

RISE OF THE JINN
William Turnage

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Synopsis

What if everyone in the world was granted three wishes on their seventeenth birthday? Fame, fortune, superpowers, the girl or boy of your dreams—you can have it all if you just wish for it, right? Wrong. The Jinn have other plans. Every wish comes with a price—a sick, twisted price. The Jinn have waited an eternity to rise and take their rightful place as rulers of Earth. Now they finally have their chance.

Clover Grimwood finds out just how warped the Jinn, known as genies in the Western world, can be. On her older sister's seventeenth birthday, Razul, one of the most powerful genies in existence, appears in Clover's living room. He violently rips away everything she loves, destroying her family and leaving her desperate and broken.

The only key to her salvation, and the means to breaking the genie's wretched curse, may be a legendary object of power, lost to the ages long ago. To find it, Clover must undergo a series of trials and reach deep inside her very soul to discover the hero she never knew existed. For in her hands rests not only the fate of her family but that of the entire world.

Prologue

Haliah's legs burned as she sped across the desolate landscape, running faster than she had ever run before.

They were close. She could hear them just over the ridge—the Taliban.

With each raspy breath, she drew in more of the searing, dry desert air. But there would be no stopping, not if she wanted to live.

She glanced over her shoulder again and caught a glint of sunlight reflecting off one of the rifles the men carried.

Faster. Hurry.

She slipped on a rock, tripping on her long dark robes, and tumbled to the ground, opening a deep gash in her knee. Blood dripped down her shin, mixing with dirt and grit from the desert floor. The rocks were sharp in the barren lands near the outskirts of Lashkar Gah, Afghanistan.

But she didn't care. She jumped to her feet, sweat falling into her eyes, fear rising in her heart. A little scrape was nothing compared to what the Taliban would do if they caught her. They'd just raided her girls' school and kidnapped or killed most of her friends. Haliah knew she faced the same fate if they got her. So she was desperately running for her life and her freedom.

She had to get away. She had to keep moving. Escape was her only option.

There weren't a lot of places to hide along the banks of the Arghandab River. The water was low, the lowest it'd been in decades. Up ahead, large boulders, once underwater, now jutted into the bright blue sky.

"Over here! I found a trail!" one of the men chasing her yelled out in Pashto.

Haliah jumped. They were close. An image flashed in her mind—the men running their dirty hands over her body, ripping her clothes off, forcing her legs apart.

She wiped a tear away as she desperately crawled over the rocks.

If only her father were there to protect her. He would save her from these evil men. But he was long gone, killed in a war fought over a stretch of dirt in the desert.

She had to hurry; they would be on her soon.

Haliah ducked behind a boulder, trying to catch her breath. She hated the Taliban. She only wanted to go to school and study. But in their eyes, that was one of the greatest sins. She wanted to be a doctor, to help people, heal them. How was that so bad? But she knew there was no reasoning with the Taliban. They'd killed her older brother simply for refusing to join them.

She peeked around the boulder, still breathing hard. A few hundred yards away, three men with automatic weapons followed her trail along the riverbank. They would find her soon. She ducked behind the rock just as one of the men looked toward her.

Had he seen her?

She had to find somewhere to hide. A dark opening lay to her left, a cave hidden along the riverbed. Could she fit in there? It looked to be small enough that the men couldn't follow. It was her only chance.

She ducked down and scooted forward on her stomach, her nostrils immediately filling with the odor of damp decay. The cave had been underwater for years. As she moved deeper inside, it opened up. It was dark inside and slimy with puddles of river water and weeds. The beam of light from the cave entrance provided just enough illumination for her to make out big shapes and odd rock formations.

Was that a statue? And what were those strange symbols carved on the wall? She could barely see them, but it didn't look like any language she knew.

“We’re getting closer,” one of the men said from a distance.

“She can’t be far now,” said another with a deep voice. “We’ll teach that little whore a lesson when we get our hands on her.”

Haliah’s heart was pounding. They were close, so close.

Please don’t find me. Please don’t find me. Please, Allah.

She frantically tried to slow her breathing and calm her trembling body since any sound would give her away. Her eyes slowly adjusted to the dimness and she glanced around for an object she might use as a weapon—a sharp stick. Something. *Anything.*

She gritted her teeth. If they found her, they wouldn’t take her without a fight.

What was that shining across from her?

She reached out and grabbed it. It was caked in mud. Who knew how long it had been in the cave under the flowing current of the river. She rubbed the gunk from it.

It looked like one of those old oil lamps her grandmother used, only this one was gold. She rubbed the lamp again, harder, cleaning it off. Perhaps she could use it to trick the men—tell them she knew where more treasure was and would take them to it if they didn’t hurt her.

Someone whistled, and a shadow passed over the entrance to the cave.

They’d found her.

No, no, no. Don’t move, don’t even breathe.

The lamp began to glow.

What in Allah’s name? She tucked it under her burqa. The stupid thing was going to give her away.

“Come on out of there, little girl,” the man with the deep voice said. “We won’t hurt you. We’re just here to take you to a safe place. This area is dangerous for schoolgirls.”

Haliah wasn’t stupid enough to believe that load of camel dung. She wasn’t going anywhere.

The lamp grew brighter, shining through her dark garments. Smoke emerged from it, filling the cave and drifting outside.

“The little whore is setting a fire in there,” one of the men said.

“Stupid girl,” the man with the deep voice said. “She can’t stay in there with the smoke. She’ll die.”

The man was right. Haliah could already feel it seeping into her lungs. She had to get out, she had no choice. Coughing, she scrambled out of the smoke-filled cave, slipping on the rocks, holding on to the lamp still billowing plumes of smoke. When she emerged into the daylight, the men immediately grabbed her arms and dragged her along the rocks.

“Let me go! Let me go! I’ve done nothing wrong. I just want to go home to my family!” she wailed, desperately hoping for mercy.

“Allah will be the judge of that,” the deep-voiced man said. His thick dark beard was tinged with streaks of gray, and he wore dark sunglasses.

She struggled to get away, kicking and screaming, but the men were too strong. Their dirty fingers dug painfully deep into her arms as they threw her to her back and held her down.

“So, what have we here?” the deep-voiced man said. “Were you going to set us on fire with this little lamp of yours?”

He yanked the lamp from her grasp and held it up. Smoke was still pouring from it, circling them and rising high into the sky. Haliah could see it clearly now. Was it blue?

“That looks like gold,” one of the other men said, pointing at it, eyes wide in surprise. “And old. An antique perhaps. We could sell it; it could be worth a lot.”

“Perhaps,” the other man said. “But first we need to teach this little slut a lesson. Hold her down. As commander, I get first go at this one.”

Haliah struggled to break free, fear gripping her as her thoughts turned to what was going to happen next. “No! No!” she screamed, tears streaming from her eyes. “Please help! Someone help me!”

“No one can hear you scream, harlot. It’s just you and us,” said one of the men holding her down, his breath smelling of liquor. “No one is coming to your rescue.”

“Don’t be too sure about that,” another deep voice bellowed out, the deepest Haliah had ever heard.

The men let go of her and sprang to their feet, staring at the smoke, mouths open, weapons ready. Haliah pulled away from them and scrambled up as a huge man emerged from the blue cloud. Actually, it looked like his body was absorbing the smoke. He was a blue giant, huge and muscular, easily over seven feet tall with a flowing white beard, shaved head, and low ponytail. He was wearing puffy white pants as men from her grandfather’s day once wore, and he carried a long, curved scimitar.

“This is none of your business, old man,” the commander said, raising his assault rifle. “Be on your way.”

“Actually, it is my business,” the blue giant said. “It became my business when this young girl freed me from imprisonment.”

“I can tell you now, old man, that whatever imprisonment you suffered is nothing compared to what we’ll do to you if you don’t move along.”

“Oh, just shoot him,” one of the other Taliban said, raising his gun. “He’s been warned enough.”

In one fluid motion, the blue man lifted his scimitar with lightning speed and then lashed out with it, his arm extending far longer than humanly possible. The scimitar cut smoothly through the air, the sharp blade whistling as it made a deadly arc.

In an instant, the Taliban’s severed head flew into the air.

Haliah gasped, backing away. Was this old man actually standing up to armed Taliban with nothing but a scimitar?

The two other soldiers yelled and immediately fired their weapons at the blue giant. Haliah fell back to the dirt. Bullets hit the old man over and over again, and each time a tiny puff of smoke erupted on his body. It took what seemed like forever for the Taliban soldiers to empty their weapons.

And still the blue giant stood, sneering at them with disdain. “I have fought armies of the greatest warriors this world has ever seen. Your weapons are but mere toys before my power.”

He turned and spat at one of the Taliban.

Something shot out of his mouth and struck the soldier in the forehead. The soldier’s eyes rolled back as a tiny trail of blood leaked from the entry point. The man fell to the ground, dead.

