



The Wish Switch

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: Magic and mayhem collide in beloved #1 bestselling author Lynn Painter's hilarious childrens book debut, perfect for fans of Sarah Mlynowski and Wendy Mass.

Emma Rockford knows it will take bonafide magic to make middle school everything she wants it to be. Luckily, before Emma's beloved Nana died, she left detailed instructions on how to access an ancient, secret, magical wishing well. Emma follows each step and plans out every moment...except for the one where the obnoxious new kid, Jackson, tosses in wishes of his own that literally knock her wishes off course. When seventh grade starts, Emma discovers that her wishes are starting to come true, alright. But not for her...for Jackson.

Which, the two quickly discover, could have disastrous consequences for both of their families, and cost Emma her best friends. Can they set everything straight in time to prevent full-blown catastrophe?

With the trademark wit and heart that have earned her legions of fans, #1 New York Times bestselling author Lynn Painter delivers a laugh-out-loud story of friendship, family, and wishing—with a delightful dash of magic.

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:46 am

the lore of four

“Y OU’VE GOT TO CLIMB on that cow and ride—go!”

Nana Marie pushed me into the field, and as I stumbled over the tall grass, I saw the huge cow that was running in circles on the other side of the pasture.

“What do you mean?” I yelled, looking at her over my shoulder, because she couldn’t be telling me to try and literally ride a cow, could she? Although, to be fair, it was my “eccentric” Nana; her goading me into cow-jockeying was not an impossibility.

I watched the beastly animal, snorting and galloping while kind of mooing and growling all at the same time, and realized that thing couldn’t actually be a cow at all because it was ginormous.

We’re talking the-size-of-an-actual-food-truck ginormous.

No way.

“I know it seems too big, but you have to be brave and go through with it,” she yelled from where she was standing on top of the fence that bordered the field, her hands on her scrawny hips. “Or the magic won’t happen!”

“But.” My heart was pounding and I couldn’t breathe—no, I was breathing too much—as the monstrously large bovine creature appeared to be getting closer. “What does a gigantic cow have to do with the magic?”

“Nothing, kid,” she said, grinning. “He’s symbolic. That gargantuan cow does not want to become a hamburger, so he took matters into his own hooves and jumped the fence. Just like you need to do.”

“I need to jump the fence?”

Nana rolled her eyes. “You need to jump the fence of your fears and go find that magical portal. Be like the cow.”

“Emma?” Someone called my name from behind me, but I couldn’t risk looking away from the giant future hamburger to see who it was.

“Hmmm?” I murmured, my heart racing as the cow drew closer and made eye contact with me. His eyes were the weirdest color, like they were glowing amber.

“Em!”

I gasped as two hands squeezed my arm.

My eyes flew open, my pulse pounding as I saw that I wasn’t in a field with Nana Marie at all—I was on the bus.

I’d fallen asleep on the bus.

Somehow, among the chaotic sounds of fiftyish screaming sixth graders all crammed together inside a lumbering yellow vehicle, I’d fallen sound asleep in my seat. It would’ve been a weird thing to happen on a normal day, but since I’d been up all night, prepping for what we were planning to do when the teachers weren’t looking, I was exhausted.

“I can’t believe you were sleeping,” Allie said, grinning from her spot beside me.

I can't, either, I thought, and a tiny part of me was sad my friends had woken me up, because I'd been with Nana Marie. I wanted to go back to sleep so I could see her again.

"Dreaming about the plan?" Kennedy asked teasingly, because it'd been all I'd talked about for the past week.

But who could blame me?

The boring nature field trip was taking us within a mile of THE magical place on the EXACT DAY it was spewing magical wishes.

If that wasn't fate, nothing was.

"Of course I was," I said, smiling, because I knew without a doubt that my dream had been more than a dream.

That'd been Nana Marie, making sure I'd go through with it.

Be like the cow.

Milo Mannington chose that moment to puke all over his window (he'd warned Mrs. Snurk that he didn't feel good, but she'd refused to let him visit the nurse before we left), so I had that nasty little distraction to keep my anxious mind from spinning out of control as we finished the drive.

When we reached Platte River State Park, everyone on our bus lined up before heading out to do nature things. We trudged along with our classmates, identifying native Nebraska leaves, birds, and animal scat (gross), but I couldn't concentrate on any of it because I was reviewing maps in my head.

We weren't going to have much time, so I needed to be locked in on the coordinates.

There is no margin for error.

"Where should we sit?" Allie asked when we finally broke for lunch, the three of us clutching our brown paper sacks as we looked for a spot. "Over there?"

She pointed to a picnic table that was smack-dab in the center of everything.

"Did you not study the plan?" I asked, gesturing toward the outer tables. "We have to be on the perimeter, Al, remember?"

That made her smile like we were about to play a fun game. "That's right."

It's not a game! I wanted to shout, but I knew it kind of was to them.

So I was calm— deep breath, Em —while we wolfed down our lunches, and I was composed when go-time finally arrived. We'd tossed our trash, moved to what I'd marked as the "jump point" on the map, and then the moment was upon us.

"Okay, on the count of three, we run for the forest," I said quietly, glancing toward the trees that were just beyond the picnic area as my heart raced in my chest. "No looking back."

Kennedy's eyes were huge as she nodded and kicked out her right foot, like she was getting ready for a race, and even though Allie was biting her fingernails like they were lunch, she nodded, too.

Thank goodness.

This was the only day, the only time, the only way the magic could happen for us, but

I'd been a little scared they'd change their minds and chicken out. It took a lot of guts— pluck , Nana Marie used to call it—to risk the wrath of Mrs. Snurk, the terrifyingly strict bullhorn-wielding teacher who'd once screamed at a student for breathing too loudly, but we had to risk it.

Being plucky today was our only chance.

“One,” I said, scanning the area for any teachers or parent volunteers who might be looking at us.

Thankfully (or not in a normal situation), we appeared to be invisible to everyone but ourselves.

“Two,” I said, my heart beating so loudly in my ears that I was surprised no one else could hear it.

“Wait,” Kennedy whispered, her eyes reaching peak bulge as she smacked my arm and said, “You’re sure you’ve got everything?”

“Positive,” I said, because I'd been planning this moment for years . I'd left nothing to chance. I'd literally gotten out of bed at 2:00 AM just to pace around my bedroom and go through everything one final time—my mental checklist, my best-laid plans—to make sure there were no mistakes.

I glanced at Allie as I sort of bounced on my toes, ready to bolt. “Are you good?”

She nodded, but didn't stop with the fingernail ingestion.

“Two and a half,” I whispered, then said, “Three!”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:46 am

evermore

I DUG MY SHOES into the ground and took off running, eyes focused in front of me as I sprinted into the forest, hearing nothing but the sounds of my friends running alongside me as I dodged trees and fallen logs. I knew we were short on time because the buses were leaving as soon as everyone finished their lunches. I wasn't about to risk this chance by being a lazy slowpoke.

My face felt numb as the enormity of what we were doing pressed down on my chest. We were good kids. My friends and I tried our best not to break rules. We'd never had detention and we always did our homework.

So how was it possible that we were sneaking away from a field trip?

It was terrifying and exhilarating, the reality that we were actually doing it.

I wondered if the school would send out search dogs to find us once they noticed we were gone, but I immediately shut down those thoughts.

I couldn't think about anything that might cause me to lose this golden opportunity.

"You're sure you know where it is?" Kennedy yelled from behind me.

"I have a cramp in my side," Allie panted. "Are we almost there?"

"Yes," I assured them, even though I was worried. What if I'd read the maps—and the clues—wrong? What if we get lost in the forest and starve to death trying to get

out?

“Stop it,” I said to myself, ignoring the cramp in my side as I saw the stream.

Yes—the stream! The stream meant we were close.

I started counting cottonwood trees, slowing to a jog.

The forty-fourth cottonwood beyond the spot where the stream crosses the path.

I heard Allie and Kennedy stop behind me, but they must’ve seen the concentration on my face because they didn’t say a word as I slowed to a walk and counted out loud.

“Thirty-nine, forty, forty-one,” I counted as I passed the trees, “forty-two, forty-three, forty-four!”

I looked up at the massive cottonwood tree. It must’ve been hundreds of years old to be the towering giant over the rest of the forest.

“This is it!” I squealed, then dropped to my knees.

Allie and Kennedy did the same, only Allie went around to the other side of the massive trunk. The secret hole was supposed to be at the base of this very tree, but there were a lot of old leaves and plants covering the ground.

I immediately started digging my hands into everything, shifting rocks and burrowing into the soil that just had to have one very important secret hole that would accept our golden wishes.

“Wait—what if there are spiders or snakes under here?” Allie asked, sounding scared,

but I didn't look up to get a visual because we didn't have time for anything but hole-finding.

"There aren't," I assured her, trying to keep her from worrying even though I had no idea about the lifestyles of the gross and creepy.

A shiver slid down my spine at the thought of encountering either of those things.

"How do you know?" Kennedy said, sounding disgusted. "I bet there are a lot of spiders under here."

I finally looked up from my digging, only to see my friends not digging and also looking at each other like they thought I was losing it.

"Come on, you guys," I said a little too loudly, panicking because we didn't have any time to waste. "Why did you even sneak away with me if you aren't going to look for the portal?"

"We are ," Kennedy snapped, "but we don't want to die on a treasure hunt."

"It's not a treasure hunt," I said.

"You guys," Allie whined, "let's not argue."

"I agree," I said, nodding, desperate to convince them to get moving before we got busted. "Let's dig and we can argue later."

They shared another look but started digging, thank goodness , and I was almost ready to move to another tree when Kennedy screamed, "I think I found it!"

Her eyes were bugging out of her face, and her mouth was hanging open in a huge,

gaping O. I looked down and sure enough, in front of her knees, was a hole the size of a medium pizza.

“No way ,” Allie whispered, her mouth also hanging open.

The hole looked big enough to land in and get hurt but narrow enough that you’d get wedged somewhere inside the opening before you’d ever fall all the way down to... whatever awaited below. I crawled over on my hands and knees— who had time to climb to their feet? —and looked down into it. It seemed bottomless, like anything you dropped into that opening would fall for all of eternity and never land.

Holy freaking moly.

We’d found it. The portal.

Thank you, Nana Marie.

It was intimidating, being that close to something so powerful. If the legend was true, this was the actual spot where lightning had once split open the earth, forcing two worlds to temporarily merge.

A shiver of fear slid down my spine.

And then I pictured Nana standing on top of that fence with her hands on her hips.

Get a grip, kid.

“We need to prep our wishes,” I said, taking off my backpack and unzipping the outside pocket. I heard Allie and Kennedy doing the same, but I kept my eyes on my own work. I needed to concentrate, because this moment was pivotal.

For as long as I could remember, and until the day she died, my Nana Marie (when my mom wasn't around, because she didn't appreciate Nana "putting silly thoughts in my head") had been telling my brother and me stories of the lore of four.

According to the legend, on April 4, the day that the first settler (Travis Glink) arrived in Glinko (our town), hundreds of years ago, he witnessed an epic electrical storm like none that had ever been seen before. The grass crackled and stood straight up like static-charged hair, the branches of the trees all lifted toward the sky, and lightning struck the very ground beside him, opening a gaping hole that formed a portal connecting the human world to the faerie lands.

Travis, scared of the unknown, quickly filled in the hole.

But not well enough.

That night, while he slept, four powerful faerie lords came up through the portal and instantly fell love-at-first-sight, head-over-heels, madly in love with Travis's four daughters.

And the daughters were equally lovestruck by the sight of the red-robed faerie lords.

But when the four lords requested their four hands in marriage, Mr. Glink, wanting to ensure prosperity for future generations of Glinkonians, requested a magical donation.

A trade of sorts.

So it came to pass that each year, on the fourth day of the fourth month, for four hundred forty-four faerie years, the lords granted four wishes to four Glinkonians.

My nana had been obsessed with the legend and knew everything about it.

According to her, there were tales of people way back in the day who made millions, swam in priceless jewels, and married royalty—grantees who hit the jackpot with their wishes. But over time, the granted wishes seemed to be less grand, almost as if the magical wish “selectors” rewarded those who wished from the soul.

For the soul.

Nana personally knew of people who’d seen their dreams fulfilled and people who’d captured the hearts of their beloveds, all as the result of being wish “grantees.”

My brother and I used to walk around town and try to guess who those people were, but that made Nana Marie toss salt over her shoulder and tell us to zip our lips, because the lore was also steeped in secret. Not only were you not supposed to talk about it at all, but if you were lucky enough to become one of the grantees, you could lose everything by speaking your wishes out loud.

You couldn’t tell anyone what you wished for.

After Nana died, we found notebooks full of nearly illegible (but not to me, because we’d been writing each other notes for years) cursive that made my mom and brother laugh at her silliness, but gave me random words and coordinates to work with.

And more questions.

Some of her scrawlings led me to believe she could’ve actually been a grantee—

(A.T. made wish to marry architect but fell in love with X during four-month gap.

