

My Wishful Thinking

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DEDICATION

For my parents, who have always done their best to grant the most important things I could wish for.

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CHAPTER 1

FOR AS LONG AS I can remember, I've been a *wisher*. It never mattered if it was shooting stars, birthday candles, dandelions or turkey bones that I used in an attempt to bring the magic. The wishes were always the same: for my dad to come home, to have my mom back to the way she was when I was little, to find true love.

Impossible. Yeah, right. I'd pretty much figured that out by seventeen, but it didn't stop me from wishing for all the things that would make my life better.

Right now I don't have any of the special equipment for making wishes, but that's never stopped me before.

I wish life were sunnier. That I didn't always end up soaked.

I glance out the display window at the front of the store. Judging from the way the clouds are piling up, I'd guess there's ten minutes—maybe twelve max—before the sky opens up and pukes all over us.

"How long do you think the storm's gonna last?" I ask Mannequin Betsy as I struggle to wedge her impossibly stiff foot into a pair of white Nancy Sinatra these-boots-were-made-for-walking go-gos.

Predictably, she's mute.

Once I have her zipped into the boot, I set her smack in the middle of the retro display and position her arms, hands on hips. In addition to the boots, she's wearing a bright yellow micro-mini with a wide, white patent belt and a top with daisies.

"There you go. Cool and retro."

But she doesn't look happy about her new outfit. More like disgusted.

"Aw, eff you, Betsy! I think you look great."

It's sad—pathetic, really—when my only hope for conversation is with Betsy. I mean, she's not even my favorite mannequin. Trudy is.

I wish someone, a customer, *anyone*, would show up.

More thunderheads roll in from the west, turning the sky completely black. It rains like this

every summer afternoon in Orlando, so why should today be any different? But when it starts, nobody will say to themselves, *Oh! I'd better make a stop at Rags to Ritzy! There's a gently worn cocktail dress I simply must have.*

The store, which is always dreary, grows dimmer without sunlight. So I stroll between racks of clothing and turn on *every* fringed table lamp and *every* art deco floor lamp. Trying to hold back the dark.

When the downpour comes, I cozy into an armchair at the end of the counter and grab the box of SAT vocab cards Em lent me two weeks ago. She won't be needing them, since she crushed the test last year with a 1450 math and verbal. Over 1900, if you count the writing. With a score like that, she'll have her choice of colleges. Still, she plans to take it again and again. Total overachiever. When she gave me the cards, she said, "Hey Lo, if you study these maybe we can end up at the same school and be roommates."

Right. It's pretty unlikely that Logan Carter is going to college at all.

But I suppose I could at least *try*, even if it is only because the weather sucks.

Pick a card, any card. I open the box and eeny-meeny one from the center of the deck: *lagniappe.*

"What the hell is a lagniappe?" I ask Mannequin Betsy.

She doesn't smile, giving me her half-lidded look.

"Hey! Don't get haughty with me. You don't know the answer either." I flip the card. It reads, *an unexpected gift.* Okay, sure. If you say so. It's not like it's gonna come up in everyday conversation.

The little brass bell over the door tinkles. There's a guy—maybe late twenties—standing in the doorway. Water drips down his face from short, curly black hair. He's got a goatee-type beard. The kind that's supposed to make guys cool but always makes me think creepy or professor.

No corduroy elbow patches on this guy. All black clothes, head to toe. Definitely sinister.

He's so wet he looks like he stepped out of a swimming pool, or a ride at Neptune's. What's weird is the feeling that I've seen him before.

CHAPTER 2

BUT THAT CAN'T BE. I've worked here for six months and this is the first time—*ever*—that a guy has stepped foot into the store alone. Sure, I've seen a couple of older, white-haired men in here with their wives, but they usually go outside to pace on the sidewalk after about a minute.

With a second glance, I'm even more certain I've seen him before. I have that never-forget-a-face skill. It can come in handy, but right now it's only working at half-strength. Unexpectedly, I shiver.

I put down the vocab cards, stand and give him my florescent-light smile. Fake and blindingly bright. "Hi. Welcome to Rags to Ritzy. Are you shopping, or do you have something you'd like to consign?" At least he lives, breathes and can respond to questions. It's a step up from Betsy.

He's lugging a tote. Or satchel or duffle or something like that. I'd probably use it as a purse, but I doubt that he is. He weaves his way slowly, huffing and puffing, between a rack of jeans and a rack of retro wear. He grunts, his face turning red as he hefts it onto the counter.

The bag is beautiful and exotic with intricately embroidered desert scenes of pyramids and camels. His eyes are as hard and black as onyx. "How much? For this?"

Not a huge improvement from the Betsy convo. "I need to check."

I reach under the counter and pull out a four-inch binder Marcia put together as a "guideline." She's emphasized so many times that there are no set rules in consignment. Negotiate with my gut, she always tells me. Usually that's not a problem. I just spew a price and it feels right. But, this guy...I don't know. He makes me queasy.

Behind the tab for *B*, on a crumpled, stained page, I find the pricing for bags. All types. Luggage, totes, purses. It's sorted based on size and brand. My hands shake as I flip back and forth between the listings. His piece is small for luggage, average for a tote and jumbo-Logan-sized for a purse. "Is it a name brand?" I ask him.