The commander’s eyes grew wider as a look of sheer terror spread across his face. He threw his gun down and started running. Haliah jumped back up but didn’t run, not knowing what to do or where to turn, shocked at the blue giant’s powers.

“It takes a very small, very weak man to attack an innocent little girl,” the blue giant said. “You are nothing more than vermin, a cockroach, and I will treat you as such!”

The blue man puffed his chest out and grew taller, rising up a hundred feet into the desert sky. It only took one step for him to catch up to the fleeing man. Then he raised his giant foot and stomped down on the jihadist fighter.

Haliah felt the force of the impact with dust hitting her in the face and her heart still beating so furiously she could almost hear it.

Then he stomped again and again, and each time a plume of dust rose into the air.

When he was done, he pivoted and strode back over to where Haliah was standing and shaking. He stood towering over her for a second, looking down, then slowly shrank in size.

“That’s the thing about cockroaches, they do make a mess,” he said as he scraped the bottom of his sandal on a rock.

“Who... *what* are you?” Haliah managed to stutter, scared of this giant even though he’d just saved her life.

“I am Razul, son of Razan, King of the Air-Bending Clan; ruler of the Aguanon Water Realm; master of the seven earth, air, water, and fire elements; and reality-warping, wish-granting jinni of the Tenth Degree.”

“A... a jinni?”

A cold chill ran down Haliah’s back despite the desert heat. She couldn’t believe it. She’d heard the stories, of course. All children had. Stories handed down for generations in the oral history of her people. But just mythology, nothing more. And yet a blue jinni stood before her. He’d saved her.

“Yes, a jinni. We are an ancient and powerful race, full of magic beyond human comprehension. And you are?”

“Haliah,” she stuttered as a blue cloud of smoke formed under the jinni’s feet.

He rose into the air and drifted closer to her, circling, staring, inspecting. She followed him with her eyes, too scared to move.

“Haliah, you have freed me.” Razul stared at her, eyes unblinking. “My imprisonment was short this time; it could’ve been much longer. I’m fortunate you arrived when you did. In return, I will grant you three wishes. Anything your heart desires.” Razul smiled.

Haliah couldn’t believe it. She’d been saved from rape and death or enslavement at the hands of the Taliban and now she was being granted three wishes. How was this possible? Had the Taliban knocked her out and now she was hallucinating? It all seemed like a dream.

Three wishes, how could she come up with three wishes?

“I... I don’t know,” she stammered. “I just want to go home.”

“And you shall, little one. But first I’m giving you the opportunity of a lifetime,” Razul said. “You have the chance to change your life forever. Look into your heart; tell me what you wish for. Tell me your greatest desires.”

She thought for a long moment. She’d never wanted much, just the chance to study in peace, to grow up in a place free of the horrors of war and oppression. But all of this was just too much.

“Can I have some time to think about it? Ask my family maybe?”

“No!” Razul bellowed angrily. “I’m giving you one of the greatest gifts that any human can ever hope to have. You must decide now what it is you desire or I will leave, you will never see me again, and you will always wonder what could have been.”

Haliah wanted the wishes. She knew if this was truly a powerful jinni, then he could grant her wishes beyond her wildest dreams. Her mind filled with desires—gold, kingdoms to rule as a princess, beauty, eternal life. But her thoughts kept returning to the tragic events of the day, her lost friends, her attackers.

Then she knew what her first wish would be. She stared back at Razul, balling up her fists in anger, a slow rage burning deep in her belly.

“I wish that the Taliban were all gone.”

Razul nodded, a devilish gleam in his eyes and a sneer on his lips. “A good start.”

He held his arms out to the side and smoke began spinning around him like a powerful dust devil. Then he closed his fingers, absorbing the thick smoke as he chanted in a strange language. He suddenly threw his hands open. Trails of smoke exploded from them in all directions, spreading as far as Haliah could see.

“Done,” Razul said, his chest heaving. “They will never bother you or your people ever again.”

Haliah wasn't so sure. She had to see for herself before she could believe it. The Taliban had been around for a long time, and she didn't think a simple wish would eradicate them.

“Two more wishes,” Razul said, staring at her intently with his glowing blue eyes.

Now things got tricky. Why not wish for something for herself? Her family was poor, and she'd never had anything of value before. But no, there was something else she wanted more than anything. She stood up tall and gathered her courage to ask for her second wish.

“I wish that girls like me, all over the world, would have the chance to study whatever they want in peace and freedom.”

“You truly are a noble girl,” Razul said, bowing his head. “Wise beyond your years.”

The blue jinni muttered another strange chant, and bright blue light again formed around his body. Then the light exploded into the sky, spreading outward, ever to the horizon.

Could this really be happening? Haliah was still in shock. Was this great and powerful jinni really granting her these wishes? If he was, he was changing the world for millions—*she* was changing the world.

“One wish left, Haliah. Choose wisely.”

What could she wish for now?

She looked away from Razul's piercing eyes, down to the sand gathering around her feet, sand as ancient as time itself.

With the first two wishes she already had everything she wanted. She could wish for gold for her family or gold for everyone in the village. But she'd seen what gold did to people. It didn't make them happy. When her cousin in Kabul had received reward money from the Americans, it brought him nothing but trouble. No, gold was not the answer.

She needed to think bigger than that.

What then?

She wanted to help others. It was at the heart of who she was. But she didn't know what other people wanted. Everyone had their own needs, their own particular wishes.

Wait!

That was it.

Haliah took another deep breath and looked up at Razul, confident that she could change everything with one simple wish.

“I wish that everyone in the world... when they're old enough, say...”

Haliah considered what a good age would be. In her village a child came of age at fifteen, but she knew many of her friends were very immature at that age. Perhaps two years more? Seventeen?

“I wish that everyone in the world, when they turn seventeen, would be granted three wishes, just like me.”

Razul's eyes widened and his mouth dropped. Haliah could only guess he was completely and utterly shocked.

“Haliah... the impossible has happened. I never thought this day would come.” The look of shock faded from the jinni’s face, replaced by a devilish grin, a broad grin that stretched his bearded mouth wide.

“Young one, your wish is my command.”

Razul closed his eyes, bowed his head, and spoke more of the strange words, chanting louder this time. His voice rose up over the desert, deafening in its ferocity.

Haliah had to cover her ears against the deep-booming bass.

Razul opened his hands and lifted his arms over his head.

Blue dust devils suddenly sprang up all around them, tiny tornadoes spreading across the landscape, growing from dozens to hundreds to thousands.

“Rise my brethren!” Razul bellowed.

The smoke clouds spun and then coalesced into shapes. Human forms. Men and women. Blue people. No, *blue Jinn*.

“We have much work to do,” Razul said to his fellow Jinn as they gathered around him, a massive crowd of blue spreading through the desert for miles.

Razul looked down at Haliah and smiled once again. Then he leaned over and whispered in her ear.

“And so begins the rise of the Jinn.”

Wish Rules Issued by Decree of the Jinn High Council

1. Wish recipients (*recips*) must accept their wishes when they turn seventeen. Those who refuse will be banished from the plane of human existence and never seen or heard from again.
2. Recips cannot ask for more wishes.
3. Recips cannot take back or undo a wish once it has been made.
4. Recips can transfer one wish and only one wish to another.

Chapter One

Three Years Later

Clover Grimwood glanced at the clock on the wall as Pythagoras droned on about his stupid theorem. Most of what he said was Greek to her, literally Greek, with some broken English mixed in. Despite being wished into the world over two years ago, her tenth-grade geometry teacher still couldn't speak the native tongue very well.

"Five minutes," Knob whispered to her as he leaned over, his bright green eyes sparkling with excitement.

Five minutes until they could leave and go to her stepsister's birthday party. Morgana turned seventeen today and would get her three wishes. She and thousands of others all over the world would have their lives changed forever that day, some for the better, most for worse.

A text popped up on Clover's phone, which she kept concealed under her desk. Most teachers banned them, but Pythagoras was pretty clueless.

Maybe Morgana will wish for a sister who isn't such a loser, appeared in shorthand.

The hateful text came from Jamey. That was Jamey with an *E-Y* not an *I-E*. Clover rolled her eyes. Not again. *Stupid slut*. Sometimes if she ignored the taunts, Jamey would get bored and stop.

Then you'd be gone and I wouldn't have to look at your ugly face.

Clover glanced across the room as the blond cheerleader flipped her golden hair back while her fingers worked their evil magic. Soon the rest of her squad joined in with rants about her being fat, dorky, or wearing clothes from the homeless shelter. Clover clicked off her phone. She'd heard it all before. She tried not to let it get to her, but the constant barrage day after day wore her down.

"Ten, nine, eight..." Knob whispered, counting down the seconds until the bell rang and they could run free from the education torture they had to endure each day.