Transferred wish to me on the third day of the fourth month, just in the nick of time.)

while others hinted at the opposite—

(They said grantees' wishes were nontransferable, so it was impossible.)

Regardless, her notebooks let me know she had a firsthand knowledge of the magic.

And that this was the 444th year.

The final year.

I wasn't sure if anyone else in Glinko knew about or believed in the lore, mostly because Nana had been adamant about not discussing it with anyone outside the family, and I wasn't about to enlighten them.

Of course, telling Kennedy and Allie was a no-brainer. I knew Nana Marie would approve because she'd always called them my "little partners in crime."

Kennedy and Allie planned to just drop their wishes into the hole after saying the chant, with zero ceremony whatsoever. They thought the whole thing was really fun, and they were excited about the possibility of having their wishes granted, but they weren't like me.

I wasn't sure they actually believed in the lore.

But to me, it was serious business. I was doing what Nana had always wanted me to do.

Which was why they were right beside me, risking detention.

The very best friends.

They also knew I desperately needed my wishes (even though I couldn't tell them what my wishes were), so they were all in, no questions asked.

“I call first toss,” Allie said, her voice startling me. I turned around and she was smiling, holding her wish package.

Nana’s notes had described in great detail the way the wishes needed to be requested. Only wishes submitted on the fourth day of the fourth month would be considered, and a “wishee” needed to write down their four wishes on a four-by-four-inch piece of paper, wrap it in four rubber bands with four pieces of local pyrite enclosed inside the packet, and say the chant.

“Fine. Go already,” Kennedy said, bouncing with excitement.

Allie lifted the pack to her mouth, tossed back her hair, and whispered:

“Four golden stones, four wishes planted.

I humbly request these four entreaties be granted.

By the power of four on the forest floor,

I seek to receive my wishes evermore.”

The three of us watched as she dropped the package and it went right down the center of the hole, falling toward mystical parts unknown.

“Gahhhh,” Kennedy said, grinning widely. “Your wishes are already on the way!”

“I know!” Allie said, smiling at me. “Can you even imagine if they were to come true?”

Of course I can , I thought. I’ve been imagining it my whole life.

Kennedy squealed.

“Shut up, shut up, you need to go,” I said, gesturing toward the hole, scared it was going to disappear before I had my chance. “You know Snurk’s going to do a head count soon.”

“Okay,” Kennedy said, smiling even bigger. She lifted her wish package and whispered into it:

“Four golden stones, four wishes planted.

I humbly request these four entreaties be granted.

By the power of four on the forest floor,

I seek to receive my wishes evermore.”

We all stared as Kennedy’s wishes fell into the hole and went right down the portal.

“Squeeeeeeeee!” Allie said, letting loose with that irritating sound. But it didn’t matter because it was exciting. If there was ever a time to squee, this would probably be it.

“Go, Em,” Kennedy said, glancing over her shoulder in the direction of where we’d left our class. “Go!”

I stood, walked four paces back from the hole, then carefully held the wish package with only four of my fingers. Four fingers, each wearing a ring.

According to Nana, the more four, the better.

I took a deep breath and whispered into my wish package:

“Four golden stones, four wishes planted.

I humbly request these four entreaties be granted.

By the power of four on the forest floor,

I seek to receive my wishes evermore.”

“Four golden stones, four wishes planted.

I humbly request these four entreaties be granted.

By the power of four on the forest floor,

I seek to receive my wishes evermore.”

“Four golden stones, four wishes planted.

I humbly request these four entreaties be granted.

By the power of four on the forest floor,

I seek to receive my wishes evermore.”

“Four golden stones, four wishes planted—”

I heard Allie groan while Kennedy muttered Come on come on come on , but I didn’t care. If chanting it four times upped the odds of my wishes being granted, I was going to chant it four times.

“—I humbly request these four entreaties be granted.

By the power of four on the forest floor,

I seek to receive my wishes evermore.”

I opened my eyes and carefully tossed the package toward the hole, energy thrumming through my body as magic was literally happening in front of us. I watched my golden wishes heading for the yawning opening, and it felt like everything was moving in slow motion. Those hopes were gracefully falling to their fate, arching toward their destiny, but then, out of nowhere, a very big rock crashed into my small package, knocking it away from the hole and into the dirt.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:46 am

snurk alert

K ENNEDY YELPED, HER EYES WIDE as she looked at me.

I dove onto the ground, scooping up the packet and throwing it into the hole like it was a live grenade. My heart was racing as I watched it disappear into the portal.

“What just happened?” Allie screamed, blinking fast and staring at the hole.

I looked over my shoulder and saw the new kid— Jackson Matthews—was standing right behind us, with my brother, Noah, beside him.

What. The. Whaaaaat?

“Noah?” I couldn’t believe my eyes. “What are you doing here?”

My brother was a seventh grader, so he wasn’t even allowed to be on the field trip. He hadn’t been on the field trip until now—I was sure of it.

So how did he even get there?

And what was he doing with the new guy?

And—AND—what the heck was the new guy doing at the portal?

Jackson had been at our school for a couple of weeks, but he was still a mystery. He had dark hair and these bright blue eyes that kind of made you feel like they could see

your every thought. He lived a few houses down from Kennedy (we all lived on the same street) and I'd seen him shooting hoops with Noah from my window, but I hadn't really even heard him talk yet, except to give Snurk one-word answers when she called on him in science, and I'd definitely never seen him smile.

Which was why it felt like my breath was being sucked out of my lungs as he grinned at me right now.

"Big Noah Rockford's on our field trip?" Kennedy said, smiling at my brother because she'd had a crush on him for a hundred years. "How the how?"

"Did you skip school, Noah?" I asked, wanting him to say anything other than yes as I climbed to my feet. We weren't the type of kids who ditched class, so this made zero sense.

"And what are you guys doing here?" Allie asked, pointing at the hole. "Specifically?"

But I knew.

Holy schmoly, I knew exactly what Noah was doing there. My eyes went straight to my brother's face, and he stared right back at me.

We were there for the same reason.

Noah might've pretended like Nana's notebooks were silly, but he'd obviously cracked the code, too, and he was there to get his wishes granted.

Just like me.

I felt like Nana would be cackling right about now as Noah and I eyeballed each other

while standing on the perimeter of the wish hole, but she'd also be throwing salt at Jackson because whyyyy was he there at the secret portal?

I stared at Noah, waiting for him to answer me, but instead he whipped something out of his pocket and threw it down the hole so fast, so sneaky-like, that I wasn't even able to tell if it was a wish packet or not.

But I knew it was.

"Would you be careful?" I snapped, feeling unsure about everything because nothing was going right all of a sudden. In my daydreams, none of these things had happened.

"Would you relax?" he said with an eye roll.

"Why did you bring him with you, by the way?" I said under my breath, scared that everything was going to be ruined now. "And why would you throw a rock into the portal?"

"I didn't," Noah said, giving me his usual you're-so-annoying squint. "It was Jackson, and it wasn't a rock—"

"EMMA! ALLIE! KENNEDY! JACKSON!"

Allie gasped, because those were definitely our names being yelled by Snurk through her bullhorn.

And the sound was coming closer.

"Come on!" Kennedy said. "Let's go!"

"Does it look like they went down okay?" Noah asked me quietly, his focus on the

portal, not the teacher.

“I think so, no thanks to you. Does mom know you’re here?” I asked. “How did you even get—”

“Can’t talk,” he said, shaking his head. “You never saw me.”

And then my brother took off running deeper into the woods.

What is happening?

“WHY ARE YOU NOT AT THE BUSES?”

I turned in the opposite direction, and Snurk was coming toward us. Full-on, like she was planning to tackle us when she got close. The woman was built like a linebacker, dressed from head to toe in safety-yellow, and it was impossible to look away from the spectacle.

“THE BUSES ARE ABOUT TO LEAVE!” she yelled, still sprinting, and I wondered if she knew that yelling wasn’t necessary when using a bullhorn.

“We got lost,” Jackson said calmly, quietly, like a neon madwoman wasn’t flying toward us with a loudspeaker in her hand.

“IT’S IMPOSSIBLE TO GET LOST WHEN YOU STAY WITH THE GROUP!”

“Technically that’s untrue,” I heard Jackson mutter under his breath, and I started to laugh in spite of everything.

But then I looked at the bright red cheeks hard-charging toward us, a bold contradiction to the screaming yellow of her fabric, and any thoughts of humor

disappeared instantly.

We were in very big trouble.

Snurk launched into a lecture that sent spittle spraying everywhere, her teeth-clenched enunciation delivering tiny bursts of saliva onto all of us as she raged about our irresponsibility.

I knew she wasn't wrong for being mad—we shouldn't have wandered off—but my mind was racing too fast for me to concentrate on her rage.

Because I needed to know—had my wishes landed okay?

Was I good?

How in the world had Noah ended up on my field trip, and where had he run off to?

Snurk marched us back to the picnic area, so red-faced and angry that we didn't dare utter a syllable as we trudged through the trees out of fear of getting bullhorned to death. It appeared that everyone in the sixth grade was already loaded up on the buses when we got there—awesome—so they were all seated and watching like we were putting on a play for them as the four of us got on the last bus.

But once I was in my seat and the bus started rolling back toward school, I took a deep breath and focused on what was important.

I'd found the portal and made my wishes.

Somehow I knew that wherever Nana Marie was, she was happy. Knowing my nana, she was probably standing on top of a table somewhere above the clouds shouting, Whoo whoo whooo!

Because I'd done it!

It might not have gone exactly according to plan, but I'd followed Nana's carefully laid trail of breadcrumbs, and my wishes were now in the portal.

It was going to work, I just knew it.

Allie and I grabbed a seat in the middle of the bus and Kennedy sat in front of us, leaving Jackson Matthews to go sit... wherever.

"I am so sorry, you guys," I said quietly as the bus started moving.

I felt really bad that they'd gotten in trouble because of me.

"Are you kidding me?" Kennedy said, her mouth sliding into a huge grin. "That was epic!"

Allie nodded, then slowly started to giggle. "It kind of was, oh my gosh."

I stared at them, in shock that they weren't freaking out.

"I kind of thought ol' Nana was a little wacky in the nightgown, if you know what I mean," Kennedy said. "But there was something to that hole. Like, I felt the magic."

"I think I did, too!" Allie squealed, which made me shush them both while the three of us giggled.

I didn't fall asleep on the bus this time, mostly because my brain was running wild. I kept thinking through my wishes and how my life was going to look if they all came true.

I mean, it wouldn't be that different, because my wishes weren't exactly "epic."

My wishes were relatively small things.

It felt wrong, somehow, to wish for things like fame and fortune, so I was sticking with simple things that would improve my life. My first three wishes were low-key asks, but my fourth was THE wish, the one that meant everything to me.

I stared out the window and went through my wishes in my mind.

1. I wish for noninvisibility. I want boobs (nothing huge, just SOMETHING), blond hair (my mother refuses to let me dye it), and to grow past the shrimp-height I've been stuck at for two years (six inches would be perfect).

I knew the request was a little selfish, and I'd be embarrassed if anyone ever knew I'd wasted a wish on that, but I was tired of being short, flat, and boring. Was it so much to ask that just once, when I walked into a room someone might say "Wow" ?

I closed my eyes and could almost feel what it'd be like to show up for the first day of school in August and have Evan Winters look up from his desk, see my transformation, then say in that scratchy voice of his, "Wow."

According to Nana, the wishes would start coming true four months from today, which would be August 4. She'd mentioned getting one wish per week for four weeks, but she'd never said how things got started. If I was a grantee, would I wake up on August 4 instantly gorgeous, or was I going to start gradually growing and changing over the next four months, both chestally and vertically, and then hit my noninvisibility goal in August?

The details of the grantings were sketchy, but I was fine with waiting and seeing.

2. I wish to be appointed as one of the seventh-grade senatorial candidates.

I'd filled out all the paperwork and already had the interview, so it was only a matter of time until I got the official call. Even without magic, I felt good about this appointment happening, because I had great teacher recommendations and I'd slayed the essay.

But now that I'd tossed it into the wish portal, it felt as good as done.

I wanted to squee like Allie at the thought of wearing that navy blue blazer to school on meeting days, walking through the halls with the businesslike confidence of a middle school senator. I was picturing it with the wind blowing my blond hair and something by Taylor Swift playing as my theme music. I already knew the exact jeans and shoes I was going to wear with that fab jacket, although now that curves and height were on the way, I'd probably need to update that part of my daydream.

Squeeeeeeee!

But just as important as the senatorial fashion statement was the job; I couldn't wait to get to work. The student legislature got to do fun things like plan dances and organize charity outreach events, but they also got to have monthly meetings with the administration, where they brought forward student concerns.

I'd be able to actually discuss with teachers the things that students didn't like and maybe find solutions; like, how amazing would that feel? For some reason, it felt like a role I was supposed to take; it had since I'd first learned of it during middle school orientation.

