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Opening extract from

The Young Magicians and the Thieves' Almanac

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Euston, we have a problem . . .

The Magic Circle is a weird old place.

Weird and old.

Founded in 1905, the –

BORING!

Yeah, you've made your point!

Don't get me wrong, being weird can often be brilliant. But anyone who regularly fiddles with 52 bits of cardboard for at least four or five hours a day (more on weekends and bank holidays) has got to be the *tiniest* bit *odd*. And any society that bunches those like-minded people together even odder. (And don't even get me started on the card-fiddling stats for a magician over the Christmas holidays!)

I suppose magic and being a magician is just quite . . . *specific*, isn't it?

'*What did you do today, magician?*'

'*Oh, not much – vanished a few doves, cut this lady I don't really know that well in half and made a long balloon into the shape of a poodle – you?*'

'*Oh, I just ate some lasagne – bye-bye.*'

See what I mean?

None of it's real, either; it's all pretend. That's the other odd thing about magic: you can learn it in the same way that you learn the clarinet. It's merely a skill. But the whole point of magic is to make it seem like you *haven't* specially learned any particular skill in the first place. Magic is just meant to *happen* in the moment.

Not true for the clarinet, sadly. At no point when playing the clarinet do you want it to seem like you haven't specially learned the clarinet. Although for some players, despite their best intentions, it *can* still end up sounding like that – OUCH!

Anyway, magic is different from everything else. And I suppose this is one of the many unique things that make it, quite literally, *wonderful*.

Take eleven-year-old Harry, for example. Harry – OH HECK, WRONG BOOK!

Take thirteen-year-old Zack Harrison . . . Zack started learning the clarinet, but ended up preferring practising magic over practising the clarinet when he realized he was far better at wrapping the crusty school instrument in newspaper, bending it in half and then tearing away the paper – not only to show that the clarinet was fully restored but that it had also completely and utterly *vanished*.

Some quick info on Zack: he's a brilliant magician (see above); has a brain that works a bit differently to the rest of us; and can make *a-mazing* beans on toast. Oh, also has a tiny bit of a squint, which means he sees double when he looks to the right without turning his head, but only a trained optician would be able to spot it and so it's definitely not worth dwelling on here . . .

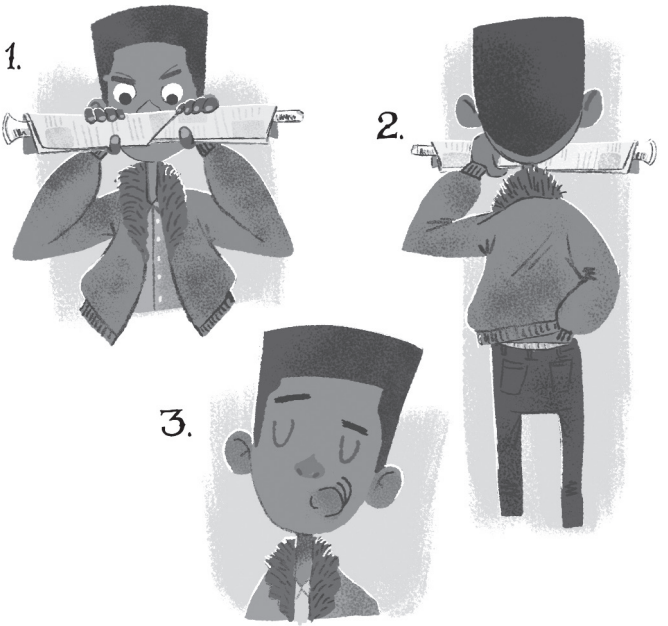
Yes, all right then, come on – so how *do* you vanish a clarinet?

Well, without giving too much away, the truth is . . . you don't! You see, a clarinet actually comes in several parts: the mouthpiece, the barrel, the first joint, the second joint and, finally (yawn, who's still with me?), the bell. So when Zack first covers the clarinet with the newspaper, we assume it's still there because we can see the mouthpiece and the bell poking out at either end. Now, this is where the human brain comes in handy. It makes sense for the brain to assume that the covered-up bit of the clarinet is still there because that's what we expect.