Finally freedom.

Jazz, Clover's Anatolian shepherd service dog, perked up from the nap that she—along with half the class—had been taking. The iron band and chain above her front paw rattled as she stood. Clover hustled to the door with Jazz by her side, trying to avoid Jamey. Knob trailed close behind, reaching out to carry her backpack.

Before she could get out of the sweaty classroom, Jamey blocked the path. Her nemesis was flanked by two Barbie goons who made up the base of the cheerleader pyramid at football halftime shows. A deep growl rumbled up from Jazz's throat.

"Easy, girl."

Jamey's upper lip drew into a scowl as she looked down at Jazz. Jazz was a massive animal. Anatolian shepherds were strong, rugged dogs bred for protecting livestock in central Turkey. Jazz was about thirty inches tall and weighed close to one hundred fifty pounds. She had a thick cream-colored coat and a black face and ears.

"Keep that dirty fleabag in check, seizure girl," Jamey said. She looked over at Knob with the same condescending look on her face. "Awww, isn't that cute. Your little boyfriend is carrying your backpack. You two gotten your freak on yet?"

The room immediately felt warmer as a trickle of sweat crept down Clover's temple. The cheerleader glared at Knob, who retreated behind Clover, holding her backpack to his chin.

"We're just friends," Clover said, trying to stand her ground.

"Yeah, right," Jamey said, tilting her head to the side, pouting.

Chad strutted over and draped his arm around Jamey's shoulder.

"Wassup? Hey, Clover, you been eatin' some clover?"

Chad jabbed his meaty finger at her mouth, lips curled in his cocky grin that never seemed to go away.

"Ha, cows like grass," bellowed Sloan, one of Chad's beefy double-chinned linemen.

"You've got a little veggie surprise left over from lunch in your teeth there," Chad said.

"Knob can help you out with that. I hear he's got some floss between his legs."

Chad flicked his hand out with the lightning speed of a high school quarterback and nailed Knob right in his crotch. Knob doubled over in pain as Jamey, Chad, and the other students laughed hysterically.

Pythagoras strode over, his toga flowing behind him, finally trying to take charge of his chaotic classroom.

"*Skatá!* Children, stop fight. Go... or learn... more geometry." Pythagoras finished out his scolding in a flurry of ancient Greek, his face turning red.

"Let's clear out," Jamey said, frowning at the old Greek philosopher. "We have a party to go to. And even you're invited, Clover. Be ready to serve us when we want something."

Of course she was invited; the party was at her house.

Jamey and her evil brood headed out into the hallway. Clover glared at her. She so wanted to do something, to say something smart, but the words never came fast enough. Every time Jamey started in on her, all she could wish for was to go hide somewhere, away from everyone, where they couldn't see her, where they couldn't make fun of her anymore.

She patted Knob's back as he bent over, holding his crotch.

"Your mother..." Knob sputtered at the backs of Chad and his friends. "I flossed her teeth last night."

Knob balled his fists up and shook his head.

"No, that's not... I mean I gave it to your mother. *No*... Your mother didn't think it was floss. Ahhh! Whatever."

Knob stood up and scowled at the retreating teens who had rounded the corner and were already out of earshot.

"It's okay, Knob. Don't worry about them. They're a bunch of idiot jerks. Let's head to my house now. Dad wanted me to help with the decorations."

Knob nodded, his lips tight and his back hunched against further torment. Clover patted his shoulder and smiled. He was a good friend, one of the few she had at school. They'd known each for three years now, ever since Knob and his mother moved into the neighborhood. Even then, Clover had towered over Knob, who at sixteen stood only about four feet ten inches. Still, he was cute in an elfin sort of way.

They made their way through the throngs of students pouring out of the building and into the bright spring day. It was early May, and the air was warming, bringing with it blooming flowers and leaves emerging from a long winter's sleep. She could feel summer right around the corner.

They didn't need to take the bus, thank God; Clover's home was a short fifteen-minute walk through a quiet suburban neighborhood just outside of Richmond, Virginia. Well, as quiet as was possible after the genies' arrival.

"Clover, Knob, wait up!"

Seraphina yelled to them from across the parking lot, waved, and came running over. A few feet away, she bumped into two of Jamey's cheer goons and her handful of books went flying.

Both of the goons laughed, and then Hayden turned and let out a tremendous burp right in Seraphina's face.

Now that might be funny if Seraphina didn't have a nose about five times the size of a normal person's, taking up half her face and have a sense of smell one hundred times more sensitive than a dog's. She'd had asthma really bad before her wish day and had wished she could breathe better or something to that effect. Clover couldn't remember the exact wording. Anyway, now her asthma was gone, but at a price.

Seraphina turned red and put her hand over her mouth as she convulsed like she was about to vomit. The two other girls strolled away laughing. Seraphina held her throw-up in and then bent down to pick up her books. Knob ran to help.

"Watch out! Coming through!" came a cry from behind.

Clover, Jazz, and her friends jumped to the side of the walkway as a huge avalanche of snow filled the road and spilled into the nearby manicured yards. Jonny glided past on his snowboard, riding the wake of the magical avalanche pushing him ever forward. His once-happy face now looked more tired than ever.

Jonny had wished to snowboard year round, which his genie had warped into snowboard *forever*. Now an endless avalanche followed him everywhere.

Knob brushed the snow off his T-shirt and frowned, and Jazz shook to clear ice from her coat. Seraphina sniffed the air.

"Smells like he's been down by the James River today."

"At least he didn't wish he could surf year round," Knob said. "Then we'd be dealing with floods every day."

"Or a hurricane," Clover added.

Knob rolled his eyes and then ducked as their friend Diego came in for a landing. The boy who'd wished he could fly hit the ground running and nearly knocked poor Seraphina down.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Diego pecked away at his iPhone, his beady crow eyes blinking at them in excitement. A text popped up on Clover's phone.

You guys ready for the party?

"Yeah, Diego, we're heading over to my house now. What to join us?"

"Caw! Caw!"

Diego nodded, black feathers rustling from the motion. Diego had turned seventeen just last month and had always wanted to be an airline pilot. Now he was living his dream of flying. A poorly worded wish, however, gave him the upper body of a giant crow and the lower body of a human teenager.

Diego tucked his wings down by his sides, and they walked the last block to Clover's house in a relative peace. Jazz ran into the yard and immediately starting rolling around on her back, absorbing the fresh aroma of crushed grass into her thick fur.

"Keep that mutt outside! I just vacuumed the floor!" Lisa yelled out from the top of a stool. Clover's stepmother was decorating the outside of the house with balloons and streamers. She barely looked at Clover as she walked by, intent on the task at hand and likely frazzled by the party preparations.

"But, Lisa, you know I need her."

Jazz was a seizure-alert dog and always stayed by her side. Clover was epileptic. Her seizures had started when she was five years old. At first, she would only have them once a year or so, but as she got older, the frequency increased. Now she averaged about one a week.

“Very well.” Lisa relented irritably. “Clean her paws with a towel from the garage first. And keep that crow-boy out.”

She stared and pointed at Diego, her face twisted like she’d tasted something bitter.

“I don’t want that thing shedding feathers in the house.”

“Caaaw!”

“Lisa, you know Diego. He’s my friend and he’s here to help set up for the party. He doesn’t shed.”

Clover turned and whispered, “You don’t, do you?”

“Caw!”

Diego squawked and a feather flew off of his back and floated into the air. Clover reached out and grabbed it before Lisa could see it.

“He can put decorations on the roof,” Knob volunteered.

“Hurpf,” Lisa snorted. “Very well, here are some balloons. But if I so much as find one feather in the house, we’ll be having crow soup for dinner.”

She scowled at them as Clover picked up a box of decorations and started taping them around the front door.

A few minutes later, Morgana arrived. She and her newest boyfriend, Whitney, blazed into their cul-de-sac, tires squealing as they rounded the corner. Whitney was driving a flashy new silver BMW that was almost as bright as his diamond skin in the sunlight.

They parked in the driveway and hopped out of the car. Jazz immediately started barking furiously at both of them. Whitney hissed at her, bearing his sharp fangs. Jazz kept her distance, letting out a deep growl.

“Keep that dog away from me or I just might make a meal out of her,” Whitney said.

“Don’t you touch her,” Clover said, getting between him and Jazz.

“Oh my God, Clover, don’t freak. He’s just joking,” Morgana said.

Whitney turned his attention to Diego, who had flown up to the roof and was stringing a Happy Birthday sign across the gutter.

“Hey, crow-boy! Try not to crap on the new Beamer!”

“Caw!”

Diego dropped the end of the birthday streamer and sat on the roof, frantically trying to pull his iPhone out of his pocket and send a response before Whitney got inside. He didn’t have much luck, though, with crow talons as fingers.