3. I wish to no longer be awkward. I want to be able to say the RIGHT things in uncomfortable situations (without verbal diarrhea and oversharing), and not choke whenever people are watching me.

I didn't need to be graceful and charming, I simply needed to not be a rambling, bumbling buffoon every time I felt nervous. I was the girl who'd once told Libby Solomon (extremely popular) about how my cashew allergy made me "puke out of both ends" simply because she'd offered me a piece of candy, and I was the girl who'd also shared with my entire English class that I used special shampoo because my scalp gets really dry in the winter.

The minute I felt nervous, my brain shorted out and sent mortifying words to my mouth.

So even though it wasn't a life-shattering request, I needed my third wish.

It was a small ask—tiny, in fact—so hopefully the wish-granting authorities would appreciate my simplicity and happily un-awk me.

I took a deep breath through my nose and tried not to get overexcited when I thought about my fourth wish.

Because that wish was everything.

4. I wish for my mom to meet a good man and for them to fall madly in love.

It almost seemed like a selfless wish on the surface, like I was sacrificing one of my wishes for my mom, but it definitely was not that. I wanted that fourth wish with everything in my being, and I would give up all the other wishes for that one to be granted.

Because, yes, I wanted my mom to laugh like I remembered her doing before Nana Marie died and every responsibility in the world had landed on her shoulders.

But I also wanted a dad. I mean, that wasn't so much to ask, was it?

Every time I hung out at Allie's house, or Kennedy's, I got a tiny pinch in the center of my chest when I was around their parents. It was like my body got a cramp from how badly I wanted what they had.

Because both of my friends had awesome fathers.

They were dorky and cheesy and wildly embarrassing (when was Mr. Holford going to ditch those eight-pocket shorts already?), but they looked at their daughters like they were the centers of their universes. They teased them and scolded them and showed up for things like class picnics and parent-teacher conferences, usually side by side with the wives they adored.

My mom deserved that, not the ex-husband who lived on the other side of the country and never cared enough to help out or check in. My parents had split up right after I was born, so I didn't remember my dad ever being around, but now that he had a shiny new family, I knew it had to hurt her, to see him like that.

Happy, in love, the proud papa of twin baby boys.

It had to make her so sad that he loved them so much, but not us.

I was still thinking about that wish when I got home from school, and its importance felt greater than ever as I used my key to let myself in because my mom had to work late that day.

On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays, Noah was in charge until my mom got home at seven thirty.

I hated it.

I liked seeing her face when I walked in after school, and I liked telling her about my

day while we ate food together.

I didn't like Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays.

"Noah?" I yelled when I walked in, dropping my backpack and closing the door behind me.

"Yeah." He didn't even look up from his spot in front of the TV in the other room, where he was playing Xbox.

"What happened today?" I asked, slipping off my shoes and moving closer. "Where did you go?"

He shrugged and said, "Don't worry about it."

Don't worry about it?

"You showed up on the sixth-grade field trip and then you ran away!" He couldn't act like this was no big deal, even though that was how he acted about everything these days. My brother used to be fun, but lately he thought everything was stupid.

Including me.

Especially me.

"So?" he said, his fingers pounding the buttons on the controller.

"So?" I couldn't believe he was being so nonchalant. "So how did you get out there, Noah?"

"It's easy to fake a dentist appointment, so then I figured out which bus had all parent

chaperones and no teachers, thanks to the kid down the street, Jackson Whatever,” he said, still smacking the buttons. “And I hopped on at the last minute.”

“What?” That was impossible. Impossibly criminal . “Are you serious?”

He finally looked at me, and his grin told me he was pretty proud of his pluckiness. “I wasn’t sure it was going to work, but it was easy.”

I shook my head, but couldn’t help being impressed. “Honestly, I’m shocked you were smart enough to decipher Nana Marie’s notes.”

“Honestly, same goes for you.”

It was nice, for a half second, that we were getting along. That we were smiling and not yelling at each other as a lifetime of nana-hood hung between us. I asked, “So you didn’t tell Jackson Matthews about the wishes and the portal, right? Like, he was already there, tossing rocks or some—”

“No, I told him.” He shrugged and said, “I mean, I needed him to help me out, and odds are good the whole lore-of-four thing is bogus, so why—”

“I cannot believe you told him!” Suddenly I was back to wanting to smack my brother. How could he tell someone he didn’t even know about the stories passed down to us—under assumed vows of silence—by Nana Marie? I was torn between wanting to cry and rage, all at the same time. “Did you not listen when she said—”

“Emma. Sweet summer child, Emma.” He sighed and his attention was back on his game. “I wanted to see if I could find the hole and I succeeded, because I’m a baller. Since I was there, I figured why not make a few wishes. But this isn’t a big deal, and the kid down the street isn’t going to take our wishy-wish birthright, for God’s sake, so calm your pants.”

“You calm your pants,” I said through gritted teeth, rolling my eyes and going upstairs, wanting to get away from him before we got into a fight that ended with one of us calling our mom at work and adding to her already stressful day.

But instead of simply walking by Nana Marie’s room, like I’d done every day since she died, I turned on the light and stepped through the doorway.

It still smelled like her somehow, the combination of flowery perfume and dryer sheets, and I dragged my fingertips over the bedspread before climbing onto the bed, lying down, and staring up at the ceiling.

“I did it,” I whispered, even though I was sure Nana Marie wasn’t hanging out on top of that dusty ceiling fan, looking down at me. I closed my eyes and said, “I took the clues you left, found the portal, and I made my wishes, Nana.”

And even though it was silly, I felt her when I said it.

I felt her in the weight of the air, in the quiet of the room, in the softness of her bed as it cushioned my body.

It didn’t make sense, but I felt her with me.

And I fell sound asleep on her bed.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:46 am

block party

Four months later (August 4)

FOUR MONTHS AFTER THE FOURTH DAY of the fourth month, I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, trying my hardest to see a change.

Any change at all.

I turned to the left, turned to the right, then turned my back so I had to look at my reflection over my shoulder.

I looked exactly the same.

No taller, no curvier, no blonder.

I was the same old version of myself, only with a little bit of a tan after running around at the pool with Kennedy all summer, and a faint bruise on my chin from an unfortunate collision between my face and our front door.

I sighed, disappointed.

I'd really been hoping to wake up looking like more of a wow version of myself.

But I was very un-wow.

And it was too early for my other wishes (senate, me less awkward, mom in love) to be

happening.

No one else was even awake yet.

“Em?” My mom knocked on the bathroom door. “You okay?”

I stand corrected.

“Yeah,” I said quietly, opening the door. “Up early today, that’s all.”

“Excited to start school tomorrow?” she asked with a smile, already dressed in her hospital scrubs. She worked from seven in the morning until seven at night on Tuesdays, so since this year school started on a Wednesday, she was going to miss the block party.

As long as we’d lived in this neighborhood—my whole life—there was a block party every year on the eve of the first day of school.

Aka the last night of summer.

“Ish,” I said with a shrug, but I was unbelievably excited about starting school. Because when my wishes kicked in—and I knew that I was a grantee; I knew it down to my bones—this school year was going to be next-level amazing.

I was going to be a not-awkward, not-invisible student senator with a mother in love.

How could I not be over the moon excited?

“I get that,” she replied, moving to stand beside me in front of the mirror and pull her hair back into a ponytail. “Fun to see people, but not fun to be back at that whole learning thing, right?”

“Exactly,” I agreed, wondering (for, like, the thousandth time) if I’d have any classes with Evan Winters.

“Well, I have a great feeling about this year,” she said, smiling at me in the mirror, one of those tired grins that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I see cute boys and easy classes in your future.”

I see cute boys in your future, too , I thought. “Please be right.”

“Oh, I will be,” she said. “Just you wait and see. Hey, do you want to go get donuts?”

“Always.” I leaned closer to the mirror. Is that a zit? Please, God, no. “But do we have to wait for Noah?”

“Who’s got that kind of time?” she said breezily. “No, I say we let him sleep while we run to Casey’s, and he can eat our leftovers when he wakes up.”

“At noon,” I added, because all he did anymore was sleep.

“Probably at noon,” she agreed.

We ran to the gas station and got a dozen donuts, and every exchange my mother had with humans who weren’t me felt rife with electricity, now that magic could be at play.

The guy who smiled and let her go in front of him in line?

He looked like a nice person, and I approved of his I-probably-work-in-a-bank fancy suit.

And the dude who held the door for her when we left? He looked a little too old for

her, but there was a dad-quality to his smile that I didn't hate.

I was obsessed with these thoughts as I wolfed down two sprinkled donuts, and I felt like my life was about to change in the very best ways. Even though I couldn't see the physical changes in my body, I sensed they were underway.

"Dude, if you throw another hot dog, I will pound you!" Kennedy yelled.

"How do you live with them?" I asked, reaching into the cooler on her porch to get another Coke.

Every year, Kennedy's triplet brothers terrorized the block party, and this year was no exception.

Their weapon of choice today was the hot dog. They apparently thought it was hilarious to throw hot dogs—fully dressed in bun, ketchup, and mustard—at random people. Hazel Simon had to run home because her adorable white sundress now had a condiment blob that looked a bit like a smiling clown, with the mustard leaving eye glops and the ketchup forming a garish grin. The troublesome trio—Clark, Kent, and Roy, all nine years old—had been an awful staple of the block party since their birth.

One year they set a bush on fire when they were setting off fireworks they'd saved from the Fourth of July; one year they wrote the bad word in the middle of the street with smoke bombs (it took months for the word to disappear); and this year they were all hopped up on the joy that apparently came from tossing weenies at people and making them mad.

"I throw a lot of punches," she said, shaking her head before yelling, "Knock it off!"

Kennedy's parents were across the street, planted in lawn chairs and fully immersed in visiting with their neighbors. The adults always let the kids run wild at the block

party, taking the night off from parenting since the road was closed to traffic.

It's what made it so awesome.

Dads were tossing footballs and discussing grilling, mom groups were bunched together in laughing clumps, and the kids did whatever they wanted while having access to an arsenal of sugary beverages, leftover fireworks from the Fourth, and cookout food.

Everyone was running around like they always did, and nothing appeared to be different, but I could feel it in the air.

Magic was afoot.

I knew it.

Also, it helped to focus on the possibility of change instead of the fact that Nana wasn't there this year (no world-famous pasta salad for everyone to freak out about), that I didn't have a dad at all, and that my mom had become a hermit.

She used to be part of the street's social circle, talking to neighbors at the mailbox and crossing the street for occasional cups of coffee and gossip, but she'd stopped that after Nana died. Now she only had time for work, driving Noah and me where we needed to go, and cleaning.

Oh—and bills.

Last night she'd fallen asleep at the kitchen table while working on bills, which made me fall asleep and dream about the wishes that were about to come true.

Kennedy hadn't mentioned the magic at all today, which meant she'd probably

forgotten about it altogether. I'd suspected she still didn't really believe in the lore, so I guess I shouldn't have been surprised.

"Whoa," Kennedy said out of the side of her mouth, "check him out."

I followed her gaze to the other side of the street. Kennedy was obsessed with boys, so I assumed she was talking about the tall guy in the hat who was blowing something up with Rafe Eckert (a year older than us and a total jerk).

Only the dude wasn't just tall—he was jacked . He had pecs like he'd been doing push-ups twenty-four seven.

"What is up with the stupid hat?" I asked. The guy was wearing a beanie, the kind of knit hat you wore in winter when you went out in the snow. It was pulled down over his forehead, so low that you almost couldn't see his eyes.

But it was ninety degrees outside.

And it was July.

"Holy cheeseballs—that's Jackson!" Kennedy said it around a gasp, her eyes popping out of their sockets.

"What?" I squinted and looked at the guy again, and... holy cheeseballs , it actually was Jackson Matthews. "How can that be?"

I was still irrationally irritated that he knew about the lore and had been at the portal, so the mere sight of him annoyed me.

"My mom, during one of her endless annoying TED Talks about puberty," Kennedy said, "told me that a lot of guys leave for middle school summer break and come back

looking like men in the fall. Like, they have crazy-fast growth spurts because of testosterone.”

She said it with awe in her voice as she stared across the street, and added, “But this is, like, next level.”

“He looks like he should have a driver’s license,” I said, blown away by the change. I hadn’t seen the guy at all since school got out, so he’d probably been gradually growing for months and we’d missed it.

“That is wild,” Kennedy said.

“I was going to say freakish , but wild definitely works.”

“Emma!”

I was a fool and turned around when I heard my name, which was how I took a hot dog to the face. One minute I was staring at our neighbor on the other side of the street, and the next, I was blinded by a stinging burst of ketchup and mustard to the eyeballs.

“Gahhhh!” I yelled, wiping at my eyes and stumbling around. “I’m going to kill you, Roy!”

“It wasn’t Roy,” one of those triple jerks said, giggling.

“I’ll kill you all, then,” I growled, because the condiments were burning my eyeballs into oblivion.

“Come on,” Kennedy said, grabbing my arm. “You can wash and change at my house.”