A hard laugh bursts from deep in his throat. "No." It's a crazy sound. His face really is sinister. It's not just the beard. He's sneering at me.

Okay. Can I take back my wish for a customer? Or maybe I'll change it: I'd like someone *sane*. Please.

"It's very, very old," he says. His eyes lock on mine with a creepy glow. "And one of a kind."

Mannequin Betsy is peering over the creepy guy's shoulder, hanging on his every word. Funny. I swallow back a laugh. His craziness is making me crazy too.

I pretend to know what I'm doing as I inspect the bag. Marcia would want this bag. *Shoot, I want this bag.* My heart thumps with an annoying techno music beat. *Just give him a price.* All of a sudden, I feel like something is hiding against the far wall behind the coats. *Paranoid!* Then I look at the three-way mirror and see his back, the bag, myself and Mannequins Trudy and Monnique going on and on and on into infinity. Or another dimension. *Crazy thoughts. Get him outta here!*

"I'm still fairly new," I tell him. "Maybe if you come back tomorrow, when the owner is here?"

He scratches his beard, bouncing on his heels. It's the way I get after too many cups of Perks French Roast. "I'm sure whatever you offer will be fine," he says, eyes shifting side to side, rubbing his nose.

Why's he so agitated?

The book says I should offer him ten to thirty dollars, based on condition, but I think Marcia would offer more. A lot of people say *one of a kind*, but for some reason I believe him. *Trust your gut.* "Um, how does fifty sound?" It actually sounds low to me after I say it out loud.

"Deal." He turns to leave.

"Wait, wait a sec! You can't go yet. I need you to fill this out so we can contact and pay you when it sells." I lay a form on the counter next to the satchel. "We'll price the bag at a hundred bucks. And see here—" I point to the fine print at the bottom. "This explains how long we'll keep the merchandise and what happens after ninety days. We can agree to keep it for you or—" I say all this at warp speed because even though the contract is important, I so want him out of here.

He takes the paper and snatches a pen from the counter.

While he scrawls his information, I blab, "After that, if it hasn't sold, we can lower the price..." I stop and stare at his hands and face. So familiar. "Do I know you? Are you on TV or something?"

He hesitates, pen hovering. "I'm a performer at Mysterical Nights. Maybe you've seen my show?"

Mysterical Nights is one of Orlando's thirty-million attractions. In a town filled with theme parks and worlds of imagination, even people who live here could never go to all of them. But I've been to this one. Em's parents took us six years ago, at the end of fifth grade to celebrate graduating to middle school. The park borders on cheesy with all the other second-rate stuff along Irlo Bronson Highway. Not that I'm complaining or anything. My mom's never taken us anywhere.

"Mysterical Nights, huh?" It clicks then, everything falling into place. "You're the magician,"

I whisper.

Because he was good. And scary. Scary good. Em and I were completely freaked out after his show, me more than Em, but that's how it is with everything. She's kinda sciencey-calm, like she could be Mrs. Spock or something. Anyway, we were sitting at a table in the orchestra section when he asked Em to be an audience volunteer. She, being the chicken-shit that she is, shook her head and raised my hand. That just ended up with him calling both of us to the stage.

The first illusion was a simple card trick. *Pick a card, any card.* But it was still freaky because we both saw the card transform—I mean, blur and blend, with shapes and colors moving around—right before our eyes. It was projected onto a big screen in back of us. Mr. Rhodes, Em's dad, later said it's all about how the hand is quicker than the eye. But he wasn't standing right over the card like the two of us were.

Still, if that had been the extent of the magic, I don't think I'd have been so freaked. For the second one he asked us both for our hands. He took a huge jeweled knife and sliced across our palms. It didn't hurt at all, but when bright red blood welled up from the cut, I could smell copper and almost fainted. Then he took a scarf and tied our hands together, all the while talking hocus-pocus crap about the magic of blood sisters. When he untied the scarf, we had no cuts, no scar, nothing like that. But an imprint of our clasped hands had been transferred to the cloth in blood.

Em has the scarf pinned to her memento board. The blood has dried and turned brown, exactly like real blood would. You can still see our tiny fifth-grade hands.

How did I not remember this guy? He seemed so much older to me then.

"Did you like the show?" He's giving me a thin-lipped, totally crap smile. There's not a shred of warmth in it.

"You used me and my friend Em as volunteers." *Why won't I shut up?* I just need to hold it together for a few more seconds and then get rid of him. "Wait 'til she hears you were here."

His creepy smile grows bigger at this. My stomach flip-flops.

"Anyway, she'll be excited—" I babble.

"I'm sure," he says with that crazy laugh again.

"Oh well, nice to meet you...or I mean, see you again." I hold back the tremor in my hand when I take the contract from him. "We'll call you when it sells."

He's already at the front door when I try to move the satchel. It's heavy, really heavy. I can't hold on to it. It drops to the floor—barely missing my feet—with a *thud*. "I think you left something in here," I holler as he walks out.

The bell tinkles again, and there's a huge crack of lightning that sounds like it lands right outside

the door.

Insane laughter this time. “Nothing that I want.”