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Wishing and Hoping

Mia Dolan

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Extract

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Chapter One

1969

There were sparks and lightning and Michael was in trouble. She smelled something burning. She saw someone blind and, worst of all, she found herself parted from her husband.

'No!'

Marcie Jones sat bolt upright in bed gasping for breath and drenched in sweat.

Her husband lay beside her and he stirred himself awake, his voice groggy and confused at being disturbed.

'Marcie? What is it? Were you having a nightmare?'

Resting her hand on her chest she felt her racing heart. 'I thought I heard Aran crying,' she lied, unwilling to admit to him that he was right, that she had indeed been dreaming and the dream had seemed so real.

Aran was their son and only a few months old, a brother for Joanna, who wasn't Michael's child though he had raised her as his own. When Joanna had been

born Marcie was a single mum, Marcie Brooks rather than the respectable Mrs Michael Jones. Joanna's father had been Marcie's first love, Johnnie, who had been killed in a road accident before he could make good on his promise to marry her.

Raising himself on one elbow, her husband strained to hear their son. There was no crying, no sound at all. There never had been.

'No,' he said, shaking his head. 'I can't hear anything.'

Marcie gave a short, light laugh. 'I must be hearing things. He's such a good kid,' she said as she snuggled herself back beneath the bedclothes and hugged her husband's warm body.

'Takes after his dad,' said Michael.

If Michael could have seen her expression he would have realised that Marcie had been lying about having heard the baby crying.

Marcie laughed again, though more relaxed, the dream behind her.

'Get some sleep,' he murmured sleepily, stroking her arm as he closed his eyes. 'We've got a long day tomorrow.'

She lay there listening to his breathing as it softened into sleep, half afraid to go back to sleep herself in case the dream returned. For four nights now she'd had that same dream and was convinced it was some kind of warning, a foretaste of things to come. Up until

now she'd never admitted – even to herself – that she may have inherited her grandmother's gift for seeing things other people could not see. Michael might think she was a little touched if she did. In time things might change, but for now . . .

She looked at her husband, so peacefully asleep. She loved him and was very proud of him.

Tomorrow night would see the official opening of Michael's first nightclub, the Blue Genie. Marcie was to flick the switch that would turn on the neon light above the door. The neon depicted a blue genie rising out of a brass lamp. Like moths to a flame, the customers would be drawn by its bright blue gleam and the female – and very sexy – genie.

Marcie had suggested that it was slightly lurid, but Michael had persisted.

'They're not coming to a church bazaar after all,' he'd said. 'We're not selling apple pies and cups of tea. We're selling a dream, a few hours of fantasy.'

She'd had to agree with him. There would be drinking, gambling and scantily clad hostesses. It was all a little worrying. Her husband would sometimes be there without her, though he insisted they didn't interest him. She trusted him because she had to; they had a family in common. Besides, they really loved each other, didn't they?

'I've only got eyes for you, Marcie. Surely you should know that.'

His words and the look in his eyes had been reassuring. The concerns were buried at the back of her mind. It wasn't easy to compartmentalise family life and business, but the older she got the more pragmatic she was. Business was business and Michael Jones had done very well for himself. He'd started his business buying up, tidying up and renting out commercial property. To his and everyone else's surprise, he'd found little competition in the commercial property marketplace. Then he'd come across the disused warehouse in Limehouse not far from the river. At one time it had been used to store tea and the old place still smelled of it – or had done until he'd done it up.

Marcie didn't know who'd suggested that he should turn it into a nightclub but suspected her father might have had a hand in it.

'It's a challenge,' Michael had said to her, his eyes shining with excitement.

She'd immediately understood what he meant and kept her mouth tightly closed against the protest that she'd wanted to voice. What Michael was saying was that he was challenging his father and his half-brother, Roberto. He wanted to prove that he was as good as them, even as hard as them. The latter especially troubled her. Michael's father was Victor Camilleri, the notorious gangland boss. Being the bastard son of one of Victor's many mistresses,

Michael had always considered himself second best. It was Roberto who got all the praise, all the affection. Michael always felt like the also-ran, hence this effort to be just as good as they were in their chosen field of operation. Nightclubs!

Her eyes closed despite trying to stay awake. The sleep would be welcome, but returning to the dream would not.

In the dream the sign above the new nightclub had developed a devilish beard, a broad male chest and a cruel expression. In effect the female form had changed into a male one – not a very nice male one.

It also spoke to her. Now what had it said?

The genie in Joanna's favourite storybook always said, 'Your wish is my command.' But in Marcie's dream it was twisted into something else. *Hoping is real. Wishing is fantasy.*

It made her think. She was hoping that Michael's nightclub would be a huge success – just like his commercial properties. She'd told him how proud she was of him. It seemed like he couldn't put a step wrong. They would be the envy of everyone, she'd said to him.

A shadow had crossed his face then and she fancied there was something he wasn't telling her.

'Is anything wrong?'

'Nothing for you to worry about,' he'd said and kissed the tip of her nose.