Ten minutes later, my vision was restored and I'd changed into Kennedy's Battle of Borgledoush shirt. She was so obsessed with the video game that she had no fewer than ten shirts with that weird little elfin dude on the front. I didn't get it, her gaming thing, but that was Kennedy.

She liked what she liked and didn't care what anyone thought about it. She was obsessed with gaming, documentaries, and everything miniature, and she'd tell anyone who'd listen about every tiny detail.

"Are you guys up here?"

It was Allie.

She'd been at her grandparents' since school got out in May, and only got back to town a couple hours ago. Finally, she was back!

"In my room," Kennedy yelled in kind of a squeal-scream as we shared a grin.

The AT3 (we'd named ourselves "the awesome threesome" in third grade and sometimes my brain still liked it) were back together!

Bring on the seventh grade.

I was leaning down, reaching for the scrunchie I'd dropped on the floor, when Kennedy said in a shocked voice, "Allie? What the heck happened to you?"

I looked up, expecting to see bandages or a disfiguration, but it was just Allie.

A stunningly beautiful Allie.

She hadn't been unattractive before, she'd been... fine.

That was a word that described all three of us—we were fine .

Allie, like Kennedy and me, blended in with everyone else.

Until she knocked something over, that is.

Allie was the klutziest person I'd ever met, always tripping or bumping into things. In first grade she fell off the risers during the Christmas program and somehow managed to land directly on her nose, which left the floor of the multipurpose room looking like the set of a horror movie.

If you looked closely, there was still a tiny bloodstain next to the ear of the Hartwood Elementary wolf.

But that didn't matter, because she looked ridiculous at the moment.

Ridiculously gorgeous.

I couldn't put my finger on exactly what was different, because it wasn't like she'd had a makeover or gotten a new haircut. No, it was like she was different, the bones of her.

Her pointy chin now looked gracefully defined, and her slightly crooked nose (see previous reference to the Winter Wonderland nasal massacre) now seemed Disney-princess perfect. It was perky, if a nose could be perky, and perfectly straight.

Allie practically glowed as she stood there smiling at us, her skin smooth, her long hair falling in soft waves that belonged on the head of a supermodel.

A huge firework exploded outside the window, sending pink and green lights scattering in front of our stunning best friend.

She was the same size and shape she'd been before she left, but her legs looked like perfect legs. Her arms looked like perfect arms. Her face was a perfect face.

“What did they feed you in Connecticut, Allie?” I asked, wanting to gorge myself on a feast of whatever the heck could make you look like that.

Allie's eyes were practically dancing as she closed the door behind her, like we needed privacy. Then she lowered her voice and said, “All I'm going to say is that I woke up like this today.”

Another firework popped outside the window, illuminating Allie with a golden spotlight.

It probably would've taken a minute for me to get what she was saying, but she was giving us ginormo eyes and talking slowly, like she was saying something that she wasn't saying. I tilted my head, looking at her, and she repeated, “I woke up like this today. Today, which is August fourth. The fourth .”

“Oh my God!” Kennedy shrieked, covering her mouth.

“Oh my God,” I repeated in shock, my heart fluttering while my stomach sank—all at once.

Because I was so excited for Allie—this meant she was a grantee—and also for the undeniable proof that the magic was real. This was absolutely incredibly amazing, and I'd always known Nana Marie was right!

But I was also a little scared because of her “woke up like this” comment. Since I hadn't woken up with blond hair and a B-cup, did that mean I was not a grantee?

Was Allie's gorgeousness indisputable proof that the magic was real and that I was

not going to benefit from it?

“Tell us everything,” Kennedy said, grabbing Allie’s arm and dragging her toward the bed. “Every single detail of today. I want to know what time you got up, what you ate for breakfast, when you noticed you’d become a princess—that sort of stuff.”

“Okay,” Allie said, laughing. Once she was seated in the center of Kennedy’s huge bed and we were sitting around her, she said, “Okay, so I woke up at six this morning, went into the bathroom, and when I glanced at the mirror while I washed my hands, I saw this looking back at me!”

No way, no way, no way. I couldn’t stop staring at her because it was so incredibly strange. She looked the same, yet she also looked like an entirely different person. It was like she was using a filter or something.

She was like an AI-illustrated version of herself.

“Have any other, um,” I said, pausing to make sure my words didn’t specifically ask about her wishes because no way was I going to risk ruining everything by breaking that cardinal rule, “things in your life seemed different today?”

“Nope.” She shook her head—man, that was some perfect hair—and said, “Nothing. Any other, uh, things I might’ve been looking for in my life have not yet appeared.”

Which made sense. Nana said the legend granted one wish per week for four weeks.

“Thank God,” Kennedy said, “because that means there’s a chance I might still see things appearing in my life.”

“Oh, for sure,” Allie agreed, nodding in a way that made her long hair bounce adorably. “Today is only the beginning.”

There was something about the way she was speaking, like she was an expert on the magic simply because she was a grantee, that irritated me a little. Nana Marie had been the expert, with her extensive documentation, but Allie had lucked into something she knew nothing about.

I was happy for her and her amazing good fortune, but receiving a wish didn't make her an authority on its processes.

"That's right," Kennedy said in a high-pitched voice, doing the tiny clap thing with her hands that she always did when she was overexcited and trying to keep it contained.

"Just the beginning," I agreed, powering through my own irritation because who cared about anything other than the magic? It didn't matter who was acting like an authority when the wish potential was within our grasp. I wanted so badly to believe there was still a chance for me that I was going to ignore every negative thought and expect the best. "It's only a matter of ti—"

"Ken?" Kennedy's mom chose that moment to knock on the bedroom door, saying her name from the hallway. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah," Kennedy said, getting up and walking over to the door. She pulled open the door and said, "What's up?"

Mrs. Holford was holding a whole bunch of cans in her arms, like she'd stopped inside just long enough to grab drinks for the entire neighborhood. "I got a voicemail from Dr. Braces that must've come in yesterday or something, because I didn't see it until now."

Kennedy's orthodontist was the infamous Dr. Braces, the dentist from TV who'd changed his last name to Braces like a way-too-literal dork. Come see Dr. Braces, and

he'll give you beautiful faces. That stupid jingle didn't even make sense, yet it could get stuck in your head and stay with you for hours.

"I am not getting them tightened. I already got them tightened like two weeks ago," Kennedy snapped. "I refuse."

"As much as I appreciate your terrible attitude," her mom said with a smile—everyone in her family was sarcastic—"he doesn't want to tighten your braces. His message said that he was looking at your X-rays and he thinks you're done. He said it's time to get your braces off."

"WHAT?" Kennedy yelled, throwing her arms into the air. "ARE YOU KIDDING ME RIGHT NOW?"

Her mom was laughing when she said, "I'm not—you're getting those things off this week, kiddo."

"Wait." Her dad popped up in the doorway behind her mom, grinning at Kennedy as he quipped, "You mean I'll no longer be blinded when my kid smiles at me in direct sunlight? Say it ain't so."

"Oh, it's so," Kennedy very nearly screamed, her entire face all lit up like she'd never heard such great news.

Which was fair. She was the first person in our grade to get braces, so she'd had an extreme amount of metal in her mouth for at least three years.

Maybe four.

"Are you ever coming back with those drinks?" her dad asked her mom. "I was sent to find you."

“So impatient,” she said, shaking her head.

“So thirsty ,” her dad quipped, wrapping his arms around her waist and lifting her up off the ground. “Let’s go, Holford.”

Kennedy’s mom screamed and started giggling as they disappeared from the doorway.

“They’re so embarrassing,” Kennedy said, rolling her eyes, but her smile was big.

My smile would be big, too.

The way her parents were together, constantly laughing, and the way they obviously adored their pack of wild children, always made me feel antsy.

Like a timer was set and I needed to help my mom find that before it was too late.

As soon as her parents were gone, Kennedy sprinted over to the bed, but instead of sitting she leaped on top of it and started jumping.

Which made Allie and me scramble off the bed, because no way was she not going to end up stomping us. Overexcited Kennedy was the equivalent of a bull in a china shop.

“Do you guys realize what this means?” Kennedy said—well, shouted , her eyes the size of dinner plates as she jumped on the bed.

“That you’re getting your braces off,” I said, grinning at Allie.

Kennedy leaped from the bed, landing in front of us in a squat-crouch move that was kind of cool and also kind of made her look like a dog who was doing its business.

Still—I gave her bonus points for the dismount.

“Yes,” Kennedy said, “but it also means that on the fourth of August, I got the message that I’m getting my braces off. I got this magically amazing news on the fourth .”

“Wait,” I said, unable to blink as I looked at her and my mind ran wild with implications. Her hair was sticking up all over and she looked utterly crazed, with excitement in those huge eyes. “Are you saying—”

“That is exactly what I’m saying but not saying!”

Holy, holy cheeseballs.

It felt like my heart was going to beat right out of my chest.

Kennedy had wished to get her braces off.

Which meant that Allie and Kennedy were both grantees.

It was hard to believe that we’d been that lucky.

And one of Kennedy’s wishes had just been granted right in front of me, in real time!

Thank you, Nana Marie.

Suddenly I just knew that I was going to be a grantee, too, and I felt like leaping onto that bed and making it into my own personal bouncy house.

Because it made sense.

Not only had I been with them when they'd made their wishes, but I'd given them the wish-making protocol. I'd taught them the wish ways.

As I stood there, looking at Allie's perky nose and Kennedy's shiny smile, I knew my first wish was on its way.

On its way, and landing any minute.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:46 am

heads up

First day of seventh grade

W HEN I STEPPED OUT of my mom's car and saw all the students standing in front of the building, waiting for the doors to open, my stomach went wild with butterflies.

Really good butterflies.

Because the possibilities of this year were monumental.

Last night, when I checked the wall in my bedroom (yes, I measured myself by marking the wall), I discovered that I'd grown almost a full inch since the last time I measured.

It was happening!

And this morning, when I'd compared my reflection in the bathroom mirror with last year's yearbook photo, my hair was a little lighter.

Not anywhere close to blond yet, but the kind of lighter that the sun took care of after a long summer.

The kind of lighter that assured me magical transformations were underway.

I wanted to jump up and down and perhaps turn a cartwheel (although my cartwheels were garbage) while simultaneously singing something from Hamilton at the top of

my lungs (probably “My Shot”).

But I wouldn’t.

I would play it cool and save that trash cartwheel for when they announced I was the seventh grade senatorial representative.

“Seriously, I can’t even,” Kennedy said as we approached the crowd of people waiting to go inside.

“Chill, Ken,” I muttered as she literally bounced up the sidewalk. Allie was on the other side of her, strutting with the slinky walk of a runway model (she’d become graceful now, too), which left me to just, well, move like a normal human.

“I can’t, though.” Kennedy readjusted her backpack as we walked toward the front doors. “I mean, my pits are already sweaty because I’m so excited.”

I rolled my eyes, because I was trying really hard to evoke an I’m-too-cool-for-everything vibe this year—mostly because I’d heard my brother’s friend call me “a weirdo who always seemed to be hopped up on sugar beans,” and I wasn’t a fan of that description—but yeah... I kind of could’ve died, too.

Because there was no doubt in my mind that the AT3 was now the GT3 (“the grantee threesome”).

Last night, right when I’d turned off my light and was going to sleep, Kennedy FaceTimed me and Allie because she’d done what was apparently impossible and beaten Level 825 in the Battle of Borgledoush game.

That was cool, as in good for her, but what had her losing her mind was when she looked at her follower count (or whatever you called it in gaming) right after she did

it and there were literally thousands of people watching her stream and commenting.

AND—this was the important part—she'd given us THE look when she informed us that she'd woken up yesterday, on the fourth , suddenly better at the game than she'd ever been before.

The lore of four.

For a quick minute I'd been tripped up by the timing, thinking she'd had two wishes granted in one week, but then I realized that was impossible. It didn't work that way. Since the wishes were secret, I guessed she'd probably said something like I wish to slay at the game without braces , or something that made both things part of the same wish.

Regardless of the unknown, the first day of seventh grade hadn't even started yet, and already our wishes were coming true.

“Does this look stupid?” Allie asked, tugging on the adorable pink dress that made her legs look twenty feet long. She seemed more nervous today, as a beautiful person, than she'd ever been as a commoner.

Which made zero sense.

If it were me, I'd be tossing my gorgeous hair around and talking loudly to ensure no one missed out on seeing me walk by. I was envious (but not jealous, because yay for Allie!) of the speed with which she'd been granted whatever her appearance wish had been. Waking up completely changed—that was like a dream come true.

People were definitely going to say “wow” when they looked at her; I had no doubt of that.

I didn't love that my "wows" were slower to arrive.

"No, it's cute," I said, taking a deep breath as we approached the entrance. I had the first-day-of-school jitters big-time, mostly because I hated the unknown. Who would be in my classes? Were my teachers going to be cool? I knew I had lunch with Allie and Kennedy, but who would we sit with?

I could already see people looking at us (at Allie) as I reached for the door handle, and somehow I knew everything was about to be different.

