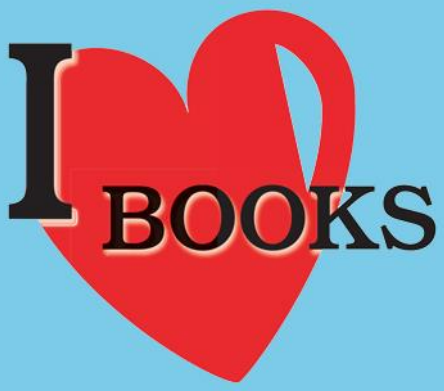


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extracts from

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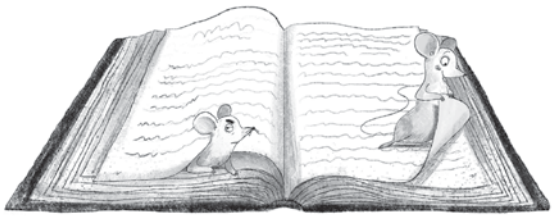
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For my dear friends Nick and Jon, with love
V. F.

For James, with all my love,
M.K.





Chapter One

LONG, LONG AGO, when trolls lurked in deep dark forests and ogres grumbled and mumbled beyond the distant hills, there was a small and ordinary village called Guttersbury. The villagers were ordinary too, and Aggie Lumpett, the only daughter of the road sweeper, was just as ordinary as anyone else … until her tenth birthday. On this particular birthday, Aggie's father gave her a book of fairy tales. By her eleventh birthday she knew every single one by heart, and by her twelfth she had decided what to do with her life. She was going to marry a prince and live happily ever after.

By her sixteenth birthday Aggie had realised this was unlikely to happen – princes did not come to Guttersbury looking for their brides. She gave up walking up and down the high street in her best white nightgown, read her stories all over again, and changed her plans. What she needed was a hero, a hero who would go adventuring and bring back everything necessary for Happily Ever After and Glorious Luxury. And, as she had seen no heroes wandering around Guttersbury in all her sixteen years, she would have to arrange this for herself. What she needed was the seventh son of a seventh son. The book said the seventh son of a seventh son was ALWAYS a hero; all Aggie had to do was find one.

Aggie Lumpett was a determined girl. She walked from village to village and farm to farm, and at last she found Garf Onion. Garf was the seventh son of a pig farmer and all he really cared about was pigs, but Aggie pursued him with such enthusiasm that they were married on her eighteenth birthday. They set up home in Pigsticking Farm, and many years later their seventh son finally arrived. Aggie was over the moon; at last she was the proud mother of the seventh son of a seventh son.

"He's going to be a hero," she announced, "so we're going to call him Magnifico." Garf Onion shrugged and went back to his pigs, leaving Aggie to begin the hero's training. She was mildly inconvenienced by the arrival of an eighth son a year later, but she put his cradle in the barn and told Yurt, the oldest boy, to look after him.

"Magnifico needs me," she explained. "He's going to go adventuring one day and bring back gold and jewels and a princess, and we're all going to live Happily Ever After in Glorious Luxury."

"OK, Ma." Yurt nodded. "What's the baby's name?"

Aggie Onion looked blank. "Don't ask me. I've already had to think of seven names. You think of something."

Yurt studied the baby. "Alfie," he said, and Alfie Onion it was.



Chapter Two

FOURTEEN YEARS LATER, an unusual smell of baking filled the kitchen at Pigsticking Farm.

"There!" Aggie Onion banged the plate down on the table. "Look at that!"

"Cake!" breathed Yurt. "WOW!"

"WOW!" echoed six of his seven younger brothers.

The cake was small, lumpy and burnt. All the same, it was a cake, and cakes were hardly ever seen in Pigsticking Farm. The wife of a pig farmer for eighteen years, Aggie was limited in her ingredients; sausages, pork pies, ham sandwiches and bacon butties were her usual offerings.

"And it's got icing!" Kip's eyes were very wide.

Whelk, Kip's twin, leant over the table to look. "Icing with writing on!"

Yurt spelt it out. "Good luck Magnifico!"

Mrs Onion wiped her hands on her greasy apron and smiled proudly. "Special day, today," she said. "Celebrating, that's what we're doing! Celebrating our happy hero."

Seven pairs of eyes turned to look. The hero was slumped at the head of the table. Under his substantial bottom was a well-worn velvet cushion, and a piece of tarnished tinsel was wound in and out of the chair back. The expression on his face suggested that he was far from happy.



Mrs Onion produced a knife and carefully cut the cake down the middle.

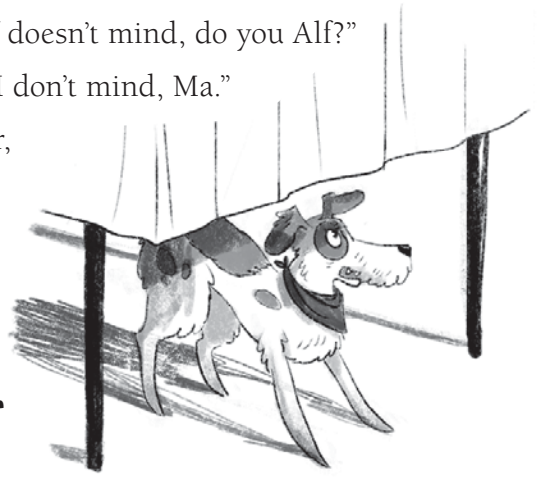
"This afternoon," she announced, "our Magnifico goes adventuring!"

She put half the cake on the hero's plate, then divided the other half into six slices.

"What about Alfie, Ma?" Yurt asked.

His mother looked annoyed. "Makes it awkward, seven slices," she said. "Alf doesn't mind, do you Alf?"

