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Opening extract from

Genie and the Phoenix

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PROLOGUE

The room was eight-sided with high, dark walls. It was a place of magic.

A man stood gazing not through the windows in the walls, but at *them. As if he could see patterns and images forming there in the glass. He approached the pane, his look hardening.*

'The time draws near,' the man whispered, but no breath misted up the glass. 'The genie will find the bird of gold. A pact will be made. And four children with lives touched by magic shall brave death in the name of life . . .'

The man smiled and turned to the pale, shadowy figure behind him.

'Soon, my dear, the aching centuries will be behind us,' he promised. 'Power and majesty shall be ours once more. Creation will cringe at our feet and the stars will

seem no more to us than sputtering candles, to let burn or snuff out as we choose.'

The figure held still in the shadows as the man stroked her cheek.

'The time of prophecy is at hand,' he murmured. 'The children are ready. Let their adventures begin anew. And let the fingers of fate tighten like a fist about them . . .'



Chapter One

Jason Worthington stood in the goal, his mouth dry, every muscle tensed. The ball flew towards him. His heart leaped. This was it. He was going to make the save! He launched himself to the side, arms outstretched . . .

The ball shot underneath him and slammed into the back of the net. He landed on the grass in a sprawling heap.

'Goal!' Milly's cry echoed around the park as she punched the air in triumph. She saw Jason's face and hastily let her arm drop. 'That was a really good try, Jase. You almost saved it!' She hurried over, offering a hand to help him up. 'I . . . I was just lucky.'

'And I was just rubbish!' Jason got up miserably. 'Even my eight-year-old stepsister can get a goal past me. No one ever wants me on

their team, not even when they're just playing at break.'

Milly frowned. 'But if they're really your friends they should let you play. It shouldn't matter if you're good or not.'

'And back in the real world . . .' Jason rolled his eyes. Milly just didn't know what it was like to be left out. Whenever he saw her in the playground she always seemed to be surrounded by a gaggle of other girls, all chattering and wanting her to join in with their games. 'I wish I was better at sports.'

A faraway look stole into Milly's eyes. 'If Skribble was here he'd grant your wish . . .'

An image of a grumpy-looking worm glaring out of an old book flashed into Jason's mind. 'Milly,' he said awkwardly. 'Michael and Jess said that we shouldn't talk about genies and wishes and Skribble any more.'

Milly glanced across the park to where her thirteen-year-old brother Michael was slumped against an oak tree playing his Game Boy. Her stepsister, Jess, who was a year older than Michael, was standing near to him, talking to her best friend, Colette. 'Older brothers and sisters are a pain,' she said mutinously. 'Why do we have to do what they want all the time?'

A few months ago the four Worthingtons

had discovered an ancient book called *The Genie Handbook: Grant Wishes Like an Expert in Six Easy Stages* – a book full of *real* magic, complete with a fussy, grumpy, totally brilliant talking bookworm called Skribble. Together with Michael and Jess, Jason and Milly had used genie enchantments to grant actual wishes . . .

It had been the most incredible time of all their lives but they'd had to give up the magic in the end, and say goodbye to Skribble.

Jason looked at Milly. 'I think Jess and Michael were right – the more we all talk about the magical stuff, the harder it is to get used to normal life again.'

'But I don't *want* to get used to it!' Milly protested. 'They're just trying to be all boring and grown up.' She looked at Jason searchingly. 'You do still think about Skribble, don't you?'

'Sometimes.' Jason sighed. 'Look, there's no point talking about this – Skribble has gone and I can't get better at football by wishing. It's OK for you, Milly. You're good at loads of things – acting, singing, dancing . . .'

'I'm not *that* good,' Milly said, trailing after him. 'Nowhere near good enough to get the lead part in the big show.'

Jason looked at her in surprise. 'What do

you mean?' Ever since Milly had found out that her new after-school drama group was going to be doing a production of *Annie* she'd been going on and on about how she was sure she was going to be chosen to play the main part.

Milly sighed. 'We've been practising for the auditions this week.' She twisted her hands together and Jason noticed that for once her confidence seemed to have deserted her. 'And . . . well . . . some people in the group are really, really good at singing. Loads better than me.' She chewed her lip. 'I don't think I'm going to get to be Annie. But, oh, Jase, I really, really want to be!'

Jason frowned. Milly normally bounced around, thinking she could do anything and everything she wanted even without magic. 'I'm sure it'll be OK.'

'I'm sure it won't,' said Milly.

Feeling awkward, Jason changed the subject. 'Come on. I suppose I should do some more practising before we have to go home.'

Practice was on his older sister's mind too – essay practice. *I haven't done any*, Jess thought gloomily, leaning back against the oak. *It's just too hard. And I bet Colette has done loads this half term . . .*

'Jess, you look miles away,' said Colette with

a smile. 'Can you come into town with me then? We should make the most of the holiday before school starts again.'

Jess looked tempted but shook her head. 'I'd love to but I really should revise.' She pushed a hand through her straight blonde hair. 'Oh, Colette. I can't believe our exams are only just over a week away.'

'You'll be OK,' Colette reassured her.

'I won't. I am *so* going to fail history. I can never remember anything. And if I do fail then I won't be able to take it next year with you and Natasha and Jodie.' Jess shook her head in frustration. 'I really had better get back.' She waved impatiently at Milly and Jason, who were playing football again, beckoning them over. 'Revision's no worse than babysitting, I guess.'

'Well, OK,' Colette said sympathetically. 'Good luck with it. See you at school on Monday.' She set off but then stopped. 'Oh, Michael,' she said, as if noticing him for the first time. 'You're friends with that new boy, aren't you? I've seen you hanging round with him.'