This was going to be the year of the GT3.

"Heads up, Rockford!"

I turned my head just in time to see Jackson Matthews grinning at me, and for a football to slam into the center of my face.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:47 am

ugly shirts and kleenex-jammed nostrils

“Y OUR TIMING IS PERFECT,” Mr. Shields said, glaring at me from behind his tiny wire-rimmed glasses. He was wearing a lab coat even though it was the first day of school, so either we were in for a wild year of daily scientific experimentation, or he hadn’t known what to wear and was using his white coat as cover. He probably had pajamas on underneath. “I was about to review the section in the class rules about my intolerance for tardiness.”

I wanted to disappear as the entire science class stared at me, standing there like a joke in the front of the room.

I heard a few whispers and a loud giggle, which made sense because I looked hilarious.

In the very worst way.

Jackson’s football had given me a bloody nose that wouldn’t stop, hence my lateness. So instead of walking through the halls beside my supermodel and influencer besties while wind blew our hair and cool music played in our wake, I had to sit in Miss Nessbin’s office with Kleenex jammed up both of my nostrils.

And now—insert huge sigh of disappointment—my honker was ginormous.

Thick at the top, thick at the bottom, with no narrowing or cute little button tip. My nose was like something a ham-fisted preschooler made with Play-Doh.

Also—it was starting to get a bluish tint that hinted purple was coming.

Please, God, no purple.

“I was in the nurse’s office,” I said, holding out my pass, and as Mr. Shields peered at me over his glasses like he needed more information, I added, “With a bloody nose. It was bad. Like, blood was pouring out everywhere and I had to—”

“Got it,” he snapped, his eyes narrowing as he watched me like I was a toddler picking my nose.

I could feel my cheeks turning hot pink as I noticed Evan Winters sitting at a table in the back of the room.

Evan was in my science class; whaaaaaaaat?!

His eyes met mine, his lips turned up in a lazy grin, and he said, “Wow.”

THE WORLD STOPPED.

My heart, the spinning of the Earth, the burning of the sun, and the expansion of my lungs. Everything in the cosmos stopped as Evan let loose with a giggle and gave his head a shake, like the sight of me was the funniest thing he’d ever laid eyes upon.

I’d been dying of hope that I would have him in a class, and now I was just dying.

Evan Winters was gorgeous and popular, and I’d daydreamed about him liking me since the second quarter of third grade. I’d known in my heart that all it would take for us to hit it off would be a solid placement on the seating chart. I’d show him how charming I could be, enticing him with my neatly written lab notes and witty comments while he... well, kept being as adorably perfect as he’d been since I first

saw him playing tetherball at recess, four long years ago.

But as he eyeballed my shirt with his perfect eyebrows scrunched together like two black caterpillars kissing, I wanted to disappear.

Not the shirt, Evan—don't look at the shirt!

Because when my nose started gushing blood, the adorable first-day-of-school T-shirt I'd been wearing (white V-neck with tiny silver stars) had become a crime scene.

It looked like someone had been clubbed to death while wearing that shirt.

And at my school, if your shirt got hit with bodily fluids, Miss Nessbin turned to the lost and found.

Now, if this had happened at the end of the year, I would've been fine. By May, the lost and found was filled with an equal distribution of "cool" and "not cool" attire, in all shapes and sizes. Last year Kennedy scored an amazing Adidas hoodie the day Bart Sturdy threw up on her. She was sad about the disgusting ordeal, but pretty happy about the delightful wardrobe grab.

But at the beginning of the year, that box was nearly empty.

Which was why I was wearing an oversized fluorescent green T-shirt that said SAFETY ISN'T ONLY FOR NERDS IT'S FOR ALL OF US .

Mr. Shields let out a long-suffering sigh, as if it were the worst thing in the world that he had to deal with a tardy student like me, and he said sternly, ominously, "Take your seat beside Mr. Matthews."

I swear I heard it in that garbled, slow-motion reverb usually reserved for scary

characters in horror movies. Beeeeesiiiiide Miiiister Matthhewwwwwwssss.

NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO.

I glanced in the direction of where he was pointing, and of course there was an empty seat at Jackson's lab table.

As Jackson Matthews stared at me with a huge grin on his face and that stupid beanie on his head, I knew that he was bad luck. My mom always said Where there's smoke, there's fire , and that guy had been the wispy vapors floating around every single time I went up in flames.

He'd popped up at the portal, he'd popped up right before I got smacked in the face with a hot dog last night, and now he'd popped up in time to ruin the first day of seventh grade by pounding me in the face with a football.

It was probably his fault my wishes were so slow. Maybe he screwed them up when he hit them with his rock or something.

It still annoyed me that Noah had told him about the magic at all, for the record.

Nana Marie had been adamant about keeping the secret of the lore in the family (Allie and Kennedy counted as family), yet somehow this overgrown near-stranger was in on the magic.

It felt very wrong .

Honestly, with how tall he'd grown over the summer and how massive his chest was, it was almost like he was getting my wishes.

Grow six inches—check.

Get boobs—check.

A weird feeling came over me as my brain rewound those two thoughts and played them again.

He'd definitely grown six inches (at least), and he definitely had sprouted an impressive chest.

But no.

NO.

That's impossible , I assured myself, because centuries-old magic granted by otherworldly faerie beings didn't get accidentally stolen by a kid throwing a rock.

It didn't work that way.

Right?

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:47 am

the wonder woman panty scandal

“P SSSST .”

I rolled my eyes and ignored Jackson as I listened to Mr. Shields drone on about lab cleanliness. I was contemplating texting my mom to see if she could bring me a new shirt, but I knew if I got out my phone right now, Mr. Shields would take it.

He was that teacher.

So gahhhhh, I had to wait, but I sooo didn't want to wait. Because every moment that I existed in that atrocious fluorescent nerd shirt was a moment further away from being seen as Dream Girl by Evan Winters.

I heard the snapping of Jackson's fingers (like I was really going to answer to that; I wasn't a dog), but then his notebook slid in front of me on our lab table. Written in pencil were the words I AM SO SORRY .

Sure you are , I thought, picturing the way he'd smiled at the sight of me with my inflated honker and atrocious shirt.

I took my pen and drew a hand gesture that perfectly captured my feelings, then slid it in front of him (without tearing my eyes from the teacher, of course). Someone who was sorry wouldn't have been smiling like an outrageously happy puppy at the ridiculously awful sight of me, so I was not accepting his apology.

The notebook slid back over.

I CANNOT BELIEVE YOU HAVE TO WEAR THAT SHIRT BECAUSE OF ME .

Part of me wanted to laugh at that sentence, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. I picked up my pen and wrote: If you're really sorry, you'll wear it tomorrow.

I shoved the notebook back toward Jackson and glanced over at Evan, who appeared to be asleep.

Yes. Please sleep through this dreadful first impression of seventh-grade Emma.

"There are five minutes left in class," Mr. Shields said, wrapping up his mind-numbingly boring presentation. "So why don't you get started reading unit one until the bell rings."

I sighed and reached for the textbook he'd handed out as Jackson said to me, "I'll wear it."

"What?" I looked over at him, expecting sarcasm, but he looked dead serious.

"I'll wear the shirt," he said, kind of looking like he felt bad. "Just, like, toss it on my porch or have your brother bring it over."

"My brother?" I didn't think they really hung out, aside from those random interactions that'd led to Jackson throwing rocks down the portal.

"Yeah, we're shooting hoops later," he said.

I rolled my eyes again, and this time I wasn't even sure why.

"Dude, you're seriously going to wear that ?" said a voice behind me.

My heart started pounding in my chest as Evan, who was apparently awake now and eavesdropping, pointed at my shirt. He looked amused (and beautiful, of course, as he leaned back on his lab stool like some sort of science-themed supermodel), and I wasn't sure if I should be offended that my appearance was what was making him smile or glad he was noticing me.

Are you mocking me or discussing? MOCKING OR DISCUSSING?

“Dude, it's my fault she has to wear it,” Jackson said, talking to him in that we-are-bros-and-speak-the-same-language sort of voice. “I gave her a bloody nose with a football before the first bell and destroyed her shirt.”

“Facts,” I interjected, my desire to kill Jackson lessening to more of a “lightly maim” situation. Hallelujah! Evan Winters knew that I hadn't selected the very hideous shirt from my closet this morning. “And it was a great shirt, by the way.”

“Well,” Jackson said, scrunching up his nose, “I don't know if I'd say great .”

“Oh, it was great,” I corrected, giving Evan what I hoped was an I'm-so-charming smirk.

Jackson leaned closer to me and said under his breath, “Yeah, but you also thought your Wonder Woman underpants were great, according to your brother, so...”

“What?” I said a little too loudly, forgetting all about the fact that we were supposed to be reading. I'd been a preschool legend on our street because I loved my Wonder Woman underwear so much that I refused to wear pants, but the fact that Jackson knew about it and was mentioning it in the vicinity of Evan made me want to scream.

The bloodcurdling scream of someone about to be murdered in a slasher movie.

“Miss Rockford,” Mr. Shields snapped, his eyes bugging like my outburst was the most shocking thing that’d ever happened to him.

“Sorry,” I said, my cheeks hot as I opened my book and wished for death.

Evan was still looking at us, so I tried again.

“For the record, it was a fantastic shirt,” I said, grinning at Evan with what felt like a scary clown smile.

And I was torn at that moment between wanting to destroy my brother for bringing this hat-wearing jerk into our lives, and wanting to kick Jackson’s stool out from underneath him.

“Sure it was, Em,” Jackson said, which made Evan start laughing.

“It was ,” I said in a squeal type of voice that even I found annoying, but that only made them laugh harder. “You wouldn’t even know because you ruined it so quickly by being terrible at football.”

“Ouch,” Evan said, giggling like this whole exchange was hilarious, wrapping his arms around his midsection as if the cackles coming from his body were so incredibly deep that they were painful.

Also—had Jackson Matthews just called me “Em,” like we were friends, when we definitely were not?

The bell rang, and I angrily gathered my things while the two of them left the classroom together. The fact that they seemed to have bonded over laughing at me made me want to chase them down, tackle Jackson to the ground, and tear off the stupid hat that he obviously thought he looked hot in.

“Did you say something, Miss Rockford?”

I glanced over at Mr. Shields as I realized I might’ve made a growling noise while picturing Jackson lying face down in the hallway.

“I was clearing my throat,” I lied, wishing the entire day had been a bad dream.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:47 am

invisible lunching with strangers

“W HERE’S A LLIE?” I ASKED.

Kennedy and I looked around the lunchroom, trying to do it in that sly way where no one could tell you were nervously trying to figure out where you would be consuming your food and who with.

But the thing about the cafeteria was that the longer you stood in one place, looking around, the more obvious it became that you didn’t fit in anywhere. That you didn’t know where you belonged. Add my stupid shirt and bulbous nose to that stressful awareness, and I was starting to panic in our search for Allie.

“Ooh—there she is!”

I looked in the direction where Kennedy was pointing and couldn’t quite believe my eyes. Allie was sitting next to Ashley Baker. THE Ashley Baker, the Ashley Baker who’d been revered and admired since the day she did a backflip off the top of the slide in second grade and landed on her feet.

Ashley was one of those people who seemed to be good at everything while also looking cool (she had leather pants and didn’t look stupid in them) and doing all the right things.

All the time.

I mean, she’d twirled fire batons in the sixth-grade talent show and hadn’t burned

down the gym. It didn't get much cooler than that.

The other four girls at the table were Ashley Baker's closest friends.

It was a GOOD table if you were going to rank tables by social importance.

So what the heck was Allie doing there?

Had she been there first and they accidentally formed an eating circle around her? Was she so hungry that she hadn't noticed whose table she was sitting at in her race to shove handfuls of food down her empty gullet?

"Wait," I said, grabbing Kennedy's sleeve as she started to head in Allie's direction. "I'm not sure we should go over there."

Especially when I look like this.

It would be terrifying enough approaching that table on a good day.

But on a day where I'd been ball-smacked in the face and was wearing the discarded shirt of a glow-in-the-dark nerd, it had catastrophic potential.

At that moment, Allie looked up and saw us.

She smiled (sort of) and waved us over.

Oh-kay. Apparently we were doing it. Kennedy and I walked over to the popular table, and as I watched Allie, I realized it didn't appear—from a distance—to be a mistake at all.

Allie looked like she fit in.

Her bouncy hair was having lunch with five other bouncy-haired heads. Her makeup'd face was having lunch with five other makeup'd faces. Her not-in-grade-school-anymore body was having lunch with five other not-in-grade-school-anymore bodies.

It checked out.

And now... here we were.

“Hey,” Kennedy said, grabbing a chair from an empty table and sliding it over with a loud screeeech so she was sitting beside Allie. I watched the girl on the other side of Allie scooch down, and I felt like the biggest nerd as I also grabbed a chair (screech) and made her scooch down even farther.

