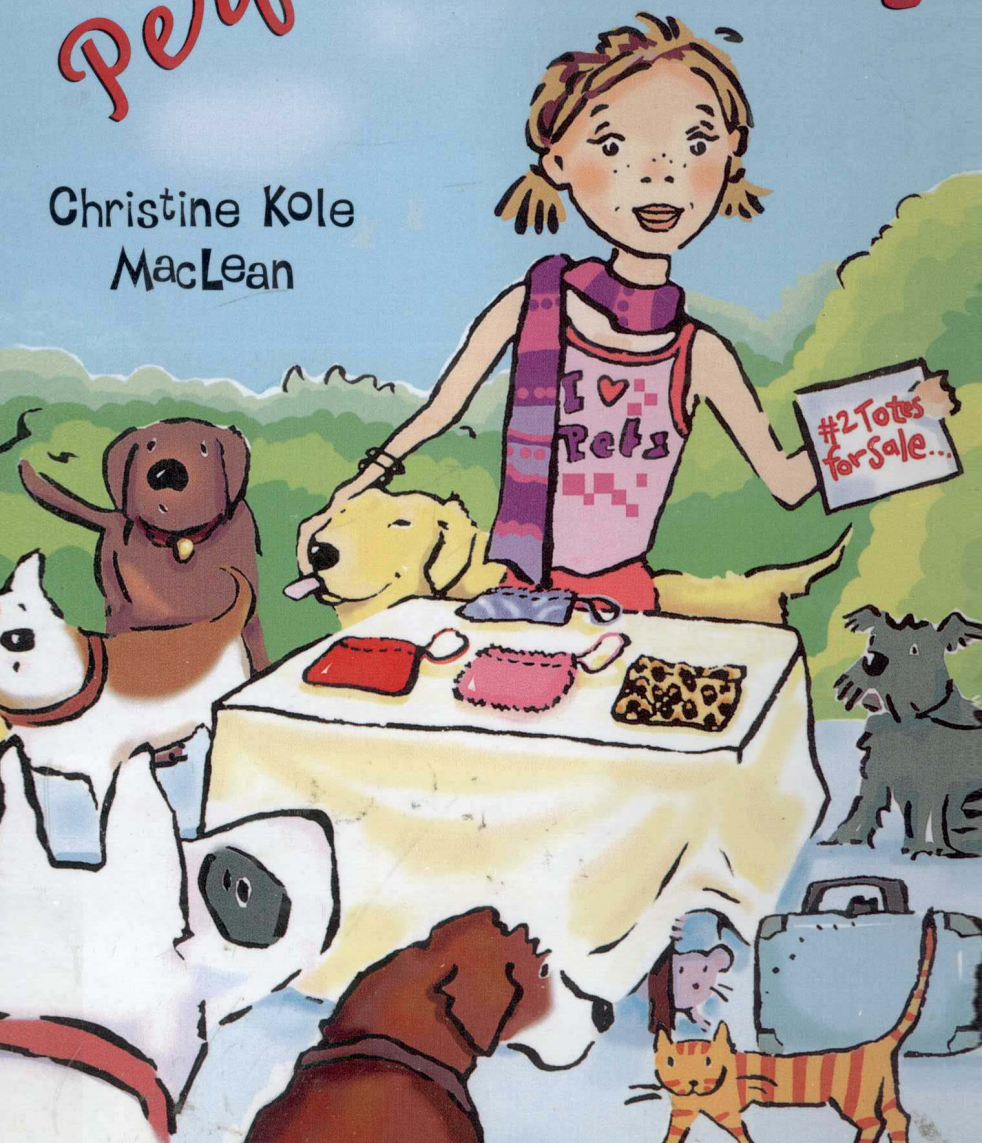


Mary Margaret

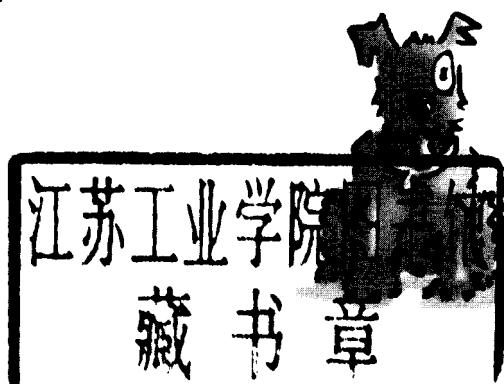
and the

Perfect Pet Plan

Christine Kole
MacLean



Mary Margaret *and the* Perfect Pet Plan



by Christine Kote MacLean



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To Brad (ahh-choo!), with love and gratitude

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Finally, I am grateful to Wendie Gerber for marching up to me on the Daisy Brook Elementary School playground on the first day of school and asking me my name. When I told her, she replied:

*Christopher Columbus,
What do you think of that?
A big fat lady
Sat upon my hat.
My hat was broke,
And that's no joke!*

She then declared, "Now we're friends." And so we were. And so we always will be.