Michael frowned. 'Who, Rick? *He* hangs round with *me*!'

'Whatever. If you see him, tell him I said hi.'

Colette grinned quickly at Jess. 'Laters!' she said and headed into town.

Michael buried his head in his hands. 'Good ole Rick the Slick,' he said bitterly, glancing up through his fingers at Jess. 'Even the girls in your year fancy him! It's not natural. It's not fair.'

'Well, he is quite fit,' Jess reasoned. 'And he's really tall. You'd never have known he was just a Year Eight.'

'Yeah, yeah. Oh, and he just happens to have loads of cash, amazing rugby skills and a dad who acts on the telly.' Michael shook his head, making his dark fringe flop into his eyes. 'How can people be taken in by that stuff?'

'I wonder,' Jess said dryly. She frowned. 'Anyway, if you don't like him, how come you're always hanging out together at school.'

'Not my choice,' Michael shot back. 'As soon as he started at school, I knew he'd be trouble, but all my so-called mates think he's great. It's really bugging me. Wherever I look he's always there.'

'Count yourself lucky if that's your only problem,' Jess sighed. 'OK, so it's annoying that this cool kid has come along and all your mates think he's amazing, but at least you haven't got mega-important exams coming up. I won't

even *be* with my friends if I fail—'

'Uh-huh. I know,' muttered Michael. 'Life sucks.'

Jess nodded in agreement.

Just then Milly and Jason reached them. 'Hi, guys,' said Jason. 'Is everything OK?'

Michael snorted.

'Everything's fine,' said Jess despondently. 'But I need to revise some more, so we'd better go home now.'

'Home. Huh!' Michael got to his feet. 'A boring old house in boring old Moreways Meet, at least a gazillion miles from anywhere remotely cool. Why can't anything exciting ever happen round here? It's just boring, boring, boring!'

Suddenly a large piece of yellowing paper blew across the grass and wrapped around Jess's legs. 'Ew!' she said, reaching down to pull it away. As she did so, Jason saw that it had a drawing and words on it.

'Hang on!' He stopped Jess before she could crumple it up. 'It looks like a map or something. Maybe someone's lost it.'

Jess straightened out the paper. Michael had already lost interest and flicked open his Game Boy again, but Milly nudged up to Jason and took a look. Jason immediately saw that he'd

been right. It *was* a map, and a very old one by the look of it. The paper was thick, yellowed with age, with rips and tears around the edges. There were lots of roads or paths marked out in dark lines, six of which crossed in the middle of the map. There were a few funny zigzags and lots of wonky rectangles, some of which were surrounded by drawings of bushes or trees. A tall thin tangle of squares sat in the top right corner of the map, like the artist had drawn several shapes on top of each other. There was some old-fashioned writing at the top, scrawled in a scratchy ink pen, but Jason couldn't make out the words. His attention was taken more by a thick red cross marked beside one of the trees.

Jess looked about. She saw a couple of mums with buggies and some pensioners playing bowls, but no one looked as though they'd lost something. Then she glanced back at the map. 'It looks a bit like Moreways Meet,' she said. 'Six roads that meet in the middle, just like in the town centre near Mum and Mark's shop.'

'The whole reason we had to move to this dump,' Michael muttered. 'Just so they could live their dream of opening a mouldy old book shop!'

Milly suddenly squealed like a guinea pig with a megaphone. Jess jumped and Michael almost dropped his Game Boy. 'LOOK! It's . . . It's a . . .' Milly could hardly get her words out she was so excited. She stabbed her finger at the scrawled words on the top of the map. 'It's a *treasure map.*'

They all stared at her. Michael got up and joined the others in staring at the map.

Jess frowned at the words at the top of the parchment. '*A Map for Those Who Seek Hidden Treasures*,' she read out slowly.

'I couldn't read that a moment ago!' Jason whispered. 'It was just a scrawl. Honest!'

'Oh, wow!' Milly exclaimed. 'A *magic* treasure map! I told you exciting stuff could happen!'

'Milly, stop!' said Jess swiftly. 'Jason can't have looked properly, that's all.'

'Exactly,' Michael sneered. 'I mean, a magic treasure map? How likely is that?'

Milly put her hands on her hips. 'How likely is it that we found a talking bookworm in a book telling us how to be genies?'

'Milly!' Jess sighed. 'You know we agreed not to talk about that.'

'You mean, *you* agreed we wouldn't talk about it,' Milly retorted, her eyes shining with

excitement. 'It is a magic map. I bet it is! I bet that now magic's happened to us once, it's going to keep on happening!'

Jason's eyes were glued to the map. 'I think maybe you're right,' he said breathlessly.

Michael groaned. 'Yeah, yeah, eight-year-old expert Milly is right – oh, and there goes a pig flying out of my butt!'

'No, look!' Holding the map out to Michael, Milly and Jess in one trembling hand, Jason pointed at the bottom of the map where seven words were written: *Know Yourself, Trust Yourself, Believe in Yourself.*

Seven words that *hadn't* been there when they had first opened up the map!

Jess paled. 'You're right, Jase,' she whispered. 'Those words really have just appeared. It *must* be magic!'

'Give it here.' Michael took the map gingerly from Jason and looked at it from all angles. 'If this is a wind-up . . .'

'It's not!' Milly hugged Jason and Jess. 'It's magic and it's real! You saw it yourself, Michael, you *can't* say you don't believe now!'

There was a long pause while everyone looked at Michael. Slowly a grin spread across his face. 'Who's not believing? Have you met my flying

butt-pig?' He clapped his Game Boy shut with one hand and waved the map in the air with the other. 'Oink! Oink! Look out, treasure – here we come!'