“Sorry,” I muttered, and her lips turned up in a fake-polite “it’s okay” smile while her eyes dropped down to my glowing-in-the-dark-and-in-the-light-so-obnoxiously bright shirt.

“I had a bloody nose,” I blurted out, which made her look queasy and actually explained nothing. I opened my mouth to keep going, but she looked away.

That’s right—save yourself.

“So I had PE first hour,” Kennedy said, looking at Allie and ignoring the rest of the table. “And Mr. Barnes said we’re going to have a week of swimming this semester, where we get bused to the high school.”

“Nooooooo,” Allie said, lifting a piece of pizza to her mouth. “They can’t make us swim .”

Ashley scowled and shook her perfect head. “My mom is definitely calling me out of

that.”

“Do you think your mom would, though?” asked Heather Hines, Ashley’s best friend. Heather had been going out with her boyfriend, Lucas, since fourth grade, so I seriously questioned her brain. Like, who did that? I was pretty sure I still ate paste in fourth grade, so I definitely didn’t want to kiss anyone who’d once considered nine-year-old me a good catch. Heather said, “She’s kind of hard-core.”

“I could talk her into it,” Ashley proclaimed, and she was so confident that I totally believed her.

“My mom would never,” Kennedy said. Her words were barely out of her mouth before Kirsten, one of the other girls, said, “My mom would never .”

And everyone chimed in to discuss this with Kirsten as if Kennedy hadn’t even spoken.

I looked at Ken and quietly said, “My mom would.”

Kennedy grinned and we had a quiet moment as the popular girls all launched into the conversation that she’d started, shutting her out as if she were invisible.

“Gosh, I don’t think my dad would let me skip,” Allie said, which started another discussion about everyone’s fathers. When Allie spoke, everyone seemed to listen.

As if she’d always been a part of their friend group.

“Hey, Holford.” Tyler Andrews, sitting at the table to our left, was leaning back in his chair and yelling to Kennedy. The guys at his table were all looking over, and I knew this couldn’t be good. I loved Kennedy, but she tended to overshare and speak without thinking first. So if that kid—fairly popular and a bit of a jerk—was trying to

get her attention, she must've done something that he wanted to mock.

“Yeah?” She glanced over, unconcerned. That was one of my favorite things about her; Kennedy didn't really worry about stuff. I could spend hours stressing because a random person gave me a weird look in the hall, but unless someone was screaming mean things directly in her face, she was unfazed.

“What time are you streaming tonight?” he asked.

“Eight,” she said, shoveling a bite of salad into her mouth. “A lot of my subscribers are on Pacific time, so I have to go late.”

A lot of my subscribers are on Pacific time?

How did she already seem so comfortable with her brand-new gaming celebrity? Did that come with the wish, the ability to handle it smoothly?

“Please tell me you're going to hit the Welterionite level. I'm almost there, so I need you to—”

“Go before you and die so you learn how not to do it?” she interrupted.

“Yes,” he said around a laugh. “Exactly.”

But I realized when he laughed he wasn't the only one laughing. Every dude at his table was listening to Kennedy, and they were all smiling. They all laughed at her joke.

What is happening?

She was so confident as she talked about the game that even I, someone who'd never

really played video games aside from Animal Crossing , was interested.

She was making Battle of Borgledoush sound fascinating.

The guys at the table kept peppering her with questions, so between that and the court that Beautiful Allie was holding with her fellow princesses, I was pretty much alone in a crowd. I ate and tried to look interested in either of the conversations going on around me, but it was difficult when my brain kept pointing out that I didn't fit into either one.

While also pointing out that it felt good to be sitting at the popular table.

Even knowing I was only there because of my friends didn't change the fact that we were there .

I didn't have to worry that the important people were mocking us because they were talking to us, and everyone in the cafeteria was now categorizing us as part of their group.

Even if I didn't technically belong, hundreds of students were now thinking that I did.

I was drinking the last of my milk when I noticed that Jackson Matthews was at the table on the other side of us. He was close enough to poke, but his back was to me, so I was pretty sure he hadn't noticed me.

Thank God .

He was talking to that kid who'd broken the track record last year—Ethan Something—and I accidentally eavesdropped. Okay—it wasn't an accident. But I was bored and he was close, so I tuned my ears into his conversation.

“—and I’m dead serious, man. I literally grew six inches over the summer. Overnight, really.”

“Yeah, okay,” Ethan said, “but you can’t tell me you haven’t been going nuts in the gym. You were skinnier than me last year, and now you’re jacked.”

“That’s the thing, though,” Jackson said, and he sounded a little... confused. “I was trying to get lean over the summer for cross-country. I didn’t go to the gym at all because bulk slows you down. I ran every day, and I did push-ups, but I never lifted.”

“I call BS.” I could hear the teasing laugh in Ethan’s voice as he said, “You don’t get a chest like that from push-ups. You’re like a solid B-cup, dude, and I refuse to believe that Mother Nature gifted you pecs like the tooth fairy dropping dimes under a pillow. No way.”

I gritted my teeth, and the urge to tackle Jackson was back, because this felt a lot like theft.

“Let’s go,” I heard Allie say, and when I turned my attention back to my table, everyone was standing and a couple girls were already walking away. Even Kennedy was talking to one of the popular girls and walking toward the trash can to dump her tray.

I knew it was only the first day, but nothing felt right.

At all.

This felt wrong and different and uncomfortable.

Ten out of ten would not recommend.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:47 am

catastrophic carpools

“L OOK. A T. T HAT!”

We were in the middle of the crowded hallway, where everyone was rushing to the exit because the day was finally over (thank God), when I glanced at the trophy case, where Allie was pointing.

And there, taped to the glass and written in perfect cheerleader handwriting, was a huge poster.

CHEERLEADING TRYOUTS!!!!!!

“What about it?” I asked, really hating that she was slowing down. I was desperate to escape the school after a very not great first day.

“You’re not going to believe this,” she said, slowing to a stop. “But I think I want to try out.”

Okay—that definitely made me stop.

Stop so that I could stare at her like she’d lost her mind.

“You’re kidding, right?” I said, shocked that Allie was smiling at that poster like she was serious.

Not that there was anything wrong with cheerleading.

It was more that Allie was the opposite of graceful. In addition to being clumsy in general, she'd never been a particularly good dancer.

Or coordinated in any sense of the word.

We'd given up on trying to learn trendy dances—at all—because it was impossible for her. And that wasn't me being mean. She was the one who always said it, who laughingly pointed it out every time she tripped over something or did something "sprawly."

"Okay, so in addition to the whole appearance thing," Allie said, moving close to us and lowering her voice so no one else could hear, "I also woke up on the fourth with an entirely different sense of coordination."

"What does that mean?" I asked, suddenly irritated with my friend's great fortune. I wanted her to have all the great things, but my day had been too awful for me to be able to receive more good news pertaining to people who weren't me.

And, like, it was still the first week, so she couldn't already be getting another wish.

Was this like Ken's ability to suddenly be cool about her gaming? Like a bonus to her first wish?

"It means that suddenly I'm a little bit graceful," she said between her teeth, like it was the most confidential thing in the world. "Like, I can do a backflip now."

"Shut up ," Kennedy squealed, tiny-clapping. "Are you serious right now?"

"Totally."

"And you want to be a cheerleader?" I asked, but instead of waiting to hear her

answer, I was wondering how to get a definitive confirmation on grantee versus non-grantee status.

Because it was looking like I wouldn't be getting any wishes.

Which couldn't be possible, could it?

I brought my attention back to Allie and said, "I never knew this was something you were interested in."

"That's because I was always too klutzy to even consider it," Allie said, squinting in the afternoon sun as we walked outside. "But now that there's a chance, I kind of want to."

"You totally should," Kennedy said, lifting a hand to wave at some dude who yelled "Later, Holford!" as we passed his friend group.

Such a strange, strange day.

"But I'm so nervous. The first practice is after school tomorrow, then tryouts are next week. That's not very much time to learn the cheers."

"But why are you nervous?" I asked, pulling my sunglasses out of my backpack. "You're beautiful and already hang out with the girls we all know will be cheerleaders. And apparently you can do a backflip now. Feels like a slam dunk."

"I wouldn't say we hang out," she said, but she was smiling. I imagine it felt pretty amazing to have a first day like hers, where everyone looked at you when you walked by and treated you like you were a celebrity.

I was so jealous it was starting to hurt my stomach.

But not in a mean way.

I wanted her to have this. I loved Allie to pieces and was so happy for her, but I wanted it for myself so badly, too, that I felt a little queasy.

“Well, compared to me, you’re already one of them.” I tucked my hair behind my ears and looked for my mom’s minivan. She hated sitting in the pickup line, so she usually parked at the church across the street and made me walk over. “None of my wishes have even popped yet.”

“Shhhh—do not talk about it,” Allie said, her eyes bugging out of her face.

She was right. The last thing I needed was to do anything to jeopardize the magic.

But also—why was she telling me how to behave around the magic?

The magic was my thing; I was the one who’d brought it to them.

“It’s your turn, though,” Kennedy assured me as she pulled out her phone and started scrolling through her Gamestagram feed. “I know it is.”

“EMMA!” I heard the voice, heard the obnoxiously loud honking, and even though I couldn’t see him yet, I wanted to kill my brother. “EMMA ROCKFORD!”

I glanced across the street, and yep—my mom was parked at the church.

And my brother was leaning out the window, hollering at me.

“I have to go,” I said, pointing and shaking my head. “Noah only gets louder the longer you make him wait.”

“He’s hilarious,” Kennedy said, her hand shielding her eyes as she tried to see my idiot brother. “And I love him so much.”

“He used to put me in armpit jail,” I said, yelling as I walked away from her. “He literally shoved my face in his armpits because he thought it was funny. You cannot love someone like that.”

“I know, but I do,” she yelled back, giggling.

“You’re a weird, weird girl,” I said, turning around and walking backward so I could see her face. “He’s a monster.”

“HURRY UP, EMMA!” Noah screamed from the car.

“YEAH! HURRY UP, EMMA!”

That made me spin around, because no no no no —please, no.

There, in the middle row of my minivan, yelling out the window beside my brother, was Jackson Matthews.

In that stupid, stupid hat.

I couldn’t catch a break, could I?

I ran across the street, desperate to shut them up before someone like Evan Winters walked outside and connected me with them in his head. (I was already going to have to override his brain image of my meganose and nerd shirt, so I didn’t need the additional work.) I slid open the van door, climbed into the back row, and barely had my seat belt buckled when my brother said, “I cannot believe you wore that shirt the entire day. Why didn’t you call Mom?”

“Oh my gosh, hon—you should have called me,” my mom said, her eyes growing wide as she looked at my face and shirt. “You had to wear that on the first day of school? What on earth happened?”

“Him.” I pointed at Jackson and gave her the short version of what’d transpired that morning.

“It was an accident, I swear,” Jackson said, but I didn’t want to hear it.

“Of course it was,” my mom replied, but she didn’t take her eyes off my face. She pursed her lips, her forehead wrinkled with worry as she asked, “How does it feel, sweetie? Does it still hurt?”

“It’s okay now,” I said, not wanting her to worry while at the same time wanting to snuggle up with the comforting sound of her voice. Because after a bad first day, it felt really good to have her concern.

“Do you think ice cream will help?” she asked, tilting her head and giving me a little smile.

“Definitely.” I smiled back at her and already felt a little better.

“Ice cream isn’t going to make that thing shrink, though,” Noah said.

“Can you not talk to me, please?” I shut the door and immediately pulled my phone out of my backpack.

“Don’t be rude, Emmer,” my mom said as she started driving out of the church parking lot.

“Yeah, Emmer,” Jackson said quietly from his spot in front of me.

I pretended not to hear him.

I did an amazing job ignoring him and my brother on the way home, mostly because they started talking about the Cubs, and I couldn't care less about baseball. But when my mom got to our driveway, she said to Jackson, "So we'll pick you up at seven tomorrow, okay?"

"Wait, what?" I asked, leaning forward between the seats. This wasn't going to be an everyday thing, was it? I couldn't handle riding with Jackson each and every day.

"You weren't the only one on the street to make honors band, honey," my mom said, smiling proudly that her daughter was finally in an extracurricular. I'd been notified last night via telephone that I was selected (auditions had been in July), and even though I was excited about making it, the disappointment of everything else had snuffed out the joy.

What was band when magical wishes were at play?

"Jackson made it, too," my mom said. "So sometimes we might be giving him rides on early days."

Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooo.

"Great—we'll now be known as the nerd bus," Noah said, smirking at his stupid joke. "Maybe mom should get a 'Bandie on Board' sticker."

Jackson laughed, apparently comfortable with my brother's mockery, but I rolled my eyes and growled. The last thing I wanted was additional Jackson time after he totally destroyed my first day (and my face), so this was not the news I needed to hear.

"By the way, Emmer," he said as he slid open the van door, "feel free to drop off that

shirt later.”

ross geller life

“CAN YOU STIR THE NOODLES while I go change?”

