've ever tasted, and without nuts. Mom is allergic to tree nuts, but not peanuts. Lucky for her she can still eat peanut butter. Without peanut butter, I might starve.

The week before school started, I had a lot of trouble falling asleep. It was too quiet in Princeton. I missed the sounds of the city. I tried not to think of my Kreskin's Crystal, sitting in its box, on the shelf in my closet. I tried counting sheep and reciting the alphabet backwards, instead. But when that didn't work, I just couldn't help myself. I jumped out of bed and got it. As I held it up, I imagined Kreskin himself standing at the foot of my bed chanting, "Sleep . . . sleep. . . ."

I woke up the next morning with my Kreskin's Crystal under me. I had a pain in my butt from sleeping on top of it. And I felt really guilty about having used it at all. I'd cheated on Jimmy Fargo. We'd made a deal, and I'd broken it. Some friend I was! I wanted to tell him that it was okay with me if he decided to use our rock. But Jimmy was in Vermont, with his mother, and they had no phone up there.

And I wasn't the only one who was having trouble sleeping.

"I can't sleep anymore," Fudge said, at breakfast.

"Why not?" Dad asked.

"I'm afraid."



"Of what?" Dad said.

"Monsters!"

"There are no monsters," Dad told him.

"How do you know?"

"Because I do," Dad said, spreading strawberry jam on his toast.

"Did you learn it at college?" Fudge asked, making mush out of his cereal.

"No."

"Then where did you learn it?" Fudge asked.

Dad sipped his coffee. Then he said, "I uh . . . learned it in high school."

"Come on, Dad," I said, laughing.

Dad gave me a look that let me know I should keep quiet. I wondered if he and Mom had told me ridiculous things like that when I was a little kid. And if I'd believed them.

"I'm still afraid," Fudge said. "I want to sleep in Pee-tah's room."

"No way," I said. "There is no way I'm going to have him in my room. He talks in his sleep."

"Then I'll sleep with Mommy," Fudge announced.

My mother, who had been reading the morning paper, looked up. "What?" she asked.

"From now on I'm sleeping with you," Fudge said.

"You have your own room, Fudgie," Mom told him, "with your own big-boy bed."



"I don't want my own room!" he shouted. "I want to share. Sharing is better. You always say so!"

Mom sighed. "That's different," she said. "Sharing is for toys and cookies and . . ."

"Maybe if Turtle sleeps with Fudge . . ." Dad began.

But I didn't wait for him to finish. "Hey, wait a minute . . . Turtle is *my* dog . . . remember?"

"But you're willing to share him, aren't you, Peter?" Dad asked.

"Not at night. He sleeps with me!"

Fudge started to cry. "Nobody cares about Fudgie. Nobody cares if the monsters eat him up!"

"Nobody's going to eat you up," Mom said.

"How do you know?" Fudge asked.

"Because I do, that's how," Mom said.

"Did you learn it in high school?"

"Uh . . . excuse me," I said, getting up from the table. "But this is where I came in."

Fudge solved his problem by himself. Every night, after the rest of the family had gone to sleep, Fudge dragged his Snoopy sleeping bag down the hall and parked himself in front of Mom and Dad's bedroom, where he slept.

And Mom and Dad didn't do a thing about it. They'd just get up in the morning and step right over him. They told each other it was just another phase. That he'd get over it. If Fudge wasn't going through



one phase, he was going through another. I couldn't help thinking that one of these days Tootsie would be going through phases too. The way it looked now, there might be no end.

On the day before school started, Alex and I rode our bikes to the shopping center to buy our school supplies. That reminded me of Jimmy Fargo and how we always used to go shopping for school supplies together. I felt really lonely, thinking about Jimmy, and scared about what school would be like here. Maybe all the kids would hate me. Maybe I'd hate them. Maybe we'd hate each other. Maybe I'd get a dumb teacher. Dumb teachers are the worst. I should know. I had one in third grade.

That night I didn't even try to get to sleep without my Kreskin's Crystal. Even so, I woke up about a million times during the night.

The next morning, I asked Mom how she expected me to walk Fudge to school and still ride my bike with Alex. Because Alex told me that all the kids in Princeton ride bikes to school.

"Maybe you could ride slowly and Fudge could walk beside you," she said.

"Come on, Mom!"

"Well, maybe you could walk him until he knows the way by himself."



"That might take all year," I said. "Besides, I want to go to school with Alex."

"Look, Peter . . . how about if you just walk him the first week and then we'll see what happens?"

"I don't think you understand, Mom . . . sixth graders don't walk kindergarten babies to school at all."

"And I don't think *you* understand how disappointed Fudgie's going to be," Mom said, slamming the refrigerator door. "But if that's the way you feel about it, I'll take him myself!"

"Good idea," I told her.