Magicians take advantage of things like this all the time.

In the smae way that we can still eiasly raed this setnecne, our brains often make some amazing decisions without us ever having to consciously think about them.

And so while our brains are busily filling in the clarinet gaps behind Zack's newspaper, the young magician is in fact stealthily removing the barrel, the first and the second joints, and stuffing them down the back of his trousers. (Yes, *that's* how much Zack thinks of the clarinet, Miss Tudor!) So, you



see, sixty per cent of the vanishing clarinet has happened before we've even got any idea that something's up.

I'll let you figure out what Zack does with the remaining forty per cent of clarinet yourself to complete the vanish. Subtlest of tiniest clues: EDIBLE clarinet.

And what of the world-famous Magic Circle? Founded in 1905 – OH NO, NOT AGAIN! Basically it's a club where magicians can hang out. Turn right out of Euston Station, London, go past Sainsbury's, cross the road (zebra crossings, please), turn left on to Stephenson Way and go round the corner, and it's there on the right – you can't miss it. (Well, you

can actually, but if you get to the Royal Society of Horticulture you've gone too far. Or are completely lost.)

And Euston Station is exactly where we find Zack Harrison right now (1.45 p.m., Monday 22 October – GPS coordinates 51.5284° N, 0.1331° W for the map enthusiasts reading this – SHOUT OUT TO YOU LOT!).

But Zack isn't the only one on his way to the Magic Circle headquarters this afternoon. Yep, that tall boy several metres behind him, clambering up the escalator three steps at a time owing to his terrifically gangly legs, is Jonny Haigh, Zack's best friend.

A few little stats on Jonny too then . . . Tallest boy in his class/his school/the universe – which he likes to remind Zack of *constantly*; has only recently got into magic, partly through Zack but also because his granddad, Ernest, is something of a legend in the Magic Circle. Used to be able to hit all the high notes in *Les Misérables*, but now that his voice has dropped only does this in STRICT privacy.

Behind Jonny? Well – it's not really relevant, but I might as well mention it as I'm here . . . There's a bunch of pigeons kind of just hanging out. Not in a suspicious way, just sort of really chilled and enjoying the train-station vibe. Anyway, let's ignore them for now and get back to talking about *human beings*, shall we?

Ah yes, next is Sophie Yang. Jonny's just accidentally barged past her on the escalator while attempting his world record for the speediest ascent. She's not impressed, if that look is anything to go by. Perhaps she would be if she knew that she and Jonny were about to become great friends. We'll be seeing

Sophie in action very shortly, but all you need to know for now is that she's from the North of England, can name all the lakes in the Lake District in ANY order, and is staggeringly brilliant at a branch of magic known as 'mentalism' (feel free to consult the Glossary at the back of this book, by the way – it's riddled with both necessary and unnecessary information – like 'What Is a Mentalist'). BACK TO BUSINESS . . .

And behind Sophie? Well, the pigeons have just migrated a notch south, which is annoying. Perhaps they could remain where they are just until the end of this chapter – what do you say, make my job a bit easier? Thanks, birds!

Ah yes, so on to our final young magician. He's shyer than the others – hence why he presently has his face hidden behind a well-thumbed edition of *Expert Card Technique*. *Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome, live at Euston Station concourse, with his impeccably neat side parting . . . It's ALEX FINLEY!* Alex is a one of a kind. Doesn't say much, not a huge fan of social interaction, and consequently isn't much of a performer, but, Lordy Lord, you should see what he can do with a deck of cards in his bedroom when the door is closed. When Alex handles a pack, it's like they come *alive*. Not bad for a twelve-year-old who wouldn't say boo to a goose. (Though, to be fair, I'm *ancient* compared to Alex and I've still never said the word 'boo' at – or even close to – a goose. I will of course now make this one of my life's ambitions and keep you posted.)

So that's our four. Our fantastic four. Our glorious gang. Our quality quartet. Our prestigious protagonists. Probably about time we see them in action – yes?

YES!

(Don't worry, I'll be back at various points, whether useful or not. See you soon!)