“Sure.” I grabbed the long fork and stirred the spaghetti while I heard my mom run up the stairs to shed her scrubs and don the pajama pants she put on after she got home every day.

She used to come home from work and sit outside with Nana Marie, or take us out for pizza, or go for a walk around the neighborhood with some of the other moms.

But since Nana died, it was straight from work clothes to sleep clothes—every night.

She’d made my favorite—spaghetti and meatballs—to celebrate the first day of school, and it was, like, the one good thing that had happened to me all day.

Noah had already gone out to play basketball, and that made me extraordinarily happy. My brother wasn’t the worst—there were moments when I actually liked him—but tonight I just wanted to chill with my mom.

Because when it was only the two of us for dinner, we had a tradition. We ate dinner on the kitchen stools and rewatched episodes of Friends (her favorite show) that we’d seen hundreds of times. Something about it felt comforting, the mindless relaxation of letting everything go and watching TV, and I needed it that night.

Especially when (hopefully) my mom’s single days were numbered.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and when I pulled it out, I saw a message from Allie.

Allie

I just did two backflips and a toe touch. What is this life??

Kennedy

I'M MAKING AN UNBOXING VIDEO BECAUSE THE UPS GUY FILLED MY PORCH WITH STUFF. FREE STUFF, FOR ME, BECAUSE OF GAMING. I SECOND THE WHAT IS THIS LIFE COMMENT.

What on earth was I supposed to add to this conversation? Our group chats were my favorite, our silly, endless discussions of nothing, but I literally had nothing to contribute.

I texted: I am stirring spaghetti. What is THIS life??

Their responses were immediate.

And made me feel better.

Allie

BE PATIENT, Em. You were the one who told us it could take a while before our... um, lives started randomly changing for no explainable reason.

Kennedy

IT'S TRUE!!! You were the expert out of the three of us, so OF COURSE your random inexplicable life changes will happen for no good reason if ours did .

I texted: That's what I thought, too, but I'm starting to wonder.

"Here—let me drain." My mom strode into the kitchen, took the pot off the stove, and drained the noodles while I sat down at the counter. "Tell me about the first day."

"Eh," I said, putting my phone away. I didn't want her to know anything about the wishes. She'd always told Nana not to talk about the lore. "It was fine."

"Aside from getting your schnoz smashed by a football, right?"

"Yeah, aside from that." I shook my head and said, "I just can't stand Jackson."

"Really?" She glanced over as she rinsed the pasta. "I think he seems nice."

"I mean, he's fine, I guess," I said. "But it seems like every time he's around, things get messed up for me. He's bad luck."

"Did something happen other than the nose-bloodying?"

I shrugged since I couldn't tell her about the wishes. "I mean, there was the time I got hit with a hot dog at the block party, and the time he knocked over my stuff with a rock, but really, it's a vibe I get from him."

"Ah, a vibe."

"So, how was your day?" I asked, wishing she'd somehow shock me with a meet-cute. "Anything thrilling happen at the hospital?"

She drizzled oil over the noodles. "I work in the ER, kid—everything is thrilling."

"Fair," I said. "But, like, did you meet anybody interesting? Enjoy any part of your

day more than usual?”

“Um, I met a kid named Ike who bruised his cheekbone by dropping an iPad on his face, so he was interesting, and I enjoyed coming home.” She dished up two plates, brought them over to the counter, and climbed on her stool. “Ooh—I love this episode. The Moist Maker is a classic.”

I sighed and wished she’d found something better than Ike.

We started eating, and it was a great episode, the one where someone stole Ross’s sandwich from the refrigerator at work. My mom and I laughed like we’d never seen it before as we wolfed down our spaghetti and meatballs.

It was so good, and the taste of Nana’s sauce reminded me of Sundays, when she used to spend all day on the meatballs.

But when Ross called his sandwich “the only good thing going on in my life,” I felt a little overwhelmed by my own patheticness.

Because at that very moment, Allie was practicing her amazing backflips for cheerleading practice. And a few houses down from her, Kennedy was making an unboxing video for her hundreds of thousands of YouTube subscribers.

But here, in my house, I was shoveling comfort food into my mouth and watching television with my mother, who sighed at least once an hour like she was dreaming of happier times.

I just ate the only good thing going on in my life.

I was getting a second plate of spaghetti when the doorbell rang.

“Noah?” my mom asked with a smile, because my brother always forgot to take his key to practice and had to ring the doorbell when he got home.

“Who else?” I said, rolling my eyes before going to the door.

But when I pulled it open, my brother wasn’t the person standing on the porch.

No, it was Jackson Matthews.

I opened the screen door and said, “Noah’s shooting hoops.”

“Why are you telling me this?” he asked, looking confused.

“Aren’t you looking for my brother?”

“No,” he said, almost as if he was annoyed by my assumption. “I came for the shirt.”

“The shirt?”

His mouth slid into a sarcastic grin. “The ugly shirt you had to wear all day.”

“Wait,” I said, shocked to my core. Was he serious? “You’re here for the shirt and you’re really going to wear it? To school?”

He put his hands in the front pockets of his jeans and shrugged. “I said I would, didn’t I?”

I didn’t know what to say. Like, I literally had no idea how to respond to that.

He was really going to wear the ugly shirt because he felt bad about throwing the ball

at my face?

“So, like, are you going to stare at me or are you going to get the shirt?”

“Oh,” I said, snapping out of it. “Yeah—one sec.”

I left him on the porch and went into the laundry room, where I’d dropped the shirt the second I got home. I picked it up and quickly sniffed it, and when I returned to the front door, folding the shirt as I walked, I was half surprised to see he was still standing there.

I guess part of me had assumed he’d change his mind and disappear.

“Here you go,” I said, holding out the shirt.

“Thanks,” he replied, grabbing it, the half-smile on his face telling me he knew he’d surprised me.

I started to close the door, then heard myself blurt, “What’s with the hat?”

His smile disappeared. “My head gets cold.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You sure? Because it looks like you’re literally sweating right now.”

He swallowed. “Of course I’m sure. Thanks for the shirt.”

And he turned and walked away, his long limbs loose and easy as he skipped down the steps and headed in the direction of his house.

“Why is Jackson always wearing a hat? It’s, like, eighty degrees outside,” my mom

said, walking over and standing beside me in the doorway.

“He’s a little weird, I think,” I said, clueless as to what I thought about him.

Because he still had that “gotcha” gleam in his blue eyes, and I still blamed him for the hiccup in my wishes, but why had he come over for the shirt? He couldn’t actually feel bad about beaming me in the face, could he?

It was impossible to believe, but then he wore the ridiculous shirt the next day.

I was headed into my first hour class when the fluorescence of the T-shirt caught my eye. I looked down the hallway and there he was, walking with two of his friends, in the ugly shirt I’d given him the night before, with that stupid hat on his head. As if hearing my thoughts, he glanced over, but instead of making a big deal of it, he simply raised one eyebrow as if to say, What do you think?

I pursed my lips and shrugged.

Which made him grin.

It was a little confusing, because I truly didn’t know what to make of Jackson when he wasn’t causing bad luck for me.

First he wore the ugly T-shirt, then we gave him rides to early band on Thursday and Friday, and it wasn’t too terrible, mostly because he didn’t talk except to quietly make jokes about my mom’s taste in music.

Jokes that were spot-on and made me laugh in spite of myself.

He was also quiet in science, which was much appreciated as I tried figuring out the best way to make Evan notice I was no longer in possession of a swollen beak (and

also that I was exactly the girl he'd always dreamed of).

Honestly, though, the thing I appreciated most about Jackson, truly, was the quiet fart sounds he made with his saxophone every time Mr. Keiser yelled at one of the flutes on the other side of the band room.

Keiser couldn't hear him, but my section (French horns)—and the saxes—definitely could.

It made me want to giggle so badly.

I couldn't, of course, because there was something about him that still felt sus, but a tiny part of me wondered if maybe he wasn't going to be the cause of my demise.

It was possible that he wasn't so awful (aside from that hat).

It was also very possible that the reason I was hating him less was because my friends were ditching me more. With each passing day they became more fabulous, making me hyperaware of how stuck in un fabulous I was.

Allie was busy every day, practicing routines with the other girls who were trying out for cheerleading. I nearly had a heart attack when she showed Kennedy and me one of the dances, because she was more than just graceful.

She was talented .

And aside from that, she was working her butt off to get better.

Instead of accepting the reality that she was now a graceful nymph, she spent every waking moment practicing. She practiced jumps, practiced cheers, practiced choreography. Allie was never not thinking about cheerleading.

I wanted to be annoyed with her, because she was doing all these exciting things with all these exciting people and I was a thousand percent left out, but how could I when it was making her so happy?

And Kennedy seemed to be more popular than Allie, if that was even possible. Every dude in the school was apparently a subscriber who watched her gaming streams. She was on the receiving end of name shouts everywhere she went.

“Hey, Holford!”

“Nice job last night, Ken!”

It was like everyone in the school was suddenly aware of how hilarious Kennedy was and wanted to be her friend. The weird things she’d always done—and had been mocked for—were now considered on-brand for her and funny.

So I was stuck in this weird place when it came to my friends. At school, things were normal among us, but I was invisible to everyone else in the world. Outside of school, they were too busy with their amazing new activities to have time to do things like ramble endlessly in the group chat or come over to my house to do nothing for hours on end.

Which was what we’d always done.

Together.

So what was I supposed to do, now that it was growing more obvious by the hour that my wishes weren’t coming?

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:47 am

official announcements

O N M ONDAY MORNING, I very nearly ran to my seat in Mr. Holman's homeroom.

I'd spent the weekend bored out of my mind, mostly because my mom had to work both days, Allie had to practice, and Kennedy had to "film."

But it didn't matter that morning.

Nothing mattered.

Nothing but the news that was coming during the morning announcements.

Today they were announcing who would be the senatorial appointees for each grade. I would finally know, without a doubt, if I was a grantee or not, because I'd wished specifically for this thing, this thing I didn't have to grow into or wait for my mom to meet.

If I was a grantee, I would know in mere minutes.

Please, please, please, please.

An annoyingly loud voice in the back of my head had been shouting all weekend, telling me I was obviously not a grantee, but I'd forced myself not to give up on the magic.

It was possible things were cooking under the surface, and I needed to give it a little more time.

As soon as the bell rang, I sat frozen in my seat, waiting.

And then I heard it. The ding-ding-ding noise that played as the announcements began.

My heart started racing.

“Good morning, Wolverines! Today is a B-day, and the lunch offerings are as follows: fiestada, beef stroganoff, hot dog, or turkey sub. The available sides are corn, diced pineapple, mashed potatoes, or garlic breadstick.”

“Barf,” Jessie Riggs said, rolling her eyes.

“Right?” I agreed, wondering how Jessie always pulled off perfect eyeliner. “So barf. The barfiest. Like, I barfed a little in my mouth just thinking about it.”

“Yeah,” she mumbled, then slightly turned her body in the other direction, away from me.

Normally I’d spend the next hour having a mental freak-out over my usage of the word barfiest, but not today. Who cared about my awkwardness on a morning such as this? Butterflies were going wild in my stomach as I waited.

“Today is also the last day to sign up for recycling committee, so stop by and see Mrs. Burke by the end of the day if you wish to join.”

Come on, come on.

“Now it’s my pleasure to announce this year’s governmental body. These were very tough decisions, and everyone who applied should be very proud of themselves.”

“Get on with it,” I muttered under my breath, tapping my fingers against the desk and shaking my legs back and forth.

“For the eighth grade, the selected legislator will be Senator Grace Bennett. For the seventh grade, the selected legislator will be Senator Jackson Matthews. And for the sixth grade, the selected legislator will be Senator Riley Meyers. Please join me in congratulating these very deserving appointees.”

“Are you kidding me right now?!” I exclaimed.

“What?” Jessie asked, giving me a weird look. I glanced around and saw that everyone was giving me a weird look because I’d basically shouted my words.

But I couldn’t answer her. Or care about the gawkers.

No, all I could do was stare at the loudspeaker in shock.

Surely there had to be more announcements coming. That couldn’t be it.

I couldn’t accept this.

Because if what I’d just heard was correct, that meant that not only was I not a grantee, which I guess I’d known deep down since the fourth, but Jackson Matthews had gotten my spot.

“I don’t even know who Jackson Matthews is,” Jessie said quietly, her eyebrows squished together. “He’s in our grade?”

“Yeah,” I said, blinking fast, because I was not going to cry.

But how could I have let this happen? I felt like I’d let Nana Marie down somehow by failing to be a grantee, like I’d failed at what she’d spent years preparing me for. Maybe I shouldn’t have told Allie and Kennedy. Maybe Nana would be mad that I’d reduced my odds by upping the number of wishers.

I mean, I shouldn’t have regretted it, because my friends were so happy, but had I literally given them my wishes? As Noah called it, had I handed them my “wishy-wish birthright”?

I opened my notebook and took out a pen, trying to claw back the disappointment that felt like it was burrowing into every one of my bones.

