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opening extract from

Sock

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Registration

Classroom plus thirty pupils minus teacher equals NOISE. At least, that was the way the maths worked in most of the schools Sara Knot had attended.

Freekham High, she reflected, was *not* most schools.

This morning there was no laughter, no chatter, no running about or paper fights. Nothing. The class had gathered in awed silence around quiet, freckle-faced Ginger Mutton.

It was weird, this business about Ginger. If Sara was feeling unkind—which she wasn't usually—she might say that Ginger was a bit of a dweeb. Small and a bit pathetic-looking, Ginger always slouched because her uniform was too small for her. Her copper-bright hair was lank, and her fringe flopped down over a tatty headband. She wore deeply uncool chunky-frame

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glasses that magnified her eyes to the size of saucers.

In any other school, Ginger would be the kind to sit quietly at the back in a little world of her own, underachieving and overlooked.

But, again, Freekham High was *not* like any other school.

And Ginger was not like any ordinary dweeb.

She had found a secret weapon. And she'd used it to force her way into the hottest cliques in school.

Right now Ginger sat cross-legged on a table, staring around at her enthralled classmates. It was only really Sara and her best mate, Memphis Ball, who were hanging back.

'I must concentrate,' Ginger announced in a spooky whisper, swaying her head from side to side. 'Mystic messages are starting to form . . . '

Excited mutterings ran through the classroom.

'Hurry up,' someone hissed. 'Mr Penter will be back in a minute to take the register!'

'Yeah, come on, Mutton!'

Ginger glanced at the clock above the chalkboard. 'It is not *I* who may speak the messages,' she reminded them, raising her right hand in the air. 'It is . . . Big Stitch!'

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'Her *sock*,' said Sara, her long blonde hair trailing about her shoulders as she shook her head despairingly. 'Look at her, Memphis! Ginger's got practically the whole class eating out of her hand—because she's wearing a sock on it!'

'Eeuw!' Memphis pulled a face. 'Eating out of a sock, nice thought!' A trim, wiry girl with a shaved head and amazing green eyes, Memphis was kind of kooky but cool. She seemed to know almost everyone in the school, which made her an expert on who was hot and who was not. This was handy for a new girl like Sara, who'd only started at Freekham two weeks ago.

Ginger Mutton had gone from zero to hero in the same stretch of time. And it was all thanks to Big Stitch, the sock puppet she brandished on her right hand—a woolly, mad-looking bundle of patches and stripes. Two buttons, one bigger than the other, formed its eyes. An embroidered square of material made the nose. A finger snipped from a glove was poked inside its 'mouth' to make a lolling tongue.

'The mists are beginning to clear,' Ginger intoned. 'Who will dare to bare their soul to his sole?'

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'Me!' 'I will!' The cries rose up. 'Speak to us, great sock!'

Sara saw that only Thomas Doughty was taking no notice. Broad, blond and bushy eyebrowed, he sat with his back to the throng.

'Doubting Thomas is the biggest sceptic in school,' Memphis observed. 'He doesn't believe in anything unless it involves sports—a hand-stitched sock doesn't stand a chance!'

But Thomas was in the minority. Big Stitch held the rest of the class in the palm of his . . . Well. In the sole of his foot, anyway.

Here was a piece of footwear with special talents.

According to Ginger, Big Stitch could tell the future.

At first, people had laughed at this funny little girl running around making predictions. They would cruelly mock the sock and tell her to get lost.

But then the predictions started to come true.

'Now I shall call upon the sock of ages,' said Ginger in a high wavery voice. 'I shall ask him to tell us that which is yet to be . . . '

'Well, *I'm* yet to be convinced,' said Sara flatly.

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'You have to admit,' said Memphis, 'that sock's got a good track record. It predicted that Cassie Shaw would find happiness with a pigeon, and everyone laughed. But then John Pidgin in the Lower Sixth asked her out the next day! Now they're in *lurrrve*.'

'Could be total coincidence,' Sara argued.

'But Ginger's brought five cool couples together in the last ten days!'

'They probably had the hots for each other anyway.'

'OK, then,' Memphis argued, 'what about when Big Stitch told Mrs Hurst's year ten netball team they'd enjoy a brief victory last Thursday?'