Zack approached the barriers at Euston Station, reaching into his pocket for his ticket. His hand emerged empty. 'Oh, not again!' he muttered, just loud enough to attract the attention of the nearby guard who looked awfully like a bird of prey with his beaky nose and needlessly long nails.

'Having some trouble finding your ticket, young sir?' the guard announced loudly, as if trying to justify his job. He came over.

Zack's eyes flashed as the man smugly printed off a fresh ticket and wafted it temptingly in his right hand, as if reminding Zack what such a ticket might look like. 'Yeah, I think I might have lost it,' Zack said. 'I'm sure I had it a second ago, but . . .'

The guard closed his eyes and took a deep breath. 'If you don't have a ticket, then I can't let you through the barriers. You have to purchase a new ticket from me, your helpful guard. Plus there will be a fine,' he added with relish, opening his eyes and flexing his nostrils.

'Oh, you're kidding! Really?' protested Zack. 'It must have fallen out of my pocket while I was asleep.'

The guard cocked his head like a duck might when approaching a canal lock, figuring out what best to do.

Zack watched him place the freshly printed ticket in his inner left jacket pocket.

'Is there a problem here?' interrupted the ticket guard's boss, coming over briskly. (Zack could tell the lady was his boss by the way she kept retching every time their eyes met.)

The guard straightened himself up, trying to impress, accidentally pouting in the process.

'Er ... not at all, Mrs Mann,' he chirped wetly. 'Everything is in hand.'

Mrs Mann looked at the guard as if he'd just admitted he was made of potatoes. 'Just do your job, Frank,' she spewed at him before heading over to a pack of attractive – and clearly lost – male tourists.

Zack waited until she was out of earshot before turning to face the guard again. 'Listen, Frank – do you mind if I call you Frank? – I know I'm *technically* meant to have a ticket, but it's not like I didn't buy one. I've just misplaced it. Is there any way you can let me through ... just this once?'

Zack gave one of his infamous cheeky grins and ran a hand through his thick hair.

The guard waited, staring at Zack's sparkling teeth for a whole ten seconds before saying, 'If you think grinning at me is going to help you get through these barriers then you're more of a maniac than I am. I've been working at this station for fifteen years; I've never been promoted; I hate my job and life in general. I'm in fact married to Mrs

Mann over there, who's evidently looking for another beau in her life; I've no kids by choice and have a sciatic nerve which gives me chronic back ache pretty much twenty-four/seven. I've never taken a day off and one of my few pleasures is fining my fellow human beings, especially children – so no, I can't *let you through, just this once* . . . young sir.'

Zack sighed, his grin downsizing by about twenty per cent.

'So, what'll it be? Shall we start playing by the rules?'

Zack shifted his weight before showing off his dazzling white teeth once more. 'Oh, absolutely not!' And with that he placed the fresh ticket he'd secretly lifted from Frank's inner left jacket pocket mere moments ago into the machine and waltzed out towards the glorious sunshine – just as an announcement came over the tannoy about how pickpockets operate at this station.

Frank.

Oh, but things were only just starting to go wrong for dear old Frank . . .

Jonny approached the barriers next, immediately attracting the guard's attention, not just because of his remarkable height but because he was also walking with his arms raised – which made him look not only taller but also somewhat insane.

Jonny looked around as he continued towards the barriers, clearly – brazenly – ticketless. He loved train stations; he loved the mix of science, technology and

people – in fact, it was one of the many things he loved about living in London: busy bustling places that felt like the start of new adventures, always brimming with life, constantly surprising and – Ouch! Mind where you're going with that wheelie case, lady!

As Jonny approached, Frank's lower jaw began to twitch, excited at the prospect of administering more fines and speaking with authority to minors. But, to his horror, as the boy drew close, without even a whiff of a ticket, the barriers wafted open – as if he was some magnificent superhero.*

Frank felt decidedly queasy. What was going on today? Just as he was thinking of spending a while in the station toilet for some peace and quiet, he spotted a girl heading straight for him, her eyes seemingly glued to a map of London. Frank was resolute . . . *Right, I've had enough of kids for one afternoon – this one is getting a fine*, he thought. *I don't care what excuses she has. Even if she has a valid ticket, she's getting a fine. Even if she invented the steam train, this silly little girl is getting a fine!* – which was an odd thing for Frank to think because he knew full well that the steam train had been invented by a man so old he