Morgana put her arm around Whitney’s waist and glared at Clover. Then she looked down at her phone, furiously pressing buttons, taking half a second to push her coal-black hair behind her ear. With her dark red lipstick and pale face, Clover thought she looked like one of those heroin-addicted, anorexic runway models who had tried to do her own makeup while she was high.

“So you ready? Whatcha gonna wish for, Morgana?” Knob asked, bouncing up and down with excitement.

“None of your business, little toad,” Morgana replied, flipping her hand dismissively.

“Everyone will find out soon enough anyway.”

“I’m hungry,” Whitney growled, flashing his fangs once again. “Anyone want to offer up a neck?”

He glanced over at Seraphina’s exposed neck, and she quickly pulled her collar up.

“I have this to offer. Bon appétit, asshole.” Knob turned and dropped his pants, revealing his ass to the group.

“Ewww!” Morgana cried out in disgust.

Knob shook his butt playfully from side to side. “Come on, Whitney, dig in.” Morgana and Whitney both cringed and drew back like vampires in the sun. Of course, Whitney *was* a vampire. When he turned seventeen last year, he’d wished to be one. His family was wealthy enough to hire the best wish-contract lawyer in town, so instead of turning into a bat-boy who slept in a coffin all day, he ended up like a *Twilight* vampire, complete with broody good looks, super strength, shiny skin and the ability to read thoughts. All the girls at school loved him. Clover thought he was the same asshole he’d been before his wishes.

“Clover, stop thinking that. I told you, I’m with Morgana.”

Whitney smiled, his cavity-filled fangs dripping with saliva. At least the genie was able to throw him a horrible case of tooth decay.

“I’m sorry, Morgana, but she’s thinking about doing it with me.”

Her stepsister believed every word that came out of Whitney’s despicable mouth. So she pointed her finger at Clover, dark eyes narrowed in anger, icy-pale face showing a hint of red on her high cheekbones.

“You know Whitney’s out of your league, fatty. The best you can do is rooster-boy up there.”

“Caw!”

Diego was still trying to send a text, but his phone had apparently fallen into the gutter. He was throwing leaves and other debris out in a frantic attempt to retrieve it.

“Come on, we have a party to get ready for,” Morgana said, grabbing Whitney by the hand.

“Last chance for a snack.” Knob laughed, pointing at his butt as the two walked past.

“Come on, let’s finish this up,” Clover said, trying not to think too much about her pretty little bitch of a stepsister. Or about Knob’s ass, for that matter.

Clover and her friends were putting the last of the balloons up outside when Wallace “the Wizard” Westbrook, Esquire, arrived. The wish attorney looked every bit the part—dark, pressed, pinstripe suit, white shirt with red tie, and a bowler hat. She wasn’t sure why they called him the Wizard, but she assumed it was because he was able to work magic in the courtroom.

“Hi, Clover.”

Wallace reached out and shook her hand, his artificial smile revealing two rows of gold-plated teeth. He held her hand just a little too long, and she had to pull it away from his clammy grip.

“My, you’ve really grown since the last time I saw you.”

The attorney looked her body up and down, a sick look on his face.

“Almost seventeen now, aren’t you? Not the little girl anymore—no, a beautiful young woman. I bet the boys are after you at school, aren’t they?”

Clover shrugged.

“Hmmm.”

Wallace, the creep, kept staring at her body, eyes lingering too long at her chest. She crossed her arms, shifted her weight from side to side, and looked away, hoping he would leave.

“Yes, quite the young lady. Well, I better head inside. We’ll talk later, okay?”

That was the last thing she wanted to do. Her dad’s old friend from school was a nasty, dirty old man, and she would stay far away from him. He was supposed to be some big shot wish lawyer who was doing her dad a favor by taking on Morgana’s case. Her parents never would’ve been able to afford him otherwise.

“All done,” Knob said as he taped the last of the balloons to the mailbox. “Let’s head inside and see if we can get a Coke to mix with this.”

He pulled a small bottle of Jack Daniels from his backpack, then quickly slid it back in. "It's the only way I'll be able to tolerate Morgana and her friends. No offense."

"No problem, Knob. I feel the same way. But just a little bit for me. I don't want my dad catching me. He's always on the lookout."

Clover and Knob walked up onto the front porch, leaving Diego in the yard digging for worms.

"Come on in when you're done, Diego," she yelled out as he eyed Whitney's shiny new Beamer with a twinkle in his eye.

"Who's that weirdo?" Knob asked Clover. "One of Morgana's friends here for the party? He looks pretty Goth."

Clover looked over her shoulder.

A man stood across the street, staring intently at her house. He was extremely tall and bone thin, and wore high, black leather boots and a full-length, black leather trench coat pulled tight to the neck. A fedora-style, bright red hat sat precariously on his giant bald head. His gaunt face was ghostly pale, his eyes dark and recessed in his skull, and his forehead seemed much larger than normal. His thin dark lips were curled in a partial smile as he stood firmly erect, unmoving. He casually flipped a coin in the air and rolled it over his spindly fingers.

"Never seen him before," Clover said, pulling her jacket tighter as she squirmed under the stranger's gaze.

"He could be a wish recip. We should invite him in."

Knob waved to the strange man, beckoning him to cross the street, but he just continued to stare, not even raising his hand in greeting.

"Guess he's not interested in the party," Knob said. "Come on, I think we both need a drink."

Knob turned and walked into the house, leaving Clover on the porch under the unsettling gaze of the pale stranger.

"Freak," she whispered under her breath, pushing the strange feeling she had about the man to the back of her mind.

She had a party to attend.

Chapter Two

It was almost four and guests were arriving. Morgana had been born at 4:45 p.m., so that was the target witching hour. When they walked into the living room, which was filling up with people, Knob immediately grabbed two cups of Coke. Then he ducked into a corner and spiked them with the Jack. He handed one to Clover. She took a sip and almost spit it out as the bitter burn struck the back of her throat.

“What the hell, Knob! This is way too strong!”

“Oh, it’s fine. Take another sip—you’ll get used to it.”

Knob casually waved his hand at the drink as he sipped from his own cup.

She wasn’t a big drinker, not like some of the partiers in her class, but she did like to have a taste every now and then, wine coolers mostly. But she figured she’d go for something a little stronger for this miserable party. It was the only way she’d be able to handle Morgana’s friends. She hated almost every one of them. It seemed like they lived solely to make her life a living hell.

“Hey, Clover, how’s it going?” A deep voice rumbled from high above her, startling her.

She nearly dropped her drink, then turned and looked up at her old friend Rocco, who’d turned seventeen a couple weeks ago.

“Pretty good. How ’bout with you?”

She’d been at his party when he’d made his fateful wish. He’d been bullied nonstop at school for years, getting the crap beat out of him by everyone from the football team to the volleyball squad. Even some of the male cheerleaders had had a go at him. You couldn’t get much lower than that.

So Rocco wished to be bigger and stronger than all of the bullies. Clover couldn’t remember the exact words of his wish, but his contract was pretty tight, or so she’d thought.

“I’m sorry,” Rocco said, handing her part of the door frame he’d snapped off walking into the house. “Still getting adjusted.”

Rocco stood over seven feet tall and looked like the Incredible Hulk minus the green skin and anger-control issues. He was trying to pick up a glass to have a drink of punch, but each time he grabbed one, it simply shattered in his catcher’s-mitt-sized hands. It reminded Clover of how she used to try to catch bubbles floating in the air during the warm summer months. Finally he just gave up, sighing and dropping his shoulders.

Clover scanned the growing crowd of partygoers. She knew most of them. They were Morgana’s friends and even though she and Morgana were in the same grade, they hung with very different crowds. It was an eclectic mix of pre- and post-wish kids, and it was very easy at a glance to tell the two groups apart. It was also easy to see who’d had a good wish attorney and who hadn’t.

“Coming through!”

Ernie Robinson nearly ran over her in his automatic wheelchair. She didn’t even want to look at his deformed body as he rolled in front of her. If he hadn’t been such a jerk to her, maybe she would’ve felt sorry for him. *Maybe*. He fell into the latter category, someone with a sucky wish attorney.

His money wish had gone awry due to slightly ambiguous wording in his contract. It was something about being *worth* ten million dollars. Anyway, the end result was that he turned into a giant morbidly obese gold nugget-human hybrid with a head and limbs. He was too heavy to

walk, hence the wheelchair. A group of younger kids trailed behind him, waiting for him to shed golden flakes the way normal people shed dead skin.

From rumors, news reports, and from being present at a few wish-birthday parties, Clover had found it was almost always safer to wish for something material instead of wishing to *be* something. The genies had a little bit less room to screw you over that way. And it was always better to keep the wish smaller in scope. In other words wish for a single gold coin instead of a billion dollars. She had no idea what the true limits were on genies' wish granting powers, but it seemed like the bigger the wish, the less likely you were to actually get what you wanted, even with a top notch wish lawyer.