But Fudge, who'd been listening behind the kitchen door, shouted, "No! I want to go to school with Pee-tah. You promised," he told Mom. "You promised!"

Mom looked at me, as if to say "You see?"

"Oh, all right," I said. "I'll ride and you can follow me."

"I'll ride, too."

"You don't have a bike."

"I have a Toddle-Bike."

"You can't ride a Toddle-Bike to school."

"Why not?"

"Because you can't. Now, hurry up. I don't want to be late on the first day."

Alex was waiting for me outside. We headed for school. Fudge tried hard to keep up with us, running



alongside our bikes, panting all the way. We were going really slow, but still, he couldn't make it. I felt sorry for the kid. It wasn't his fault he was just a kindergarten baby. So I scooped him up and sat him on the crossbar of my bicycle, even though my parents have warned me a million times never to do that. I think they once knew someone who smashed his head open that way. But what they didn't know wouldn't hurt them. Besides, the school wasn't that far. And Fudge really liked riding on my bar. He waved to everybody on the street. "I'm starting kindergarten today," he sang.

Alex, who had no brothers or sisters, laughed.

When we got to school, I took Fudge to Mrs. Hildebrandt's kindergarten and handed her Fudge's registration card. Then I went upstairs with Alex to Mr. Bogner's sixth grade. All the kids were singing,

*Oh who owns the school?*

*Oh who owns the school?*

*Oh who owns the school?*

*the people saaaayyyy. . . .*

*Oh we own the school*

*Oh we own the school*

*'Cause we are sixth*

*graaaaders today!*



I sat down at a desk next to Alex. On my other side was a girl, about three heads taller than me, with long, tangled brown hair.

Mr. Bogner wasn't dumb. I could tell right off. I can always tell. First he told us about his summer. He was an Outward Bound instructor in Colorado. He taught college kids to climb mountains. Then we told him what we did over the summer. I would have liked mine to sound more exciting. I would have liked to tell the class—*"This summer I sailed the Atlantic with just my dog, Turtle, and my friend Jimmy Fargo. Oh sure, we had some rough times but we made it across."* Except that Alex was sitting right there and he knew the truth.

There were three new kids in our class. I was the only one from New York. Another boy, Harvey, was from Pennsylvania, and a girl, Martha, was from Minnesota.

Mr. Bogner told us about some of the projects we'd be working on during the year, like building a Viking ship and studying our home state of New Jersey. I wanted to tell him that it wasn't my home state and it never would be, but before I had a chance, Martha said, "Excuse me, Mr. Bogner, but my home state is Minnesota. So will I be studying that, while the rest of the class does New Jersey?"



"No, Martha," Mr. Bogner said. "As long as you're living here, you can consider New Jersey your home state."

"But Mr. Bogner . . ." Martha said.

"Why don't you see me about it after class?" Mr. Bogner said. And he didn't sound angry or anything.

Later, I found out the girl who was sitting next to me, the tall one with the tangled hair, is named Joanne McFadden. I was going to ask her where she lived, when a message came over the intercom. "Good morning, Mr. Bogner . . . would you send Peter Hatcher to Mr. Green's office, please?"

"Right away," Mr. Bogner answered.

"Thank yooooooooou."

Mr. Green was the principal. What did he want with me?

Joanne McFadden whispered, "What'd you do?"

"I don't know," I said, feeling my face turn red.

"Do you know where Mr. Green's office is?" Mr. Bogner asked.

"I'll find it," I said.

"Don't look so worried, Peter," Mr. Bogner said. "You can't be in that much trouble . . . it's only the first day of school."

The whole class laughed, except Joanne McFadden. She just gave me a kind of shy smile.



*It probably has something to do with registration, I thought, on my way to the office. I'll bet my mother didn't fill out the part of the registration card, about who to call in case of emergency if the parents can't be reached. She forgets that almost every year. Or maybe the principal likes to introduce himself personally to all the new students. But then, why wouldn't he have asked for Harvey too? And Martha, from Minnesota? Because he calls them to his office in alphabetical order, I told myself, not knowing either Harvey's or Martha's last names. And if he started with the A's early this morning, he'd probably be up to the H's now. Yes, that made sense.*

I found Mr. Green's office. "I'm Peter Hatcher," I told his secretary.

"Go right in," she said. "He's expecting you."

"You wanted to meet me?" I said to Mr. Green. "I mean . . . see me?"

"Hello, Peter." Mr. Green looked something like my uncle, but my uncle is clean-shaven and Mr. Green had a moustache. Now that my father is growing a beard, I'm more aware of these things. "We're having a bit of a problem with your brother," Mr. Green said.

*Oh, so that was it. I should have known!*

"We've tried to get your mother or father on the phone, but there's no answer, so we were hoping you'd be willing to help us."



"What'd he do this time?" I asked.

"A number of things," Mr. Green said. "Come on down to the kindergarten . . . I'll show you."