* Sorry to intrude, dear reader, but just to clarify – as much as Jonny would like to think of himself as a superhero, this stunt was pulled off by sewing into the lining of his coat a power magnet which, when he lifted his arms, triggered the barrier's electromagnetic circuit. Along with voiding any credit or debit cards in the immediate vicinity, no doubt – good luck with buying all those casserole ingredients for supper tonight, Frank! As you were . . .

was now *dead*. Frank readied himself, beefing up his chest, accidentally pouting again . . .

The girl – Sophie, remember her? – came over, immediately locking eyes with Frank and surprising him by suddenly offering her right hand. Without thinking, Frank held out his own hand in response. But just as he did so, Sophie withdrew hers, quickly taking his wrist with both her hands and moving his arm up towards his forehead.

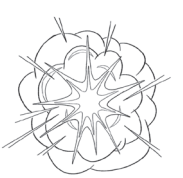
In performing this odd manoeuvre – successfully confusing the conscious part of Frank's brain – Sophie had achieved everything she wanted: access to his subconscious. (Well, it's something Sophie wanted right at this very moment . . . The rest of the time Frank was free to do with his subconscious as he liked. Such as thinking about ways of punishing ticketless children and destroying Mrs Mann.)

Sophie spoke firmly, not breaking eye contact. 'What is it you're not thinking about?'

Frank's eyes flickered in confusion as she continued her hypnotic induction. 'You were just about to let me through the barriers.'

And then, just like one of those dogs on talent shows that do things their owner says and then get given £250,000, along with a brief appearance on *The Royal Variety Performance*, Frank popped open the barriers like a good little pup.

Sophie made her way out into the sunshine, delighted. She always took an extra-special pride in her first successful



hypnotic induction of the day. She consulted her map again. *On to Stephenson Way.*

Frank blinked back to reality. What had just happened? He looked past the barriers, searching for the girl, searching for answers. 'What is happening today?' he said out loud, causing Mrs Mann to look round from her flirty tourists, annoyed at the interruption.

Frank went back to his post, tired. *Just six more hours to go*, he thought depressingly.

Alex approached the barriers next, his head lost in a book almost twice his size. Not that he was particularly bookish; more that this was his way of avoiding eye contact. And if it also meant catching up on how to achieve the perfect pressure fan with a deck of playing cards, then so be it! He had made this journey several times before – often simply to get a break from his parents in Kings Langley, heading straight back home on the next return train – so he knew the station well.

Spotting Alex immediately, Frank inhaled deeply while clenching his buttocks – something (he had read somewhere) that helped focus the mind.

The boy reached into his pocket, bringing out a ticket – beautifully valid, as far as Frank could tell.

Without averting his eyes from the pages of *Expert Card Technique*, Alex fed his ticket into the ticket entry point (as Frank had learned to call it during his training several glaciations ago). The barriers opened smoothly, perfectly, allowing him to pass through.

Alex retrieved the used ticket on the other side.

Frank breathed a sigh of relief, relaxing his bum cheeks. *Finally some normality*, he thought.

But Alex had not yet disposed of his ticket. With the tiniest flick of his wrist, he tossed the ticket into the air, spinning it into a blur. Frank eyeballed it suspiciously as – with the determination of a really angry bee – the blur began to approach.

'No, no, no, you can't reach me from there,' Frank muttered, increasingly concerned. 'Surely not . . .' Closer and closer it came towards him, so fast he could now feel its fan-like breeze on his face. He wanted to blink, he wanted to flinch, but that would be giving in. 'No, stand your ground, Frank, it's all going to be just fine. It's not going to get you on the nose.'