So she'd pushed the concern to the back of her mind. Michael was capable, and, although he knew some pretty tough characters, he could handle himself. As for wishing – well – she sometimes wished things could have been different in her life: that her mother had never left home, that her father was respectable and that Johnnie, her first love, had never died . . . But then if Johnnie hadn't died, she would never have met Michael. She wouldn't have her precious baby son.

The dream didn't return, though at one point it did seem as though someone whispered something in her ear.

'Face things head on and your wishes could be fulfilled.'

There was also a smell – a hint of engine oil – and a feel of leather. It made her feel better. She slept.

At number ten Endeavour Terrace, in Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey, Rosa Brooks couldn't sleep. She'd been dreaming about an electrical explosion and someone she loved was close to it.

Having no telephone and the nearest public phone box being at the end of the street, she could not convey her fears to her granddaughter immediately. On the other hand she couldn't just lie there in the

darkness mulling her fears over in her mind, so she did what she always did at a time like this.

Swinging her old legs out of bed, she felt with her toes for her slippers, found them and put them on.

Turning the light on might disturb Garth, her 'adopted' nephew. There was another reason for not turning the light on: it would do nothing much to aid her descent. Her eyes were getting bad – very bad.

Luckily she'd lived in the old cottage for many years. She knew its nooks and crannies, which stairs squeaked and how many there were between the top and the bottom.

Familiarity had trained her to know where the kettle was and, by their radiated heat, how hot the coals were in the old iron range.

Out of habit she went to the right hook on the dresser for her cup and the shelf for her saucer.

Once the kettle had boiled and the tea had brewed, she felt for her favourite chair and sat in it, her cup and saucer balanced in one hand.

The tea cooled. She hadn't taken a sip. Vestiges of the dream were still in her mind. They troubled her.

She sighed deeply and heard it echoing from the matching armchair on the other side of the fireplace. There was a sound as though someone heavy was

making himself comfortable. Her husband Cyril had always sighed and the springs of the old armchair had always sagged and sang beneath his weight after a hard day at the docks.

'I had a dream,' she said softly. 'I think Marcie is about to have some trouble.'

'And you want to warn her.'

The words her deceased husband spoke were not heard in the usual sense; she *felt* them.

She sat there thinking for a moment. 'I suppose I do, and yet . . .'

'You think that p'rhaps you don't need to. You think she'll know herself?'

Rosa Brooks nodded. 'I think the time has come.'

Someone had tied a huge red bow around the switch that would turn on the neon light of the Blue Genie.

'Your very own nightclub,' Marcie whispered to her husband proudly. He deserved his success – he worked so hard.

Michael smiled back at her. '*Our* nightclub. Just remember that, babe. Everything that's mine is yours too – yours and the kids.'

When he kissed her, his lips were soft and warm on hers. Neither of them cared that everyone was watching them, though if they'd been in private they would have done much more than kissing. That's how it was between them still even after almost two

years of marriage; they couldn't get enough of each other.

However, when she looked at the sign, the image from the dream came back intermittently, sending a cold chill down her spine.

She did her best to shake it off, revelling in the moment with more exuberance than she would normally show. She wouldn't let anything spoil this. She wanted everything to go perfectly for Michael's launch.

The staff and invited guests clapped as Marcie stepped forwards to turn on the switch. Her father was standing with them looking on proudly as though his little Marcie had done this all by herself – which wasn't true of course. Michael had already been in the throes of branching out into business when he'd met her. But this one, as he kept telling her, was special. He was going to be a thorn in his father's side and prove that he was a better man than his brother who was presently detained at Her Majesty's pleasure for causing actual bodily harm.

'I'm as good as the Camilleris,' he whispered to her.

'Better,' she whispered back.

Once again shaking off a shiver, Marcie flicked the switch. Everyone looked up as the neon flickered like a gas flame reluctant to ignite. But suddenly there it was; bright blue against the dark red brick of what

had been an old tea warehouse. The sharp blue of the neon was reflected in the pavement beneath it, which was still wet from an earlier downpour of rain.

Everything happened so fast. Suddenly the sign sputtered and fizzed, sparks flaring and falling to the pavement.

A cry of alarm rose from the crowd.

Marcie was standing to the side of the sign looking up at it. Michael pulled her back as the sparks showered down on her and a second gasp of amazement went round the crowd.

'You OK?' It was her dad, Tony Brooks, who asked.

Michael answered for her. 'Yeah. She's fine.'

Marcie said nothing and was far from fine. She was looking up at the sign. Earlier the nubile and very female genie had sparkled with erotic cheeriness. Now what looked down at her was dark and slightly charred, similar to the image in her dream.

'It's a bad omen,' somebody said and sparked a rumble of amazed conversation.

Michael turned on them. 'Cut the gossip! It's an electrical fault, that's all.'

The smell of charged electricity hung acrid in the air. Only the more sensitive would have noticed it. Marcie was one of them.

The electrician who had installed the sign shook his head and looked dumbfounded. 'That shouldn't have happened,' he said.

'Accident or deliberate?' growled Michael through clenched teeth.

The electrician shrugged. 'I don't know. It shouldn't have happened.'