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1. Lester on the Loose



The hole in the cardboard box is a bad sign. It looks teeny from my doorway, where I'm standing. But the closer I get to the box, the bigger that hole looks. By the time I'm halfway across the room, I know I'm too late. I know there's a rat loose somewhere in my house.

I've only known Lester for an hour, but if he chewed his way out of the box already, he must be the smartest rat in the world. My dad would say he's an overachiever. My mom would say . . . My mom would say, "WHAT? There's a WHAT loose in my house?" She is the boss of our house. She is also forty-one years old and pregnant, which means that she has not been in the best mood lately.

It's not my fault—about Lester, I mean. (Although her bad mood isn't my fault, either.) I was coming home from the park, making up poems.

Sidewalk, sidewalk,

Don't you wish that you could talk?

Dogs poop on you.

Don't they know about the loo?

My brother, JT, told me *loo* is the way they say *bathroom* in England.

Anyway, I had just finished that poem and was munching some raisins when I saw a pinkish rock that was kind of sparkly. I squatted down to look at it and suddenly Lester was there, right by the rock. I didn't move. He looked up at me with those tiny red eyes and twitching whiskers and I loved him right then. He sat up, sniffed at the last few raisins in my hand, then crawled into my palm and started chowing down. "You sure are a good eater," I told him. I looked around for his owner, but I didn't see anybody. So I brought him home and put him in a cardboard box until I could think of what to do with him.

No, my mom is not going to like this at all. She'll say, "Why, Mary Margaret? *Why* did you bring a rat into my house? I don't care if he is tame!"

And I'll say, "I couldn't just leave him there!"

Then she'll say, "That's not a very good reason."

My mother always wants a good reason for everything. I could be attacked by a lion on the sidewalk and yell "HELP!" in my scarest voice. And I bet my mother would say, "Give me one good reason." I'm not kidding.

It seems like there's only one reason that my mom thinks is good, and that is "I think I have to throw up." I learned that last summer on the way home from the fair.

My mother isn't big on junk food, so I don't get it very often. But she was in a really good mood that day because she had just quit her job to start her own company. She says that means that now she's not only our boss, but also her own boss. She works from home. The good news about that is I get to see her more, but the bad news is I have to be quiet when she's on the phone, which is all the time.

Anyway, quitting her job put her in such a good mood that she let me buy orange soda, a corn dog, cheesy fries, and cotton candy. For a while I was in heaven! I ate every bit of everything, even though I was full after the corn dog and really full after the cheesy fries. But I went ahead and ate the cotton candy because cotton candy disappears in your spit and never makes it to your stomach at all, so there's always room for cotton candy.

After that we piled into the minivan. I sat in the way back, where it's bumpiest, and JT and his best friend, Duff, sat in the bucket seats in front of me. We took a different road home than we usually do, and on the way we went past some horses. "Can we stop?" I asked, because I always ask whenever we see horses. I like to kiss their soft noses, when they let me.

Mom was driving, like she always does. Everyone in the family knows that she's a better driver than my dad—even my dad. "I'm sorry, but no," she said.

The road was curvy like a snake and hilly like a caravan of camel humps. The car was going up and down and back and forth. Up and down. Back and forth. Up. Down. Back.

Forth. Then my stomach went up. It stayed there, but the car went down.

“Can we stop?” I asked again.

“I don’t see any horses,” my mom said to my dad. “Do you see horses?”

“No,” he said.

That’s because there weren’t any horses. I didn’t feel good. I felt really sick, actually, like I was going to throw up. I leaned forward so I could tell Mom and Dad why I wanted to pull over, but I don’t think leaning forward was a good idea because right then I threw up. The good news is I did not throw up on my new leopard-print shorts or my favorite red stretchy shirt with the purple squares. I didn’t even throw up on Gary, the toy dinosaur I’ve had forever. The bad news is I threw up all over the cyber-ranger that JT had won at the fair. It took him about a bazillion tries and his whole allowance plus some of Duff’s money to win it. For a minute it looked like he was going to get mad, but then he called it a barf-ranger and laughed.

That is how I know “I have to throw up” is a good reason, and next time that I have to throw up I should say so—right away. When I was little, “I have to go to the bathroom” was a good reason, but it’s not anymore.

I wish I could get my mom to understand about this. What I mean is, I didn’t mean to bring a rat home. Lester asked me to bring him home—maybe not with words, but he *did* ask—and I couldn’t just leave him there. And it’s not my fault he chewed his way out of the box. He did that be-

cause he's the smartest and strongest rat in the world—and he got that way before I even met him. So none of this is exactly my fault. But there's a good chance Mom won't have the same opinion.