But just as his brain processed that very thought, the ticket nipped him on the nose, forcing Frank to cry out like a tiny baby and causing our gang of pigeons (remember them?!) to fly up naively into the sunlit strewn glass roof of Euston Station, only to come hurtling back down again, instantly regretting the benefits of being indoors.*

* Oh, and by the way, we will never hear from Frank again, so I hope you enjoyed his brief appearance. He did eventually get home that evening, casserole ingredients in hand, but ended up rowing with Mrs Mann so loudly that the neighbours called the police. He now faces a huge court hearing for chopping off Mrs Mann's head. And so, yes, it's very unlikely we'll be meeting Frank again unless we happen across him in jail, where – sadly – this story doesn't take us . . . I don't think . . .

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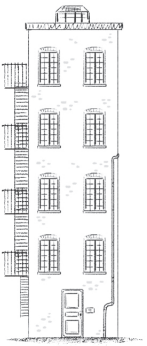

Zack, Jonny and Sophie had arrived outside the Magic Circle headquarters. Staggered, to be precise, at intervals of about ten seconds. But they had made it. They were here! This was the place where a woman was first sawn in half (legally). This was the place where a man named Ali Bongo could appear without anyone batting an eyelid or asking him how to spell it. This was the place where every single piece of literature ever written about magic (including how to turn a handkerchief into an egg) was kept, catalogued and studied. Yes, this was THE Magic Circle: a place of secrets, intrigue and utter wonderment, a place of –

'Is this really it?' asked Sophie.

Jonny and Zack turned round to face the quirky-looking girl, her hair all shaved at the sides. She stared at the rather boring blue door, her eyebrows raised as she shifted her rucksack and put her map away.

'You *do* know what building this is, right?'

Sophie grinned. 'Yes, thank you, *Zack Harrison*, I do know what this building is! This is the world-famous headquarters of the Magic Circle.'

'Did you just read that?' Zack pointed to a small wooden plaque that boasted the society name in bold lettering.

'Ha – might have!' said Sophie, extending her hand. 'Sophie Yang.'

'Zack H–'

'Hang on a minute!' interrupted Jonny, batting his friend's hand away from Sophie's. 'How did you know his name was Zack Harrison?'

Zack gawped at Sophie. 'Yeah, hang on a minute – have we met before?'

'In your dreams, mate!'

'Then how?'

'Well . . . Have either of you read any of Corinda's books on mentalism?' Sophie asked.

Zack and Jonny both shrugged.

'Good, because it's not relevant,' she joked. 'What *is* relevant is that your name is splashed across the back of your rucksack in thick marker pen and I've been staring at it ever since I left Euston Station.'

Zack and Jonny burst out laughing. 'Oh, *now* I feel stupid!' said Zack finally, shaking her hand firmly up and down.

'I take it you're both here for the induction week too . . . Exciting, isn't it?'

Zack threw Jonny a tiny look which – given that Sophie had already demonstrated just how perceptive she was – was easily spotted.

'We are, yes,' answered Jonny immediately. 'Do you know what you might do in your audition at the end of the week?'

'Think so.' Sophie played with what was left of her fringe, moulding the strands into a series of peaks. 'I'll probably do some hypnosis stuff, maybe some mind-reading and then finish with a –'

'Whoa, hang on. Wait a flipping second!' interrupted Jonny, his eyes gleaming. 'You do hypnosis? *Cooooooooo-oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooool!*'

‘Sure! What about you?’ Sophie looked up at him. ‘Got *your* routine sorted?’

‘Well, I’m still quite new to it,’ explained Jonny, rummaging around in his bag haphazardly and bringing out a set of linking rings, which had somehow miraculously joined together. ‘But my granddad has already taught me how to do this!’ He held the rings aloft proudly, though secretly at a loss as to how they’d managed to link together *in his bag* . . . There *must* be a gap in them somewhere!

‘What about you, Zack?’ asked Sophie, her eyes meeting his.

‘Oh . . . Well, I’m pretty good at pickpocketing . . . But . . . But I don’t know if I’ll be allowed to do that . . .’ He trailed off, looking uncomfortably over Sophie’s shoulder.

Well, if this isn’t the behaviour of someone hiding something, she thought, *I don’t know what is!*

Alex approached them tentatively, his face peeping over the top of some strange chapter on false deals, his cheeks already beginning to flush as they turned to face him.

‘Hi!’ Zack smiled at the blond, bespectacled boy. ‘You OK?’

