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Opening extract from

Genie Us

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Milly's eyes darted around. 'What shall we do?' she said in her normal voice. Her gaze fell on the open boot of her dad's car. Four cardboard boxes were piled up beside it. 'I know! Why don't we have a look at the rest of those books Dad bought, see if there is anything good.'

Jason sighed. 'What's the point?'

'You heard what Dad said: there could be all sorts of books in those boxes!' Milly dragged him enthusiastically over to the car. 'Come on, quick, before your mum burns them all.'

'Paper bursts into flame at two hundred and thirty-two degrees Celsius,' Jason noted.

Milly shot him a look. 'I bet there's loads of boring facty books here that even you'll like.' Crouching down, her dark ponytail falling over one shoulder, she flung the first box open and started to sort through the titles. 'My Life in Politics, How to Rear a Beagle . . . nope, nope, nope.' Milly threw the books carelessly out of the box. 'Nothing good so far.'

Jason sat back on his heels. He could still hear the sound of angry voices through the dining-room window. 'I thought moving house was supposed to make everyone happy,' he sighed. 'But it's been four weeks now, and everyone's sad. My mum and your dad argue the whole time, and Michael and Jess are missing London so much they're in the world's longest bad moods.'

Milly nodded. 'I wish we were still in London because then I could have been—'

'Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz,' Jason interrupted. 'I know.' He'd heard his stepsister moan about not being Dorothy about a thousand times.

'It's just so not fair!' Milly declared, tossing her hair back as she pulled the rest of the books out of the box. 'I'd have got to sing and dance and act. It would have been brill—' She broke off as she reached the bottom of the box. 'Hey, there's a really funny little book down here, Jase. Look!'

Jason peered into the box. A thin book with a dark leather cover was lying on the bottom. It looked old. Older than any book he had ever seen.

A title was etched into the cover in ornate gold writing. Jason frowned. It was hard to make out the exact words because the letters had so many swirls and curls at the ends. 'The Genie Handbook,' he read out. 'Grant Wishes Like an Expert in Six Easy Stages.'

'What?' Milly was taken aback. 'It tells you how to be a genie?'

'As if!' Jason laughed. 'It must just be a storybook.' He took it out. For such a slim book, it was strangely heavy. He put it down on the ground between them.

Milly opened it. 'Oh,' she sighed. 'It's written in a foreign language.'

Jason saw that she was right. He wasn't sure that the words were even printed: they looked almost hand-written, with funny squiggles all over the place.

'Pants!' said Milly. 'It sounded like a really good book.' She jumped to her feet and put her hands together. 'Your wish is my command!' she said, giving a dramatic bow. 'I'd be a cool genie, wouldn't I, Jase?'

Jason smiled at her but there was something bothering him. Suddenly he realized what it was. 'Wait a sec. Why's the title in English if the rest of the book is in another language? That doesn't make sense.'

Milly looked surprised. 'You're right. Maybe there's some English words further on.'

The paper was soft and old, and as the first few pages flicked through her fingers, they made a gentle rustling sound. But as she turned more and more, a new noise began to come from the book.

A chomping, wriggling noise.

It seemed to come from deep within the pages, getting louder and louder.

'What's that sound?' Milly said. 'What—?' She broke off as the book started to tremble beneath her fingers. She snatched them away, and the book fell shut. It lay there, quiet and still again.

For a moment she and Jason just stared at it.

'Did . . . did you see that?' Milly whispered, gazing at the book as if it was about to jump up and bite her.

Jason nodded. 'It shook. It definitely shook, all by itself.'

'And it made a noise.' Milly gulped.

'But books don't shake and make noises,' said Jason. 'Maybe it got so squashed at the bottom of the box, the pages were expanding . . .'

'Not everything has a brainbox explanation.' Milly looked at him. Her blue eyes widened. 'What if . . . what if this book is magic?'

'Magic?' Jason echoed. 'A magic book?' Crouching down beside the book, he took a handful of pages in his right hand, and cautiously started to flick through them, letting them fall one at a time. The book started to tremble. 'It's happening again!' he gasped.

'Keep going!' Milly exclaimed as the same strange chomping, wriggling noise they'd heard before started up again.

Jason let the pages fall faster and faster. The book began shaking so much it almost jumped out of his grip. Then there was a ripping, tearing noise – and a hole appeared in the middle of the book.

And then something popped out from inside it! A tiny wriggling something, its brown segmented body curling from side to side.

'Ugh!' Jason cried. 'It's a maggot!'

Milly gasped as, before their eyes, the tiny wriggly creature started to grow. 'I never saw a maggot do that before!'

It grew bigger and bigger, until suddenly it was the size of Jason's thumb.

'Maggot?' it squawked. 'Maggot indeed!'

'Argh!' Jason sent gravel flying as he jumped backwards. 'A talking maggot!'

Straining with effort, the creature wriggled a little further out of its hole. It looked almost speechless with fury. 'Do these handsome, regal features look like a maggot's to you?'

Jason couldn't actually find many features to judge. The might-be-a-maggot's mouth was a simple black line, crinkled in disapproval. Its two dark eyes flicked crossly from Jason to Milly under the specks of its brows. 'Well?'

‘Actually, you look more like a worm,’ Milly admitted. She gasped as she made the connection. ‘Are you a bookworm?’

‘A bookworm! Hark at her!’ The creature drew itself up haughtily. ‘I am a good deal more than just a bookworm, young lady. Still, at least if you can see me, that must mean you believe in magic. Now, come on, what do you mean by disturbing me like this? Explain yourselves!’ Its beady eyes swivelled crossly from one to the other. ‘Hurry up! I’m waiting!’