Knob came up beside her, taking another sip of his Jack and Coke.

"Not much longer now," he said, looking at his watch and nodding at her drink.

She took another sip, and this one did go down smoother. In fact, it tasted pretty good.

Clover's father burst through the door, late as always. Luckily, the first person he went to was Wallace the Wizard, intercepting the attorney before he could return to her and offer up a back rub or something. Clover shuddered at the thought.

She waved to her dad across the crowd. He smiled and waved back, then Wallace the Wizard pulled out the thick contract and they started going over some last-minute details. Her dad called Morgana over, who rolled her eyes as she pried herself away from Whitney's grasp.

Wallace pointed to something in the contract and spoke to Morgana. Morgana promptly put her hands on her hips and shook her head. It looked like the last-minute changes were not to Morgana's liking.

"Woof!"

Jazz was watching the whole thing as intensely as Clover. She reached over and petted her big dog.

"It's okay, girl, I'm sure everything will be fine. Lisa will help them work it out."

Jazz sat quietly at her feet and intently surveyed the crowd.

"Speaking of Lisa," Knob said, pointing. "Looks like she's getting the brunt of one of Morgana's little fits now."

Morgana was yelling at Lisa while her mother pleaded with a bit more decorum. Clover had no idea what change they were making to the wish contract at such a late hour. They'd been working on the stupid thing for over a year. Possibly the Wizard had found out about a new loophole the genies were exploiting and they needed to cover that.

More finger-pointing went back and forth until it looked like Lisa finally gave in, as she always did, letting her only blood-related daughter, and favorite child by far, have her way. That, of course, ignited another round of finger-pointing and yelling, this time between her father and Lisa, with Morgana adding, loud enough for most of the room to hear, "I hate you, Gabriel! You're not my real father! I'm going to wish for whatever I damn well please!"

Great, Morgana. Smart move there.

Clover knew that if she didn't follow the exact wording of the contract, then she had no chance at getting what she wanted. Morgana's ability to articulate intelligent thoughts had a long way to go to catch up with her looks—that was for sure.

"She's screwed if she goes off contract," Rocco bellowed out.

Clover nodded in agreement. You had to be very precise in what you wished for, because the genies would always twist your words. Even if you specifically wished for your wishes not to hurt or embarrass you or for nothing bad to happen, they almost always did. It seemed that *bad* was open to interpretation.

“Maybe she wants to be a vampire like Whitney, or a werewolf,” Knob said, smiling. “Then she and asswipe can go and have some little dog-bat babies and live happily ever after.”

Everyone around them laughed.

“We’ll find out shortly,” Seraphina said, looking at the clock on her cell. “In thirty seconds, twenty-nine...”

Everyone else in the room checked their watches, phones, and other portable devices on cue. The feeling of anticipation spread like static electricity. A blanket of tense silence grew over the crowd as the seconds drifted away.

Clover’s pulse quickened, and her breathing sped up to match it. The genie would be here in seconds. She took another big chug of her drink, almost finishing it. The warm alcohol hit her stomach, easing the tension from her body. Was she getting buzzed already?

“I wonder who she’s gonna get,” Seraphina whispered.

You never knew which genie would show up, and some were much more amicable than others. Then there were those few who were pure evil. When they appeared, a wisher may as well just throw his carefully crafted wish contract in the trash and expect to live out his days as a dung beetle or something.

“Ten... nine... eight!”

The chanting grew louder with each tick of the clock, until—

“Zero!”

The center of the large living room shimmered ever so slightly. The people standing there quickly backed up, edging as far away as they could. A chill ran down Clover’s back, and her hair, filled with static electricity, floated over her head. The same thing happened to others in the room.

Suddenly a tiny whiff of dark blue smoke formed, replacing the shimmer. It grew and grew until it nearly filled the room. The crowd of partygoers shrank back, murmurs and gasps of awe spreading through them.

This was going to be a big one, and blue at that. The blue genies were the oldest and most powerful.

Clover’s heart raced as the smoke took shape.

The genie was coming.

Chapter Three

Smoke weaved its way around the room as if it were alive with bizarre shapes jumping from the void and then retreating. Finally the beads and strings of blue began to coalesce in the center, spinning and dancing to a magical beat. Out of the chaos of smoke, a blue genie was born.

A great muscular chest inhaled as the genie flexed arms like massive, gnarled tree trunks bursting with veins. When the head formed, Clover could tell that this was an ancient genie. His square blue face sported a thick white beard tied neatly at the chin. His head was shaved completely but for a white ponytail that began just above his neck and trailed down his back. His torso ended in a trail of smoke, no legs or lower half of his body visible. He surveyed the room, and a smirk creased his face when everyone averted their eyes from his powerful gaze.

Clover though, strangely enough, stared at him with intensity. She knew she should be feeling fear, yet she felt strangely numb inside. Was it the Jack and Coke?

“Greetings. My name is Razul,” the genie said in the deepest voice she’d ever heard, a voice that made James Earl Jones sound like a choir girl. “You may have heard of me.”

A cacophony of gasps rose up from the room. Razul was the name of the genie that had granted the original three wishes—the genie that turned the entire world upside down. What was he doing here?

Clover’s body tensed. She could sense this genie’s might. That he chose to visit them, of all people, was indeed strange.

Jazz whimpered, tucked her tail, and shook in fear, cowering behind Clover’s legs. She’d never seen her big, strong dog so frightened before. Anatolian shepherds could defend goat herds against hungry wolf packs and ferocious cheetahs. They didn’t rattle easily.

Razul stroked his beard and eyed Morgana.

“Hello, little pretty. Ready to have some fun?”

Looks of terror spread across everyone’s faces, especially Morgana’s. Still, Clover felt nothing. She should be as frightened as everyone else. If this was truly Razul, then he was one of the most powerful and evil of all the genies known to humans. She should cringe before him.

Suddenly an image popped into her head out of nowhere, kind of like those uncontrollable giggles that people sometimes got at funerals, laughing when they should be crying.

The image was Papa Smurf.

On steroids.

She couldn’t shake the image of this great and powerful Papa Smurf genie doing curls in front of the mirror at the gym and then looking to his blue spotter and saying, “I can feel the pump! Oh yeah, I can feel it!”

She laughed out loud.

All eyes turned to her, including Razul’s. Any trace of a smile quickly evaporated from his face, leaving just a frown and a cold narrowing of his eyes. He floated casually to her, trailing smoke from his waist to the floor. She tried to suppress the giggle monster that had taken possession of her body, but even with her hand covering her mouth, she couldn’t stop laughing.

Razul stopped in front of her as everyone around her backed away.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.” But she continued to laugh.

“Hmm. Laugh while you can, little one. I’ll make a point to see you in a few months, Clover Nashira Grimwood. And I guarantee that you won’t find anything funny about that.”

Knob grabbed her arm and tried to pull her away, but she still wasn't afraid. The great and commanding Razul moved closer to her face and stared directly into her eyes. Clover stared right back, unblinking. Deep down, below his glowing blue pupils, she saw a blue flame burning, a fire born in the heavens and fierce enough to scorch the earth.

Razul lingered for a second and then suddenly backed away.

"Enough of this nonsense. Let's get started."

What was that? He just turned away, dismissing her. Perhaps he thought of her as insignificant, just as so many at school did. A spark of anger ignited in Clover's chest.

Wallace the Wizard stepped forward, holding the wish contract out for Morgana.

"Wise and mighty Razul, it is a pleasure to meet you." Wallace extended his hand. "My name is Wallace West—"

Razul held up his finger, barely glancing at Wallace, and the Wizard froze in place.

"Morgana, dear child." Razul smiled. "I can grant you anything your heart desires. What is it you truly wish for?"

Razul inched closer to Morgana and then circled her, leaving a trail of blue smoke that enveloped her like tentacles.

"I-I-I...", Morgana stammered.

"The contract, dear, please read the contract," Lisa pleaded.

Morgana shook her head—clearing a spell Razul was trying to place on her? It wouldn't be the first time a genie tinkered with a wish recipient. She reached out to grab the contract from Wallace the Wizard's stiff hands, but the attorney's frozen fingers had a death grip on the document. Clover's father had to help her pry his old college buddy's fingers loose.

With the contract free, Clover's father stood facing Morgana and held the thick document out in front of her. She flipped to page one and began reading.

"The following information set forth in this document shall constitute the full nature of my three wishes. At no point will put Genie's name here grant said wishes—"

"You need to say *his* name there, dear," Clover's father said gently, pointing to the document.

"Oh, okay. Sorry. I'm a little nervous."

Morgana shot a quick glance over at Razul and then returned to the contract.

"At no point will *Razul* grant said wishes until all terms of this contract have been laid forth verbally by the wish recipient."

