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Opening extract from

Starmaker's Club: Phoebe Finds Her Voice

Written by

Anne-Marie Conway

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Phoebe finds her Voice

'A warm, wise and wonderfully witty read'
Cathy Cassidy

Star Makers Club

Phoebe finds her Voice

Anne-Marie Conway

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For Dad with big love

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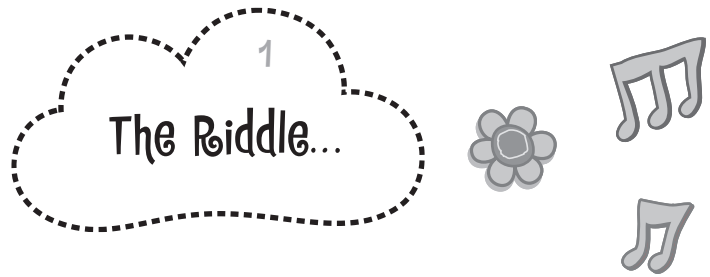

1 The Riddle...

Everyone saw the leaflets. It was impossible not to – unless you'd been trapped in an underground cave for the past two weeks. They were everywhere: in the corridors, in the classrooms, in the dinner hall; there was even one in the girls' loo. The first one to go up was printed on bright yellow paper with a huge star in the middle. It said:

Star Makers

...is it your time to shine?

Ellie thought they'd been put up for a joke but Sam said they were from some television

company looking for the next Big Thing. They were just guessing though; no one knew who'd put them up or what they were about really. And then a week later a new one appeared, stuck up in just as many places as the first. It looked exactly the same except it said:

Star Makers

…have you got what it takes?

I snagged one off the wall when no one was looking and took it home. It was like a riddle or a code or something and I was waiting for the next clue.

My name's Phoebe by the way, Phoebe Franks, and I'm nearly twelve years old. I've got flat, mousy-coloured hair – freckles, the size of saucers – and an embarrassing habit of turning beetroot every time I open my mouth. My dad's a fruitcake, my sister's a pain, and

my favourite pop star of all time is Donny Dallesio. Oh yes and one more thing – I love, love, *love*, singing and dancing – but *only* when no one else is watching.

I could hear Mum clattering about in the kitchen getting breakfast ready. It was Monday morning and I had that funny feeling I always get about going back to school after the weekend, like someone's tied a knot in my tummy. It's weird because I've always loved school, and I couldn't wait to start Woodville Secondary. I was looking forward to it like mad all through Year Six – but it's been a total nightmare. It's so big, and noisy and confusing and I don't know where I am half the time – let alone where I'm supposed to be.

I pulled the duvet over my head and snuggled down for a last five minutes, thinking how brilliant it would be if I could stay under my covers for the whole day or even longer. Maybe I could teleport my bed to somewhere far away:

a different country or a different planet. Somewhere amazing where they only serve crisps for breakfast and you can eat as many packets as you like.

I closed my eyes and concentrated really hard. I tried to imagine rivers filled with salt – and smoky-bacon bushes – but it didn't work. I was still at home and I still had to go to school – and the chances of getting crisps for breakfast were about *zero*.

Downstairs Mum was sitting at the kitchen table reading something. She was hunched right over and the belt from her old, towelling dressing gown was dangling down on each side of the chair.

"The electricity bill's just arrived," she muttered as I walked in. "It's even higher than last quarter – almost double. I mean I know it's the winter, but honestly, Phoebs, how on Earth am I supposed to pay for this? We're just going to have to…"

But then she stopped, put down the electricity bill and turned into THE BREAKFAST DETECTIVE – tracking my every movement as I took a banana out of the fruit bowl.

"I'm not really hungry, Mum. It's no big deal."

"Well it is to me, Phoebe Franks," she sighed. "You're not going to school without eating a proper breakfast, and a banana is *not* a proper breakfast."

"You say that every day, but look at me, I'm fine. Do you even know how many vitamins and things there are in a banana?"

Mum gave me one of her looks and poured me a huge bowl of cornflakes.

"Oh, and I'm sorry, Phoebs, your dad phoned. He won't be able to see you on Saturday because he's got something on with his group at the centre and apparently he can't afford to miss it."

"He never can," I said, pushing my cornflakes away.

None of this surprised me, by the way. Mum always worries about the bills these days and she's always in a mood. My weirdo dad – who doesn't live at home any more – nearly always rings to say he won't be able to see me. And then there's my little sister, Sara – she just irritates the pants off of me the way that only little sisters can. I swear if you could pick and choose your family, like from one of those catalogues, she'd be going straight back.

"Something is going to happen to you today, Phoebe Franks," Sara announced suddenly, a blue and white check tea towel wrapped around her perfect blonde curls. "I've looked at your tea leaves and I'm telling you, something is going to happen – something that's going to change your life – and there's nothing you can do to stop it."

I pulled the tea towel down over her face. "I'm not drinking tea, I'm drinking orange juice, and something happens to me *every* day,

raisin brain. You don't need to be a fortune-telling genius to figure that out."

"It's no use, Phoebe," Sara insisted. "You can't actually fight your own destiny, you know. Your life *is* about to change, you'll see."