Alfie shook his head. "I don't mind, Ma."



Under the table Bowser, Alfie's dog, growled angrily. He'd seen Alfie being left out far too often, and he didn't think it was right. "**Unfair unfair unfairrrrrr,**" he muttered. Fortunately, Alfie was the only one who understood him.

"Ssh!" he warned. "I don't mind. Not really."

Once the cake had been eaten, Aggie stomped over

to a cupboard and flung open the door, revealing a large paper parcel tied up with string. "Been saving these for years and years," she said. "And now the time's come at last. Stand up, Magnifico, and we'll get you ready."

Magnifico stared at his mother. "What? What do you mean?"

Aggie beamed fondly at her favourite son. "You've got to be dressed right for adventuring. It's like I said, today's the day. It's the seventh day of the seventh month, and YOU, Magnifico Onion, are the seventh son of a seventh son. You're going off to win the hand of a lovely princess, and you'll soon be back home with a fortune. Pots and pots of gold – and we'll all be able to live in Glorious Luxury. Every single one of us!"

"Even Alfie?" Yurt asked.

Aggie nodded. "Even Alfie."

Alfie's eyes opened wide in astonishment. "So I won't have to sleep in the barn?"

The glowing vision of the future made Aggie unusually generous. "You'll have your very own bed," she promised.

"WOW!" Alfie jumped up and flung his arms round his mother. "Thank you, Ma!"

"It's Magnifico you'll have to thank for it," Aggie told him as she pushed him away, but her tone was gentler than usual. "He's the one who's going to make us all rich."

She turned to the cupboard and heaved the paper parcel off the shelf. Dumping it on the table among the crumbs, she undid the string with a flourish. "There we are! Hat and boots with silver buckles."



Magnifico looked uneasily at the boots. "They look a bit small, Ma."

"It's what a hero wears," Aggie said firmly. "It says so in my book." She was back in the cupboard. "And look here! A real hero's sword!"

Yurt sniggered. "That's a bread knife."

Aggie was not to be put off. "It's as good as a sword any day. Your dad spent an age sharpening it."

The hero blinked. "Why do I need a sword?"

Aggie Onion folded her arms. "Now, now,

Magnifico. I've read you those stories a hundred times. You've got to find your princess, and you might meet trolls or a couple of ogres along the way."

Magnifico was pale green. "But I don't want to meet any ogres. Or trolls. You never said anything about trolls, Ma! You said all I had to do was find a princess and marry her and then I'd be rich and have all the chocolate I ever wanted!"

His mother patted his trembling arm. "Don't you worry, pet," she soothed. "You're the seventh son of a seventh son. The trolls won't touch you. They'll run away as soon as they know who you are."

"But what if they eat me before I can tell them?" Magnifico was greener than ever. "They might be hiding behind a bush, and pounce on me when I'm not looking! How will they know I'm a hero if I'm being munched and crunched and gobbled?"

Things were not going quite as Aggie Onion had hoped. She tried to think if any of her stories featured an unwilling hero, and something stirred in her memory.

"I know," she said. "Take Alfie with you, and he can go on ahead and explain who you are. Lots of heroes have a Faithful Servant. It's usually a dog. Or a horse. But I expect Alfie would do."

Magnifico brightened visibly, and Alfie stared at the ground, hopeful butterflies fluttering in his chest. He didn't dare say a word; any sign that he really, really, REALLY wanted to go on an adventure might make his mother change her mind, or make his brother refuse to take him.

Aggie was still considering her idea. The more she thought about it, the better it appeared. "Alfie can carry the luggage," she said. "And it'll get him out from under my feet. What do you think, Magnifico? Would you like a Faithful Servant?"

Magnifico, terrified of being sent off on his own but not wanting Alfie to think he was needed, did his best to look as if he was doing his brother a favour. "I suppose he can come."

"Do you promise to do everything you can to help your brother?" Aggie gave Alfie a stern look.

Alfie nodded. "Cross my heart and hope to die!"



He meant it. Success would mean his very own bed, and, for someone who slept on a pile of hay in the barn, that was Glorious Luxury indeed.

And so it was decided: Alfie was to travel with Magnifico. While the hero was being dressed in his hat, cloak and boots, Alfie collected his few belongings and tied them up in a handkerchief.

Under the table, Bowser sat up. If Alfie was going out adventuring, then he was going too. He glanced round the kitchen, saw nothing he wanted, and went to wait for Alfie outside the front door.

Garf was too busy with his pigs to say goodbye, but Aggie Onion and her boys stood in a line to wish the hero good fortune, good luck and speedy success.

Aggie was torn between tears and an ecstatic smile; her beloved seventh son was leaving home, but he was going to bring her a Happily Ever After and Glorious Luxury. The brothers shuffled their feet and slapped Magnifico on the back. Only Yurt gave Alfie a quick pat as he followed Magnifico down the line. "Here." He slid a small parcel into Alfie's pocket. "This might come in useful. Take care of yourself!"

Alfie grinned. "Thanks."

Their mother snorted. "It's our Magnifico he should be taking care of, not himself! And make sure you do, Alf. I don't want to hear that your brother's been eaten and you haven't!"

"No, Ma." Alfie gave his mother what he hoped was an I'm-happy-to-be-eaten smile, and she gave him a half-hearted wave before clasping Magnifico to her bosom for one last farewell hug.

Five minutes later they were on their way, Alfie in front staggering under the weight of several bulging picnic baskets, which were to keep the hero from starvation, and a couple of leather cases containing



the hero's clothes. Bowser walked beside him, his tail wagging as he thought of the adventures to come. Magnifico stomped in the rear, glancing nervously to the left and right as he went, as if he was already expecting to see trolls and ogres.