Morgana continued reading the document word for word, obviously with no clue as to what any of it meant. By the looks of the document her father was holding, they were going to be there for a while. The tension drained from the room as Morgana laid out the nature of the contract before starting in on her wishes. It looked like she was going to follow the document to the letter after all, which meant no crazy drama like Clover was sure many in the room were hoping for, especially those whose wishes had gone badly. Even though they would never admit it, often these seventeenth-birthday parties brought out the post-car-crash watcher types. The crowd remained quiet for the most part, just a few murmurs as folks checked their phones for messages.

"Seems we have a party crasher," Razul said as he lazily drifted around on his back.

He pointed a finger at Morgana, and a boy suddenly appeared in front of her. Morgana gasped and jumped back. The boy was leaning over, and his lips had been touching hers in a kiss.

"Dash Everhart!" Morgana exclaimed, backing away.

Dash just stood there, frozen, his lips puckered up. He had been in love with Morgana ever since they went out for a month or so last year. Morgana had broken up with him and he never got over it. Basically, he'd been stalking her ever since. Well, until he'd disappeared.

Clover remembered his wish day from a few weeks ago. He was on the track team at school but was never a big star. He wanted to be faster, so that's what he wished for. After making his wishes, he'd disappeared. No one had seen him since.

"What's he doing here?" Morgana asked.

Razul floated over, inspecting the boy.

"I have to congratulate the genie who granted this wish," Razul said, raising an eyebrow. "Seems your little friend here sped up so fast that he no longer registers to human senses."

So that was what happened to him. He hadn't disappeared. He was always there, just moving too fast for people to see him. Poor Dash. From his perspective, everyone must seem frozen in time, barely moving.

Then again, he had been kissing Morgana. Clover had a sick thought, wondering just what else Dash had been doing to Morgana without her knowing.

Morgana touched Dash, who was as stiff as a statue, then shrugged and went back to reading the legalese.

Clover took the final sip of her drink, feeling even more buzzed. She wondered how strong Knob had made it. Then she grabbed a giant strawberry the size of her hand from the hors d'oeuvres table and took a bite. Bountiful harvests of fresh fruits and vegetables filled pantries all over the continental United States since some well-meaning girl had wished for an end to hunger.

The sweet delicious taste filled her mouth and the juice dripped down her chin. Then she suddenly got the sharp, slimy taste of raw oysters and had to force herself to swallow. That was the twist. You never knew what you'd get in the food these days. Damn genies.

Seraphina joined her and Knob, sniffing a slice of pineapple.

"Liver. Specifically goat liver," she said as she put the pineapple slice back on the table.

Morgana droned on like she was reading from the phone book. Clover wandered over to the window. The legal mumbo jumbo and the murmurs from the partygoers danced through her mind, mixing with the effects of Knob's drink, lulling her into relaxation, like she'd slipped into a warm bath.

But the sight outside jolted her to attention.

"What the f—"

The strange pale man in the black trench coat had been joined by two other men, nearly as tall, wearing the same bizarre outfits, only these had black hats instead of red. They stood very close to each other, almost touching hands, and all three stared at the house, rigid and creepy partial smiles on their ghostly faces.

"It's time." Knob nudged her in the ribs. "She's getting to the good part now."

Clover shuddered and turned away from the three freaks across the street. She wanted to tell her parents about them, but she'd have to wait—Morgana had reached the meat of her recitation, her first wish. Everyone's attention perked up, and the small conversations that had sprung up quieted one after the other.

Wish number one dealt with the health and longevity of the entire family. It was a good solid base to build upon. Although no one knew if the genies had the power to grant everlasting life, they could easily make a human young and strong again. Morgana read through a litany of caveats, trying to close loopholes the genies had delighted in exploiting.

To Clover, the whole thing seemed like a war of words between the wish attorneys and the genies, with the loser, most of the time, being the wish recipient. Of course, Wallace the Wizard didn't seem to be winning anything right now, except for the *who could stay frozen the longest* contest with Dash as his competitor.

Finally Morgana got to the end of wish one.

"And so for my first wish, I, Morgana Ashley Bentancourt, do wish."

Razul looked like he'd fallen asleep, lolling around on his back on a cushion of blue smoke. But he instantly snapped his fingers, eyes still closed.

A hush fell over the room as a strange blue light enveloped Morgana, her mother, and Clover's father. The touch of gray hair around her father's temples slowly darkened and the wrinkles on his forehead smoothed to perfection. Lisa saw similar improvements, twenty years and twenty pounds falling away instantly, the faded beauty of her youth returning. It was hard to tell on the outside if anything happened to Morgana, although she did seem a little less pale.

Clover looked down to see if she glowed as well, but there was nothing. She felt the exact same. A quick glance in the mirror in the hallway revealed her same plain appearance, freckles and all. She hadn't been listening close enough, but she wondered if the contract failed to cover stepsisters. Typical—just another slap in the face from her despicable stepsister.

Cheers and applause rang up around the room as her father and Lisa paraded around in front of everyone with their new youthful bodies. She'd never seen her dad look so good—potbelly gone and muscular arms nearly ripping out of his pressed, white business shirt. Lisa looked like she was ready to be elected prom queen again.

Razul had rolled over to his stomach to watch the show, eyeing Lisa up and down, admiring his handiwork.

"Okay, one down, two more to go," her father said proudly.

Wish number two was the standard money wish the whole family had discussed. This was a complicated one that had to be worded just right; otherwise the money would end up on the front lawn just as a tornado arrived. Or it'd appear in the form of a gold nugget buried so deep under the house it would cost more to dig it out than it was worth. Or a band of thieves would show up at the bank just after the money was deposited. All of these events had happened to friends in their neighborhood.

Morgana read out a very specific set of rules for the source of the funds, where and when they were to be deposited, and the length of time they'd be available. Razul was back to his bored posture again, floating, gazing at the ceiling, whistling some tune Clover almost recognized. Twenty minutes later, Morgana got to the end.

"And so, for my second wish, I, Morgana Ashley Bentancourt, do wish."

"Done," Razul said the instant she finished.

Clover's dad looked over at Lisa, who had her laptop open to the family bank account. A giant smile popped up on Lisa's face and she gave the thumbs-up sign.

"It's all there!"

A cheer rang out from the party guests.

"Number three, please," Razul said, now twirling his finger in the air and making little animals out of his smoke trail. "Your last and final wish forever. Make sure it's what you want."

Razul flipped over to his stomach and stared at Morgana.

She looked back down at the document. This last wish must be the cause of the argument they were having earlier. Morgana started reading, then stopped and looked up.

"Uh-ahhh..." she stuttered and Razul smiled.

“Let me help,” he said.

He waved his hand, and the pages of the wish contract fluttered, then the document rose out of Morgana’s hands and spun above her. Letters and words lifted off the pages and hung, floating in the air in front of Morgana.

“Just read it out loud, dear,” Razul said, his anticipation clearly building along with everyone else’s. Then he paused for a second before adding, “Or... you can wish for what’s *really* in your heart.”

Morgana seemed bewitched by the floating words bobbing and weaving like they were underwater.

“Morgana, just read the contract, dear,” Lisa said urgently. “Don’t do anything rash.”

She started reading again and then stopped.

“No, Morgana,” Clover whispered.

She could tell by Morgana’s twisted frown and shooting glance at Lisa that she was about to have another fit of rebellion, going against the carefully worded final wish her parents had set forth for her.

The third wish was supposed to deal with happiness and a life of purpose, which her father was always telling them was one of the most important goals that they could strive for. Clover seemed to grasp the concept, at least part of it. She always felt good when she set a goal for herself, something just out of reach, and then worked hard for it and succeeded. It was a much better feeling than if someone had done it for her or given it to her. Her hard work at school and good grades were examples.

But Morgana didn’t see things that way, or maybe she just wasn’t mature enough to understand the concept. If she wanted something, she wanted it now and with a minimal amount of work. Anyway, they’d been going back and forth on the wording of the wish for days, and Clover thought they’d finally come to an agreement, though apparently the last-minute changes sent things into a tailspin. Now Morgana was having second thoughts about the whole wish-number-three concept of a purposeful life.

A rebellious frown traced across Morgana’s pale face. She looked straight at her mother and stepfather and then swept the floating words away with the back of her hand. She turned to Razul, whose eyes widened in glee.

Clover held her breath and clenched her fists. She knew things were about to go terribly wrong.

Morgana brushed her long dark hair behind her ears, cut her eyes over at her mother, and said, “For my third and final wish, I wish for...”

Chapter Four

A hush fell over the room. Clover could hear Jazz panting beside her as she sat obediently against her leg. Then Lisa yelled out, “No, Morgana!” breaking the silence as she lunged forward and tried to clap her hand over Morgana’s mouth.