That's why I need to find Lester in the immediate future. I drop to my knees and scramble around my room. I think I see him under the bed, but it turns out to be wadded-up underwear (dirty or clean? Can't tell, don't care) next to a balled-up sock, plus some dust. He's not in the closet or under my pile of dirty clothes or even under my pile of clean clothes.

I try to do what my mom is always telling me to do—put myself in other people's shoes. I close my eyes and think, If I were the world's smartest rat, where would I hide? Then I know! There's still some old butterscotch candies in the Aztec sun piñata that I made for our spring festival, and that's where I would be if I were the world's smartest rat. But either he's not the world's smartest rat or I'm not that good at putting myself into a rat's shoes, because he's not there. I can't find him anywhere.

Unfortunately, I'm pretty sure my mom will be able to. Even when nobody else in the family can find something, she can—even in my messy room. She's scary that way, like a snake that can find its prey by sticking out its tongue. I've watched her to try to see how she does it, and I haven't been able to figure it out. She doesn't use her tongue that I can see, but she has her ways.

"Tch-tch-tch," I say, patting the floor. "Here, boy, here,

boy. Things will be better for you if I find you before my mother does." But either he's not in my room, or he isn't trained to come when he's called. I'll have to take care of that when I find him.

I run out of my room, past JT's room, where JT and Duff are doing homework. When I get to the phone at the end of the hall, I dial my new friend Andy's number.

"Hey, Andy," I say, trying to sound normal. "This is Mary Margaret. Remember? From yesterday? Want to come over?"

"I'd like to," says Andy. "But I'm kind of busy."

"With what?"

"First I was practicing my violin, but right now I'm organizing my sheet music. It got all mixed up during the move."

Organizing music? I guess I still have a lot to learn about Andy. I'd like to yell, "SHEET MUSIC? WHO CARES ABOUT SHEET MUSIC! I'VE GOT A RAT LOOSE HERE!" But JT's door is open so I'm trying to be normal, pretending like I'm having a boring conversation with Andy. "Really?"

JT comes out of his room, walking with one arm crooked out in front of him like a big Z and the other arm crooked out behind him. He's trying to walk like an Egyptian. Don't ask me why. He's just weird sometimes. He looks at me out of the corner of his eye. I fake a smile but only because I want him to G.A., which is code for *go away*. He does, down the hall toward the bathroom.

"Yeah. I need to do that before I go meet my new violin teacher in a few minutes."

"Umm-hmm." I listen for the click of the lock on the bathroom door. When I hear it, I cup my hand over my mouth and the receiver. "Look," I say quietly. "You want to be best friends, right?"

"I don't know. I guess."

"Then you need to come NOW. Because that's what best friends do."

"Why now?"

"Because there's a *rat* on the *run* here and I need your help finding it."

"A rat? That's dangerous. You better tell your parents so they can set a trap or put out poison or something."

"No! He's a tame rat."

"How do you know?"

"Because he followed me home from the park."

"Rats don't follow people."

"That's what I mean! He's a tame rat. He wanted me to pick him up."

"Who does it belong to?"

"I don't know. And it's not an *it*. It's a *him*."

"Have you told your mom?"

I slump against the wall. "No. I was going to ask if I could have a pet first."

"I didn't know you wanted a pet."

"Well, I do. And it was perfect that Lester followed me home."

"The rat *and* a guy named Lester followed you home?"

"No! The rat's name is Lester."

"How do you know?"

I clunk my forehead against the wall. "Because I named him Lester!" I say, forgetting to be quiet right then.

I hear the floorboard squeak behind me. "Who's Lester?" asks JT.

I jerk my head up. "Oh . . . uh . . . just a pretend friend!" I say.

"I should have guessed, Imaginary Mary," he says.

Normally I would shoot back, "My name is *Mary Margaret*." And normally he would say what he always says, "That's an awfully big name. You have to grow into a name like that." But I just give a little pretend laugh so he'll leave me alone and go back to his room, which he does.

Andy says, "If I was you, I never would have let that rat in the house."

"But you're not me."

"That's for sure. I wouldn't be you if you gave me all the candy in the world. Or for all the money in the world. Or even for—"

"Okay, okay!" I interrupt. "You don't want to be me."

"You can say that again."

"You don't have to be me! Just come over and help me."

"I can't."

"Because of your dumb sheet music?"

"No. I told you. Because I have to meet my new violin teacher. But even if I didn't, I couldn't come."

“Why not?”

“For one thing, my mom wouldn’t let me. Rats have too many germs. And for another thing . . .”

“What?”

“I wouldn’t know what tie to wear.”