Alex’s heart began to pound. Why did people always feel the need to talk to him? Couldn’t they just leave him alone? He took a deep breath and thought about something unrelated to calm his nerves (sweetcorn, in this instance), just like he’d been advised by the ‘doctor’ his parents had taken him to see last year.

Deep breaths, Alex . . . Corn on the cob . . . Chicken and sweetcorn soup . . .

‘Is . . . is this the Ma–?’ Alex began.

‘Yes!’ the other three chimed like an over-zealous pop group.

‘What’s your name?’ asked Sophie, offering her hand.

Alex stared at the girl’s arm, clearly wary. ‘I . . . I saw what you did . . . to the guard . . . at the station,’ he managed.

Sophie faltered slightly (there’s a first time for everything). ‘Ah. I see! Well, I promise I’m not going to do that to you.’ And she took Alex’s hand and gave it the most normal shake in the world. ‘Sophie Yang.’

‘A-Alex Finley,’ he said shyly.

‘Well, it’s great to meet you, Alex Finley,’ said Jonny cheerfully. ‘I’m Jonny and this is Zack. Now, Sophie, what *did* you do to the guard?’ he added, increasingly captivated by this girl.

‘I was just practising!’ She held up her hands innocently. ‘Just a basic handshake induction – he fell for it beautifully, though!’

‘Hey, Alex, don’t be nervous,’ said Zack, remembering how anxious he’d been the first time he came to the Magic Circle. ‘Everyone in this building loves magic, remember.’

‘Have you been here before, then?’ asked Alex, daring a quick look up at Zack.

‘Oh, well, erm . . .’ Zack trailed off, sending Sophie’s Sherlock radar into a spin again.

‘Ooh!’ said Jonny quickly, catching Zack’s eye and then changing the subject, causing Sophie to raise her eyebrows yet again. ‘What are you reading?’

'Erm . . . *Expert Card Technique*,' Alex mumbled, showing them the cover.

'By Hugard and Brau?' Sophie whistled. That was some complicated card magic. 'Wow, you must be pretty good!'

Alex went a shade of dusty pink as Jonny patted him on the head, which wasn't as patronizing as it sounds, more just convenient, given the difference in height. Jonny had never even heard of Hugard and Brau.

'Will you show us something before we go in?' asked Zack, always keen to watch a fellow practitioner of magic at work.

Alex was immediately suspicious, taking a couple of steps back. Surely this was some kind of joke . . . No one ever asked him to show them a trick unless it was a ruse to bash the playing cards out of his hands and all over the school playground. Hell, no one ever even *spoke* to him most of the time. But here were three people he'd just met who seemed excited by the prospect of him showing them something. Three people who – quite possibly – maybe even *liked* him.

He gingerly reached into his pocket, removing a brand-new deck of Bicycle playing cards. Brand new because Alex usually got through approximately one deck per week – more if he'd been practising lots, which was often the case recently. Sometimes he'd overhear his parents complaining about it – not so much because of the cost, but because they would far rather he spent his pocket money on sports magazines or computer games like their friends' 'normal' children did.

Alex stretched his fingers, slowly removing the cards from their case, handling them expertly, as if they were an extension of his self. With the cards in his left hand (dealer's grip), he placed his right thumb over the top of the deck, making a *swoosh* as he spread them into a perfect arc (pressure fan).

Sophie, Jonny and Zack gawped. Wow, this guy sure knew his stuff: that was no easy move!

Alex held the beautiful fan of cards towards them, pleased that the flourish had worked out as planned. 'Pick . . . Pick a c–'

But just as Alex most likely went to say the word 'card' he was interrupted by the creaking of the blue door as it slowly, majestically began to open.

They all shifted their eyes to the entrance of the Magic Circle headquarters, wondering what might be the first thing they saw.

A man in top hat and tails, thought Sophie, thinking of the countless pictures she'd seen in books and magazines.

Someone our age, Zack hoped.

Granddad, perhaps, thought Jonny.

Some resident bully, worried Alex, his mind suddenly starting to race as he hastily put his cards away.

No.

It was a lady in her early sixties whose glasses hung on a chain just below her bosom and which bounced about like they were trying to get away.