We walked down the hall together.

All the kindergarten babies were busy. Some were building with blocks, others were painting, and a group was playing house in the corner. It was just the way I remembered kindergarten. But I didn't see Fudge anywhere.

"Oh, Mr. Green," Mrs. Hildebrandt said, limping over to us. "I'm so glad you're here. I can't do a thing with him. He still refuses to come down."

I looked up. Fudge was perched on top of the cabinets that were on top of the cubbies. He was stretched out, lying across the top, just inches from the ceiling.

"Hi, Pee-tah," he called, waving.

"What are you doing up there?" I said.

"Resting."

"Come on down!"

"No. I don't like this school. I quit!"

"You can't quit," Mr. Green said.

"Why not?" Fudge asked.

"Because going to school is your job," Mr. Green said. "Otherwise, what will you be when you grow up?"

"A bird!" Fudge told him.

Mr. Green laughed. "Creative, isn't he?"



"I wouldn't necessarily call it that," Mrs. Hildebrandt said.

"Why'd he climb up there in the first place?" I asked.

"Well," Mrs. Hildebrandt said, "*that* is a long story."

"Because she's mean!" Fudge called. "*M-e-a-n.*"

"Now, Mr. Green," Mrs. Hildebrandt said, "you've known me for a long time . . . and I ask you . . . have I ever been mean to a child . . . knowingly, consciously, intentionally mean? Especially on the first day of school?"

"She wouldn't call me *Fudge*," Fudge said. "That's why I had to kick her!"

"He kicked you?" I asked Mrs. Hildebrandt.

She held up her skirt and showed me her bruised shin. "And I don't mind telling you," she said, "that I was in great pain. I almost passed out . . . right in front of the children."

"Is that when he climbed to the top of the cabinets?" I asked.

"That is correct."

"Because she wouldn't call me *Fudge*," Fudge said again.

"It's not a proper name," Mrs. Hildebrandt said. "And it's not as if he hasn't got a proper name. He has."



*Farley Drexel Hatcher*. I told him that I would call him Farley . . . or I would call him Drexel . . . or I would call him F. D."

"But she wouldn't call me *Fudge*!"

All the little kids turned around, and suddenly the room was very quiet.

"That's right," Mrs. Hildebrandt said. "Fudge is a good name for candy. It is not a good name for a boy."

"I told you, I'm a bird," Fudge shouted.

"There is something very definitely wrong with that child," Mrs. Hildebrandt said.

"There's nothing wrong with him!" I said. "My mother calls him Fudge. My father calls him Fudge. My grandmother calls him Fudge. His friends call him Fudge. My friends call him Fudge. I call him Fudge. He calls himself Fudge. . . ."

"Yes, we get the picture," Mr. Green said.

"I can't imagine a parent actually deciding to call a child Fudge," Mrs. Hildebrandt said.

"You don't know my parents," I told her.

"Well, that's true, but . . ."

"I think what we have here is a basic personality conflict," Mr. Green said. "So I suggest that we transfer Fudge to Ms. Ziff's kindergarten."

"Splendid idea!" Mrs. Hildebrandt said. "The sooner, the better."



"You can come down now," I told Fudge. "You're going into the other kindergarten."

"Will the teacher call me Fudge?" he asked.

"As long as you want her to," Mr. Green said.

"And will she let me use the round blocks?"

Mr. Green looked at Mrs. Hildebrandt.

"I never let them use the round blocks on the first day. It's one of my rules."

"You can't build anything good without the round blocks," Fudge said.

"We'll ask Ms. Ziff," Mr. Green told Fudge. "But we do have rules here . . . and you will have to obey them."

"As long as I can use the round blocks," Fudge said.

Mr. Green loosened his shirt collar and wiped off his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Hurry up," I said to Fudge. "I'm missing important things upstairs."

"Like what?"

"Never mind . . . just get down."

Fudge climbed down to the top of the cubbies, and Mr. Green reached up and lifted him the rest of the way down.

"Good-bye, Farley Drexel," Mrs. Hildebrandt said.

"Good-bye, Rat Face," Fudge said to her.

I gave him an elbow and whispered, "You don't go around calling teachers Rat Face."



"Not even if they have one?" he asked.

"Not even then," I said.

Mr. Green and I took Fudge next door, to Ms. Ziff's kindergarten. She was reading *Arthur the Anteater* to the kids. I could tell that Fudge was impressed. "I know that story," he said. "Arthur doesn't like to eat red ants."

Mr. Green handed Ms. Ziff Fudge's registration card. "His name is Farley Drexel," Mr. Green said. "But everybody calls him Fudge."

Ms. Ziff smiled at Fudge. "And I'll bet you're as sweet as your name," she said.

"I am," Fudge agreed.

"Just ask Mrs. Hildebrandt," I said to myself.

My brother's school career had begun.