'They lost!'

'True. But to cheer them up afterwards, the Games teacher told them they could wear their own knickers during matches from now on instead of those nasty scratchy PE ones! That's a *briefs* victory, if nothing else! And what about—'

She broke off as Ginger cried out: 'I urge you to speak to us now, Big Stitch, as I recite the rhyme of time!'

The sock was swaying madly like a loopy cobra getting ready to strike.

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'Here we go,' Memphis murmured. 'She's summoning the sock spirit!'

While the puppet fixed the audience with its wonky stare, Ginger began to chant:

'Big Stitch, Big Stitch, soft, snug, and
and wool-rich,
Show us a future idyllic.
Your toe's in the know and your heel
shall reveal
Even though ten per cent is acrylic!'

The sock stiffened. Its mouth gaped open.

'Sam would be loving this,' hissed Sara. 'Wonder where he is?'

Memphis shrugged. 'Late again. Third time this week.'

'And it's only Wednesday.' Sara smiled.

Thinking of Sam Innocent usually made her smile. He was infuriating in many ways—cheeky, stubborn, refusing to take anything too seriously—but the two of them shared a weird kind of bond.

They had both been born at the same time on the very same day: February 29th. Weird.

Both had parents with low boredom thresholds, so they'd each spent most of their thirteen years

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moving house and switching school. Three times last year, and twice more since. *Spooky* weird.

And they'd both started at Freekham High on the very same day in the middle of May—just in time to get dragged into a bizarre mystery involving a lot of severed thumbs and fingers. *GROSS!*

It was as if they were living magnets attracting weird stuff or something.

Or maybe it was something about Freekham High itself . . .

A high-pitched squawk seemed to burst from Big Stitch.

'I have a message for Thomas Doughty!' the sock said. Ginger was a good ventriloquist. Only if you looked closely could you see her lips moving.

Thomas looked back over his shoulder. 'Give it a rest, Mutton!'

'Misfortune is coming your way,' said the sock in its funny voice. 'Beware the full moon, Thomas! Beware the fall of the full moon!'

'Yeah, right,' said Thomas. 'That's a talking sock and you're a ginger. Why should I believe either of you?'

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The sock shook as if it was laughing. 'I was right before, wasn't I?'

'That's true,' said Memphis. 'It said Thomas would be lucky in love . . . '

'Yeah, I know—he found a fiver under his desk when we looked at *Romeo and Juliet* in English,' said Sara. 'What does that prove?'

'Well, what about when Big Stitch warned him that trouble was afoot?' Memphis argued. 'It turned out to be a *left* foot—he lost one of his new trainers in the changing rooms! Hey, you should ask the sock about that bracelet you lost last week. You've looked everywhere and you can't find it.'

'Don't remind me. I think my dad accidentally threw it out with the garbage,' Sara grumbled. 'Memphis, are you trying to tell me you *really* believe in a soothsaying sock?'

She shrugged. 'I'm keeping an open mind. Since you and Sam showed up at Freekham, I'm ready to believe pretty much anything!'

'Where *is* Sam?' wondered Sara. 'He's *really* late this morning.'

'Hey, Stitch,' called Fido Tennant, cool kid in class with a thatch of brown hair and a winning

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smile. His real name was Dorian, so he found his nickname a big improvement. 'Tell me straight—am I going to win my races in Sports Day this afternoon?'

Sara listened in. She was running in the girls' hurdles and the 1500 metres herself, and Mrs Hurst the Games teacher said she was a strong contender to win. Even so, Sara didn't like to count her chickens before they hatched.

Ginger was giving nothing away. 'You know that Big Stitch will not answer direct questions,' she said. 'He only makes his own predictions.'

Fido shrugged. 'Well, I just thought that since he's a sock he might appreciate a question that involved running shoes.'

Big Stitch twitched on the end of Ginger's arm. 'I have a prediction to make about *you*, Fido,' it said in its strange, sockish manner. 'You will get your geography homework back today—'

'Duh!' said Thomas. 'What kind of prediction is that? We've got Geography second period, we'll *all* get our homework back!'

The sock shook its head sagely. 'But Fido will get a rubbish mark! The worst in the whole class!'