A simple glance from Razul and Lisa froze in place, joining Wallace the Wizard and Dash Everhart as another human statue in the living room.

“Go on and finish, dear,” Razul said deeply and softly, smiling ever so gently. “Don’t let them tell you what to do anymore.”

Morgana stood up straight and proudly stuck out her chest.

“I wish I was a world famous pop music and movie star with a perfect family!”

“Hahahaha!” Razul bellowed. “Excellent! Your wish is hereby granted.”

Razul bowed. The trail of smoke drifted from his torso down to the floor and then crept over to Morgana, enveloping her body. Inside the blue tornado, Morgana was transformed.

Her long dark hair grew shorter, turning into blond curls, while her tall, thin frame shrank and became chubby. The full cheeks of a child bulged out from her face. Her clothes also changed; her short miniskirt and tight top replaced by an even shorter blue flowery dress with a big bow tie and ruffles. When the smoke finally cleared, Morgana had turned into a little girl who looked to be about ten years old.

“What the hell is this?” she blurted out in a cute squeaky voice as she looked down at her body.

Razul held up a finger and slow, melodic music started playing. Morgana immediately went into a tap-dancing routine and sang about the good ship Lollipop and Peppermint Bay. She was actually quite good.

Clover was shocked at first, not really sure what to make of this development, then she laughed and pulled out her phone to take some pictures and a quick video.

“And straight to Facebook,” she said to Knob as she hit the Enter button.

Morgana got her wish all right. She got everything she deserved.

Three minutes later when the song was over, Morgana’s grandparents stood and started clapping.

“My goodness, Ned, she’s better than little Shirley Temple,” Morgana’s shriveled old grandmother said.

“Beatrice, I think she *is* Shirley Temple!”

“Oh my, Neddie. She certainly is! Shirley was so popular in music and films back in the day. What a wonderful wish! Let’s hear another song.”

Morgana was still gawking at her body, holding her arms out and poking her stomach.

“I’ve got all these horrible baby songs in my head. And they’re like a hundred years old!”

Morgana slapped the sides of her head with both hands. In a world where pop songs from last summer were considered old, Clover knew Morgana must be having a traumatic experience.

“And I’m a fat baby pig!”

Morgana started crying.

Jazz nudged Clover, whimpering and then pawing her leg.

Oh, no, damn it! That was the signal a seizure was coming on. Now was the worst time for a seizure. Clover needed to go to bed, or find a quiet space, but she so wanted to see how the rest of Morgana’s wish played out.

“Okay, girl,” Clover whispered. “Just a minute.”

Razul watched Morgana sob and rolled his eyes, then he said, "Now for part two of that wish, which should technically be another wish. But since you didn't follow your little contract on wish number three, I'll bend the rules a bit, just this once."

He smiled and snapped his fingers. Clover's father and Lisa both disappeared in puffs of smoke.

"The perfect family."

Two smoke tornadoes appeared in the middle of the room, spinning slowly. Out of the haze, a man and woman appeared. He was dressed in a dark suit, carried a briefcase, and wore a dark hat. She had on a pretty dress with flowers and was tying an apron around her waist.

"My goodness, so many houseguests. I should make blueberry muffins. And, Walter, I need to get your dinner started. How was your day, dear?"

The man, Walter, kissed her on the cheek.

"Just dandy, Betty. I've been looking forward to your delicious pork chops all day."

Clover searched the room. Okay, where were her dad and Lisa?

She felt a tug on her pants leg and looked down just as another cloud of blue smoke cleared away, revealing a small boy. He looked to be about eight years old and was holding a slingshot.

"Gee whiz, sis, I think my slingshot is broken. Can you help me fix it?"

Clover stared at the kid in shock.

"Holy crap!" Knob chuckled beside her. "Your family just turned into the Cleavers."

She didn't think it was very funny. Her dad had disappeared, sent to some genie Neverland. Where was he? Was he gone for good? Panic gripped Clover as she thought about losing her father. If he was gone, she would be truly alone.

She knew it was nearly impossible to undo a wish once it was spoken. She tried to clear her head and think about what to do next.

Jazz whimpered and pawed her again, this time much harder. Clover ignored her.

"Well, my work is done," Razul said, bowing. "Other duties beckon."

"Wait!" Clover yelled out.

Once again, all eyes in the room turned to her.

"Where's my father?"

Razul's lips closed together in anger as he glided across the room to hover in front of her. Jazz scurried out of sight and everyone else backed away. Razul stared down at her, arms crossed.

This time Clover felt the fear. She'd seen the power of this genie, seen how he could rip her father away from her.

"For the disrespect you showed me earlier, little Clover, I've put your father and stepmother in a very special place, where they'll remain until the end of time."

Razul whirled his hand, and out of the blue smoke an image formed. Clover could make out a great cavernous chamber filled with lava and fire. Her father was chained to a rock in the middle of a lava lake, wearing only his underwear and dripping with sweat. Lisa was on the other side of the rock in the same condition.

The lava bubbled and tiny creatures emerged from it. They had red crablike bodies and human-baby heads but with horns. One of the creatures turned and gazed at Clover, baring its sharp teeth. A long forked tongue shot out, and the creature continued its climb toward her father. When the first of the horrible things got to his feet, they bit him while dozens, maybe hundreds more climbed over their backs. Her father screamed in agony as they devoured his flesh.

Clover couldn't watch anymore and turned away, tears welling in her eyes. What despicable horror had Razul sicced on her family? This couldn't be real. It couldn't be.

"After my little pets are done chewing on his intestines, they'll go back into the lava pit. Then your dad will heal completely over the next twenty-four hours, and tomorrow my creatures will feast again."

Razul smiled.

"This is your father's fate."

"You bastard!" Clover yelled, pure anger rising up to replace her fear. "What did we ever do to you?"

Razul growled, "The list of abuses genies have suffered at the hands of you humans is far too long for me to recite. Our superior race has been forced to bow to you apes for millennia."

"And my mother?" Morgana squeaked as she twirled over, wiping tears from her cheeks.

"You have a new mother; why should you care?" Razul said dismissively.

"I... I want to know."

"Well, my little pets need somewhere to lay their eggs."

The blue smoke scene panned over to show the horrid baby-headed crabs crawling in and out of Lisa's mouth. Then her stomach grew larger and larger, vile larvae inside writhing and pushing against her skin, trying to get out. Eventually her stomach grew to where it looked like it would surely burst. And it did. Thousands of tiny crab devils spewed out all over the rocky ground under Lisa and scurried into the lava.

"Don't worry, she'll heal as well. Then she'll give birth again tomorrow."

Morgana screamed, shrill and piercing, as everyone else in the room gasped. Clover gritted her teeth, her body tense with a deep hatred that she had never experienced before. The funny little tricks and twisting of the wishes that she'd seen happen to her friends was nothing compared to this horrific medieval torture.

Before she could stop herself, Clover balled up her fist and swung at the evil Razul. But she hit only smoke as the genie faded to ether.

Clover was filled with rage, her pulse quickening, heat bursting from her body, her face exploding with blood.

"You damn, dirty, blue beast, bring them back!" she screamed.

"You would do best to hold your tongue, bitch!" Razul bellowed as he took form again, chest swelling and body growing until his head touched the ceiling. "Just for that outburst, I'm putting a timer on Gabriel and Lisa Grimwood. They'll heal only for another three weeks."

Razul pointed to Clover's forearm where a blue digital timer appeared just under her skin. It was counting down the seconds.

"When the timer gets to zero, that's it. Your parents will simply bleed out and die in staggering agony."

The blue genie zoomed close, only inches away from Clover's face.

"And there's nothing you can do about it."

Clover tried to say something, but her body began to stiffen, muscles tightening.

The seizure was coming.

Razul's lips creased into a diabolical smile.

"What, no snide comment?" he said, the words dripping with sarcasm. "My work here is finished. I'll see you in seven months, little Clover Grimwood."

And just like that, Razul was gone. A tiny trail of blue smoke dissipated through the room. All was silent save for the clanging of pots in the kitchen, where some woman pretending to be her new mom was fixing blueberry muffins.

Clover toppled to the floor, and her body began convulsing as if a furious demon was thrusting its way into her. She bit down on her tongue and blood filled her mouth as tears of despair streamed down her cheeks.

Chapter Five

Several party guests, including one doctor friend of her parents, were able to stabilize Clover to prevent her from doing damage to herself. The seizure was by far the worst she'd had yet. Jazz lay soothingly by her side as she spent an hour or so recovering.

"I know, girl, I should've listened to you."

It was horrible to be cursed with epilepsy. Without Jazz, she would never be able to live a normal life, always fearing an attack and worried whether she would hurt herself.