"What's my destiny, then?" said Mum. "Am I going to win the lottery so I can pay some of these bills?"

"*Mum*. I can only read one fortune at a time," said Sara, dead seriously – only she didn't realize how stupid she looked sitting there with an old, stained tea towel stuck on her head.

I picked up a postcard that was lying in the middle of the table. "Hey, listen to this, Sara, it's from Gran, and she's been swimming with *real* dolphins. How cool would that be?" It was supposed to shut her up but it didn't work. Why would it? There hasn't been a thing invented yet that could shut Sara up.

"Quick, give me your hand," she squealed,

the tea towel completely covering her face. "And don't call me *Sara*, right – it's *Mystic* Sara."

She snatched the postcard away and grabbed my arm, knocking my glass over in the process. A river of sticky juice swam across the table, soaking the electricity bill, this week's shopping list and the lid of Mum's sewing box.

"*For goodness' sake!*" Mum snapped, whipping the tea towel off Sara's head to mop up the mess. "Don't you think I've got enough to worry about without cleaning up after you all the time? Oh it's all right for your gran, mucking about with a bunch of dolphins halfway across the world, but some of us have to work for a living!"

And while they argued about spilled juice and dolphins and telling fortunes, I sneaked a packet of crisps out of the cupboard and escaped back upstairs to my bedroom.

We always walk to school whatever the

weather; it's only three roads away. Our road is very long and full of squashed-together houses that all look exactly the same, so if all the numbers disappeared or blew away or something, you could easily end up going into the wrong house.

We have to shoot past Number Four as fast as we can; Valerie – *beaky-nose* – Burton lives there, with her frizzy bird's-nest hair and lips as thin as string. She's got this creepy way of appearing out of nowhere, like in a **HORROR MOVIE**, and once she's got a hold of you it's impossible to get away.

She goes on and on about the **state of the country** and the **state of the education system** and she especially likes to go on about **broken homes** where the *poor* children never get to see their dads – meaning me and Sara, of course.

It's the children I feel sorry for, she always says, looking at us and nodding like crazy – until I think her head might actually drop off.

I hope it does one day. I hope it drops off and rolls away!

When we get to Sara's school, Mum goes in with Sara and I carry on by myself down one more very long road and then round the corner to Woodville Secondary. I don't know why it's called *Wood*ville; it's surrounded by these tall, grey railings – like a prison – and there isn't a tree in sight.

It was one of those freezing cold mornings, the kind when you can see the breath coming out of your mouth. Outside the school gates, Polly Carter was standing with one of her pathetic little sidekicks, holding a pencil and pretending to smoke. I tried to stay out of her way, but just before we went in she pushed past me and hissed, "Watch where you're going, *Phoebe*, can't you!" as if it was all my fault in the first place.

She's such a witch, Polly Carter. She's been on my case ever since I joined Woodville in

September but I've got no idea why. Hate at first sight or something. I was just about to ask her where she'd left her broomstick – but the bell rang and everyone trooped inside.

I noticed the third leaflet straight away. It was stuck up right next to our lockers and I nearly dropped my bag when I saw what it said.

Star Makers

…is your life about to change?

Seriously, I'm not kidding. It totally spooked me out – like Sara really could see into the future. I spent the whole day waiting for something to happen, *anything*, but it was pretty much business as usual. In maths we learned some complicated new way of doing long division, but since I can't do the old way there wasn't really much hope I was going to

get the new one. Then in English, as part of our poetry topic, we had to write a humorous limerick.

I love writing – especially poems – but when Mr. Davis asked if anyone wanted to read theirs out to the class I looked down at my desk and pretended to be busy sharpening one of my pencils.

"Put your hand up, Phoebs," hissed Ellie, leaning over and reading mine. "It's wicked!" But I couldn't, not in a million years, and by the end of the lesson my pencil was so sharp I could've used it to pierce Polly Carter's ears.

The trouble with me is that I'm shy – and I'm not talking about the way some children are shy, like when they walk into a room full of total strangers, or have to speak out loud in assembly. I'm talking about being so shy that sometimes I can't speak at all. The words are there, squashed inside my head, but it's like I don't know how to get them out any more.

I didn't used to be shy – just the opposite – but ever since Dad left *and* since I started at Woodville, it's like I've had a personality transplant or something. Sometimes I wonder if maybe I left my *old* personality at Merryhill Primary. That if I popped in there one day – after dropping Sara off in the morning – I'd find it hidden behind a radiator, or stuffed down one of the loos.

Anyway, by the end of the day, after double science and the most boring French lesson ever, I'd more or less forgotten about Sara's prediction at breakfast. Then just as we were getting ready to go home, our form teacher, Miss Howell, said she had something important to tell us. I stopped sorting through my stack of homework and looked up.

She was standing at the front of the classroom with some bright yellow leaflets in her hand – *the* bright yellow leaflets – and she looked excited, like it was her birthday, or she'd

won the lottery or something. It's not like I even believe in fortune-telling, I'm not that stupid, but there was something about the way she was standing there, with that look on her face, holding those mysterious leaflets, that made me wonder, just for a second, if The Great *Mystic* Sara might have been right after all.