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At this, Fido frowned. 'But that essay was easy!'

'Ha, ha,' laughed Ruth 'Ruthless' Cook—to whom being mean came as easy as breathing. 'Serves you right, you swot.'

'Silence!' cried Big Stitch—and miraculously, Ruthless obeyed. 'Another message is coming to me from the future . . . An important message for . . . Vicki Starling!'

'For me?' gasped Vicki. 'Wow!'

Sara rolled her eyes at Memphis. Vicki was the crowned queen of the year's A-crowd. Her blue eyes, dimpled cheeks, and platinum blonde bunches were to die for—trouble was, she knew it. Her circle of prom queen wannabes—Denise, Elise, and Therese, the so-called Chic Clique—basked in Vicki's reflected glory, always trying to outdo each other in their quest to be her best buddy. Sara watched them now as they fell about gasping and giggling in frenzied excitement until the Sock shushed them sternly into silence.

Ginger glanced at her watch, and Sara saw that registration was almost over. Surely Penter would be here any time now?

'Vicki,' said the sock gravely, 'you are destined

to find true love with *the very next person to walk through the classroom door*!'

'Oh my God!' Vicki squealed, amid a bunch of ear-splitting shrieks from her clone club. 'Love! Can it be true?'

'Of course it can't be true,' sneered Doubting Thomas.

But the whole class fell silent in any case, eagerly watching the door. The clone club held its collective breath. Even cynical Sara couldn't tear her gaze away.

'Let's hope it's not Penter!' she whispered.

Memphis grinned. 'If it is, that's one sick sock!'

Then, suddenly, the door flew open.

And Sam Innocent came racing inside.

A giant gasp went up at the sight of him. Memphis and Sara swapped startled looks. Ginger looked pretty amazed too. She looked at the sock accusingly as if it had been holding out on her.

'Vicki, it's *Sam*!' cried Therese, as if no one had actually noticed.

'*Him*?' Vicki stared in disbelief.

'Gotta go,' squawked Big Stitch quickly, as Ginger unrolled the sock from her wrist.

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'Sorry I'm late, I . . . ' Sam tailed off as he took in the incredulous faces all staring his way. He'd been running—his freckled cheeks were flushed red, his dark spiky fringe plastered to his forehead with sweat. 'Where's Penter?' he panted. 'Did I rush all the way here for nothing?'

Vicki turned on Ginger. '*That* is meant to be my true love?'

Scandalized whispers started up around the class.

'Well played, mate!' called Fido, giving Sam a thumbs-up.

'Unlucky, Starling,' sniggered Ruthless Cook.

'What's going on?' said Sam. Then he noticed Ginger—or rather, the woollen bundle in her hand, and he groaned. 'Don't tell me that stupid sock has been reading the tea-leaves again.'

'Yep,' called Sara. 'And it says that you're going to be Vicki Starling's ickle darling!'

Sam's jaw dropped amid wolf-whistles and jeers and more laughter. Doubting Thomas shook his head as if it was all beneath him. Vicki's friends started queuing up to give Vicki wet little embraces.

But from the look of shock on Vicki's face,

Sara wasn't sure if they were congratulating her or giving her pity.

'Cheek of her!' complained Sara. 'Acting like Sam's way beneath her.'

Memphis raised an eyebrow. 'Jealous?'

'No way!' Sara protested, blushing. 'I'm just saying—'

But the next moment, the imposing figure of Mr Penter marched in and all chatter ceased. The class swiftly dispersed to their usual places around the room.

'I should hope so, too!' growled Penter. His hair had been carefully combed with obsessive neatness, but his red-rimmed eyes and patchy beard undid the good work; left him looking more like some clapped-out rabid animal in a wig. 'I've just been checking arrangements for this afternoon's Sports Day with Mrs Hurst. I think you should know that my form has come in the top three overall for each of the last ten years. And to ensure that this record shall continue, rest assured I shall be involving myself very closely.'

'Are *you* running in a race then, sir?' asked Fido innocently, to much laughter. It was the sort

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of dumb line that Sam might have come out with—but Sara could see he was too busy glaring at Ginger to be cheeky to anyone.

She also saw that Vicki Starling was watching him from across the classroom, thoughtfully.