Finally she was lucid and able to walk around again. Despite her being physically well, her emotions were still jangled. Her father and stepmother were being tortured in some genie hell, and they would be dead in a few weeks. *Dead*. She had no idea what to do. How could anyone be freed from a genie? Could anyone help them? Clover wanted to curl up under the sheets, sleep, and forget about everything that had happened. But she knew that hiding wouldn't accomplish anything.

"Clover, dinner's ready!" came a call from downstairs.

Her stomach growled. So much for staying in her room. But she did need to eat.

Delicious smells emanating from the kitchen drove her downstairs. Her seizures always left her ravenous. She trudged through the living room and found that all the guests had left, including Wallace the frozen wizard and Dash. Their new genie-conjured mother, Betty, was cleaning the mess left behind.

"Oh, there you are, dear. I hope you feel better. I made you some chicken soup."

Betty held out a steaming bowl. Clover hesitated. This stranger was in her house, treating it like her own. What did she want?

"Go on, dear, take it."

Betty shoved the bowl toward Clover's chest. Her stomach grumbled again, and her hunger quickly pushed aside her misgivings. She grabbed the bowl.

"I... I'm going to eat upstairs, in my room."

"That's fine, dear," Betty said, smiling with her head tilted strangely to the side.

Clover didn't want to be around strangers making her home their own. She just wanted to be alone. As soon as she got to her room, she locked the door and sat at her desk, feet tucked under her.

The soup was delicious, full of hunks of chicken and fresh vegetables. She shoveled it into her mouth as though she hadn't eaten in days. The swirling broth brought back memories of the genie smoke from earlier. She replayed the scene with Razul over and over in her head. She couldn't get the horrible image of her father being eaten alive out of her mind.

"Oh, Daddy, I'm so sorry."

The whole thing was her fault. Why had she laughed like an idiot? She was so stupid—a stupid, fat loser. She slammed her head down against the desk, rattling the soup bowl and spoon, sobs erupting uncontrollably from her chest.

"Whatcha crying 'bout, Clover?"

She bit her tongue as she jerked at the sound of the voice beside her. Hadn't she locked the door? The genie-spawned kid was standing beside her, bottom lip pouting, wearing the same bib overalls he'd had on earlier.

"Who are you?" she asked. "How did you get in here?"

The boy scrunched his face up and tilted his head to the side. "What are you talking about, silly? I'm your brother, Seed."

“You’re not my brother,” Clover said, wiping her tears and backing away from the weird little kid. “I don’t have a brother.”

“Of course you do,” Seed said, easing forward. “Quit playing games.”

“I’m not playing games,” Clover said emphatically, still retreating until she nearly fell out of her chair. “A genie conjured you from smoke.”

“A genie?”

“Yes, you don’t remember?”

“Remember... Hey, where’s my slingshot? You didn’t take it, did you?”

Seed dove forward, inches from her face. She pulled back and fell on the floor, the chair crashing down beside her.

“No... I don’t know where it is.”

Seed eased away and started wandering around her room.

“Who’s this lady? She’s pretty.”

He pointed to the picture of her mother on the dresser.

“That’s my mo—” He didn’t need to know her business. “That’s someone I knew a long time ago.”

“What happened to her?”

“She... she went away.”

Clover thought back to the last time she saw her mother. Her real mother. She’d left them one night when Clover was about four years old. She said she was going to the grocery store, but she never came back. They found her car in the parking lot with a note inside saying she couldn’t take the stress of a family any longer and wanted her freedom.

The police put out an alert, but there had been no clues to follow. Her mother simply disappeared. There was nothing to indicate foul play, so the lead investigator seemed to think she was having an affair or something and had simply run off, like the note said. But Clover couldn’t believe her mother would do that, simply leave them. Her father looked for her for years before finally giving up.

“Hey, kid, I’m kinda tired; do you think I can have some privacy?”

The little boy was still fingering the picture, and Clover got up and took it from him.

“Kid? Call me Damien or Seed, like everybody else does.”

“Seed? Why Seed?”

“Golly. I’m not really sure, sis. It has something to do with what I’m supposed to be when I grow up.”

“What do you mean? You’re supposed to be a gardener or a farmer or something?”

Seed turned away and started rooting around in one of her drawers. He reached in and pulled out a tampon.

“What’s this?”

“That’s private—girl stuff.”

The room got a little warmer as she pried the tampon from his clammy little hands.

“Look, Seed, I’m exhausted. I’ve had a really crappy day—”

“Oh no!” Seed burst out, pointing at her mouth, eyes wide. “You said a no-no word. Mom doesn’t like it when you do that. If she hears ya, she’ll come up here and give you the business.”

Clover had no idea what the business was, just that she certainly didn’t want to get any of it from her fake mother.

“I’m sorry... Seed. Uh, it won’t happen again. Why don’t we both just get some rest now?”

“Okey dokey. I’m ready to hit the hay. See ya in the morning, Clover. Sleep tight and don’t let the bedbugs bite.”

Seed smiled and waved good-bye.

Clover locked her door, checking it twice to be sure the latch was secure, and then she jammed a chair in front of it for good measure. She lay in bed, listening for strange sounds.

It was going to be a long night.

#

It seemed like just a few minutes had passed after she closed her eyes before her alarm clock was shrieking its hateful wake-up call, rattling her eardrum.

“Was yesterday a dream?” she asked Jazz, who was lying at the foot of the bed.

But she knew all too well it hadn’t been. Her body was still sore from her seizure, and her heart was crying out at the absence of her father.

Morgana’s wish had torn the family apart, but her own mouth had put her dad and Lisa in peril.

The blue clock counting down on her forearm confirmed the reality and the danger. The seconds left on her father’s life fell away like autumn leaves.

The aroma of fresh bacon wafted up from the kitchen. That most certainly was not a dream. She shook her head. It was just another genie trick, a vile temptation. Her stomach thought otherwise, though, as it grumbled in response to the delicious smell.

“Better than a Pop-Tart,” she said to Jazz.

That was all Lisa usually gave her.

Jazz scratched at the door, wanting to go out.

“Okay, girl.” Clover opened the door.

She jumped back in bed. Despite her hunger, she just wanted to lie there, wishing for her father to come back and those strangers to leave. Who were they anyway, genie creations or real people? She had no idea and she doubted they did either.

“Clover!” Betty swung the door open fully, not bothering to knock. “Dear, breakfast is ready. You need to get up and start getting ready for school or you’ll be late.”

“I’m not going to school.”

There was no way she was even going to get out of bed today. She was just going to bury her face in her pillow.

“Yes, you are, young lady.”

“I’m sick. Just leave me alone.”

“Let me take your temperature.”

“No. Get out of my room now, you freak!”

Clover was not normally so rude to strangers, especially those that wanted to help her, but the events of late had pushed her to the edge. Everyone had their breaking point and Clover was just about at hers.

Betty gasped, eyes wide, hand on her chest.

“Oh my, what’s gotten into you, dear?”

Clover stared at Betty as she stood poised at the door, her face turning pale.

“Listen. I don’t know who you are or what you want, but this is my house, and you are not welcome here.”

“But, Clover, I’m your mother!”

Those words struck her, and the temper she tried so hard to always keep in check hit the boiling point.

“You are *not* my mother! Lisa is not my mother! My mother left me here and ran away because she hated me! Now get out of my room!”

Spittle flew from Clover’s mouth with each word, and her eyes ran with tears. Betty raised her eyebrows even higher and swayed like she was going to faint.

“W-W-Walter? Clover is sick. Can you help me take her temperature?”

Was this woman deaf?

“What did I just tell you!” Clover screamed.

Betty eased into the room, holding her hands out in front of her.

“It’s okay, dear. Calm down. Sometimes a fever can addle our thoughts, make us think and see things that aren’t really there. We’ll get you taken care of.”

Walter came into the room, adjusting his tie.

“What’s wrong? Is Clover okay?”

“She might be running a fever, dear. We need to take her temperature.”

“Oh no, poor thing,” Walter said, running his meaty hand through his jet-black crew cut. “I’ll run get the thermometer. Clover, take your pants down and roll over.”

Oh no, he wasn’t!

“He’s not touching me,” she said, her voice weak this time and trailing off.

“Don’t be silly, dear. We’ll help you,” Betty said, nodding.

Walter came back in, holding the thermometer. And not one of the modern stick-it-in-your-ear kind. Clover pulled the covers up over her head, a reflex from when she was a little girl trying to hide from imaginary monsters. Only these monsters weren’t imaginary. Walter yanked the covers down, violently twisting her arm.

“You need some help getting those pants down, honey?”

Walter closed in on her, his gorilla-like bulk menacing. He was built like an old-school boxer from the 1940s, with a hairy barrel chest and thick neck. His burly fingers reached for her sweat pants.

“No!” she screamed again.

“No more back talk!” Walter yelled.

He lunged at her.

Clover jerked back in horror, desperately trying to kick his hand away, wishing her *real* father was there to protect her.

End of this sample.
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