My social life, my homelife, my future—I’d been positive that they were all going to take a sharp right into happy land as soon as I became a grantee.

So what now?

How was I supposed to change the sucky things in my life without magical assistance?

“What does he look like?” Jessie asked. “I swear I’ve never heard of him.”

“He was new last year,” I said, wondering how a new kid could even be a senator. I’d had to get teacher recommendations, write a massive essay, paint old ladies’ toenails at the old folks’ home to get volunteer hours, and sit through a formal interview. How had he even had time to do those things when he’d only popped up at the end of the year? “He’s super tall now and wears a hat all the time...”

“That guy?” she asked, her eyes going huge in her face, which for some reason made

me unaccountably irritated. “Hot Hat is our senator?”

“Hot Hat?”

“That’s how I think of him, because he’s hot and wears a hat.” She smiled and said, “Duh, Emma.”

I wanted to scream, because Jackson was definitely not Hot Hat.

Jackson was back to being Enemy Number One.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:47 am

jackson matthews is a thief

“CONGRATULATIONS, Senator Matthews.” Mr. Shields smiled at Jackson from his desk as Dumb Hat came through the classroom door. I clenched my teeth as I watched him enter the room. I was the only person in our grade who was supposed to have the title of senator.

Not Jackson.

He looked weird as he muttered thanks and headed for our table, like he was embarrassed, and I felt my entire body growl at the sight of him. If I were the senator, I would respond to the congratulations with poise and grace.

Jackson looked like he had no idea what to say.

“Did you study for the quiz?” he asked me as he sat down and unzipped his backpack.

“Yes,” I replied shortly.

“I didn’t, and I’m toast.” He slammed down his textbook, then his notebook. “I didn’t even read the assignment.”

“Stinks being you,” I said, refusing to look up from my notebook.

“That’s ‘Stinks being you, Senator Matthews ,’” he corrected, and I could hear the smile in his voice. “Didn’t you hear that I’m basically your king now?”

I snorted. “I heard, and I can’t quite believe it.”

“Me either. I don’t even know how I got picked.”

“What?” That made me look up. “What do you mean? You applied and had an interview, Einstein. That is how you got picked.”

“No, I didn’t,” he said, his freaky blue eyes narrowed on me like he was confused. “I don’t even know what a middle school senate is .”

The bell rang and I clenched my fists, because they wanted to punch something out of frustration. Jackson’s casual oh-this-is-wild attitude was too much. “There was, like, a ton of work you had to do to even be considered. Don’t be all cool and pretend you didn’t try for this.”

“I swear on my life, Emma,” he said quietly, his voice very serious, “that I did not try for this. I don’t even know what a senator does in a middle school; seems really stupid to me.”

“It is not stupid—”

“Put your books and notebooks away,” Mr. Shields said, coming around his desk with a stack of papers in his hand. “And no talking. The quiz will take most of the class period to complete, and when you’re finished, please read quietly at your desk until the bell rings.”

I tightened my jaw and forced myself to ignore everything but the quiz. I’d studied, and I was the first one in the class to finish.

Which was bad, because then all I did was sit there and inwardly rage over the ridiculous hatted person to my right. Of course he’d tried for the senatorial

appointment—that was the only way you could even be considered. It wasn't something where someone could write in a name at random; the faculty elected the representatives, after careful consideration.

Unless.

The niggling little voice in my head, the one I'd been telling to shut up since that day at the portal, was now screaming.

Jackson Matthews grew. I didn't.

Jackson Matthews got the appointment. I didn't.

Jackson Matthews had curves. I didn't.

Those thoughts circled around in my brain like a chant, over and over again, and my head nearly exploded.

He was getting my wishes.

Jackson Matthews, the boy who'd been there at the portal when I'd made them, was somehow getting my wishes.

“Oh. My. God!”

“Miss Rockford!” Mr. Shields looked at me like I'd just murdered someone in the middle of the classroom. “Would you like detention?”

“N-no,” I stammered, my heart racing as the certainty bounced around inside of me. I hadn't meant to yell in the middle of the quiz, but my epiphany was too big. I gave him my most sincere “I'm so sorry.”

He went back to quietly watching the class, and I went back to freaking out.

Because I knew what had happened to my wishes.

I closed my eyes and pictured Jackson's rock knocking my wish packet out of the hole.

Jackson Matthews had stolen my wishes.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:47 am

hat

EXCUSE ME, JACKSON, but I think you might've accidentally taken my magical wishes.

No, that sounded absolutely unhinged.

I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye as he zipped up his backpack.

I'm going to need your help reversing the magical spell that's given you the body of a god, Senator Matthews.

Okay—I definitely wasn't going to say that.

But it was early—only the second week of the wish-granting—and it seemed like he'd only received my first two wishes so far, so there was still time to try and fix things before he stole the wish that mattered the most.

Because after poring over Nana Marie's journals for the past few months like a fortune hunter looking for the sunken treasure map, I'd come to learn a lot of random information about the magic. Little one-sentence fragments she'd scrawled out that might mean nothing, but I suspected meant something.

And the same one kept popping up in the back of my brain like graffiti ever since I'd noticed the similarities between Jackson's new appearance and my wishes.

(A. T. made wish to marry architect but fell in love with X during four-month gap.

Transferred wish to me on the third day of the fourth month, just in the nick of time.)

It seemed like a random note about a random someone named A. T., and there was no other information in the notebooks about that person, but it gave me hope that maybe there was a way to transfer a wish.

It wasn't much to go on, information-wise, but this entry gave me a tiny, last-resort notion that it might be possible to reverse this.

But I was going to need his help.

And I wasn't sure how to make that happen.

He always seemed to smile a big fat bratty grin when I was unhappy, so it was impossible to imagine a scenario that would end in him happily assisting me.

Also, why would he want to reverse the wishes and go back to being a normal version of cute when he was now, like, man-among-boys handsome?

The bell rang, and I nearly jumped out of my skin because I needed to talk to him.

Like now .

I turned toward him as he stood and pushed in his stool.

“How'd you quiz?” I blurted out loudly. I fake-laughed and said, “I mean, how did you do on the quiz?”

His eyes narrowed to a squint, like he knew I was up to something. “Fine...?”

“Good,” I said a little too loudly, nodding and smiling, even though there was nothing

to smile about. Quit being so awkward! I said, “That’s great.”

“You okay?” he asked, putting his backpack over his shoulder. “You look weird.”

“Your mom looks weird,” I said around a giggle, then shook my head and added, “I mean, she doesn’t. Your mom looks fine. Very normal. I was making a ‘your mom’ joke, not bashing your actual mother.”

Get a grip, Emma Rockford!

“I’m going to go,” he said slowly, pointing in the direction of the door as he smirked like I was a funny little weirdo. “Because I’m not sure what’s going on with you, and I feel like I’m in danger.”

“In danger?” I repeated, feeling confused and embarrassed and so freaking anxious because I needed to fix everything immediately.

“Yeah, you’ve got a whole ticking-time-bomb look on your face, and I don’t want to be here when you blow. Later, Rockford.”

He turned and left the room, and I was torn between wanting to throw my book at the back of his head (because hahaha I’m in danger —you’re so funny, Jackson) and wanting to beg him to shut up and do what I asked.

Instead, I wandered out of the classroom and into the hallway, practicing in my head what I was going to say.

I think there’s been a mix-up, and I need your help.

It was earnest and to the point, so that was probably the best way to frame it.

But I was very worried I was going to sound like a tinfoil-hat-wearing kook once I started explaining the exactitudes of the “mix-up.”

Your pecs should’ve been my pecs, bro. You’re accidentally rocking my chest.

As I walked into the seventh-grade locker area, focused on how I was going to convince him to help me, I accidentally ran into (over) someone crouched in front of their locker.

“Oof,” I grunted, tripping over the person and stumbling, murmuring “sorry” over my shoulder as I struggled to stay upright.

The guy stood to his full height, and when my eyes rose all the way up to his face, I stopped moving and wanted to curse my bad luck.

“It’s you,” I said, thinking of course I ran over Jackson.

Why wouldn’t I?

He smirked, where he wasn’t smiling but his eyes were squinted like he was grinning on the inside. “As if I believe you weren’t coming for me. You were trying to run me over—admit it.”

“I wasn’t,” I said, shaking my head. “Swear.”

“I don’t know, you seemed pretty torked in Shields’s class.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, not sure where to start with him, how to broach magical subjects.

“Why were you mad at me, by the way? Was it because of the senator thing? Because we can trade. I don’t want it.”

I gritted my teeth and forced myself not to rage at the unfairness of that statement, of him casually saying I don't want it about something I wanted more than almost anything else in the world.

"See?" he said, pointing at my face. "You keep growling at me."

Do I? I didn't think I had, but I felt growly when I looked at him, so it was entirely possible. I said, "I don't growl."

"You do, too. What I want to know is why I seem to bring out the growl in you."

"Well," I said, nervous to bring up what was sure to make me sound like a loon, "I'm sorry. It's just, um, something unusual has happened."

"Unusual, huh?" He looked intrigued. "Tell me all about it."

I glanced over my shoulder to make sure no one was listening, but the halls were emptying, so no one was close to us. I inhaled through my nose, trying to remember the first line I'd practiced. Was it I think you accidentally —

"Today, Rockford."

"Give me a sec," I snapped, needing to word it exactly right.

"See? You growled again."

"No, I didn't!" I replied, even though I totally had.

"Spit it out, will you?" he prodded.

"Fine," I said, blurting out, "I think there was an accident, and now you're getting my

magical wishes!”

It was like the entire world went quiet as soon as that little unhinged morsel left my mouth.

His dark eyebrows went up. “I’m sorry—what did you say?”

Gahhhhhhh, why didn’t I stick to the plan?

I sighed and stepped a little closer, because I didn’t relish sounding like a delusional child, and whispered, “I know Noah told you about the lore of four.”

His eyebrows scrunched together. “So...?”

“So last year, at the field trip, when Snurk busted us...? Do you remember that?”

“Of course,” he said, watching me while he grabbed a book out of his locker. “I still have nightmares about that neon storm trooper running at us.”

“Well,” I said, positive he was about to laugh at me, “I was in the middle of making my wishes when you threw a rock that crashed into my wish packet. Do you remember that, by chance? That you threw a rock that hit my rock?”

He stared at me like there was a lot going on in his head, like he was working through some complex scenarios, and then he only said, “Yes.”

“Okay, good.” I was glad he wasn’t looking at me like I’d lost my marbles, but I was pretty sure it was coming. “I know this sounds a little strange, but I think when your rock hit my rock, it screwed up the magic and now you are getting my wishes.”

“No offense, but you sound like a kook right now,” he replied as the bell rang. “Like

you've totally lost your marbles. You're saying that you think I got your 'magical wishes.'"

And he did air quotes, the jerk.

News alert: Jilted seventh grader destroys classmate for egregious use of air quotes. More to follow at six.

"I don't think it," I said, crossing my arms over my chest. "I know it."

"You just growled again."

"I did not !"

"You did," he said with a smirk. "You should really work on your rage."

"I don't have rage."

"You do , but we can discuss that later," he said. "For now, enlighten me on whatever this ridiculousness is that you're all hopped up on."

"Okay. So. I wished for the seventh grade senator appointment, and you got it. Apparently without even applying."

His eyes narrowed, but he didn't say anything.

So I kept going.

"I wished to grow six inches taller, and you grew six inches overnight ."

"How do you know that ?" he asked, his dark eyebrows scrunching together like he

was confused.

“Eavesdropped at lunch,” I admitted. “And your pecs.”

I gestured to his chest with my hand, unsure of exactly how to explain.

He stared at me blankly for a second, like he was waiting for an explanation, and then his mouth slid into a huge grin. “Are you telling me you wished for boobs?”

“Shut up ,” I said through my teeth, hating myself for being foolish enough to admit to that wish.

He started laughing at me, and I was in the process of dying of mortification when he held up a hand and said, “Sorry.”

Only he was still grinning like he thought it was hilarious.

So I said, “Let’s talk about your stupid hat.”

“Um, thank you...?” he replied, putting his hand down. “And for the record, I think I might like the growling better than the straight-up insults.”

He said it with his typical sarcasm, but something on his face changed.

He looked guilty.

“No.” I shook my head and knew it. I knew I was right. That hat was covering another one of my wishes. I pointed my index finger at his skull and said, “I bet your hair is blond under there.”

His smile disappeared completely, and Jackson’s jaw clenched as he watched me

without saying a word. A streak of red appeared out of nowhere on his cheekbones, and I saw his throat move around a swallow.

“I wished to be a blonde,” I said, going up on my tiptoes, “so let’s see.”

I pulled off the beanie, and even though I expected it, I gasped as the hat fell to the hallway floor.

Because Jackson Matthews’s thick head of dark hair was now bleached blond.

final wish

I RANG JACKSON'S DOORBELL and waited, nervous.

I hadn't seen him since I pulled off his hat in the hallway, because he'd immediately snatched it back and put it on his head. Two seconds after that, Mr. Shields showed up to yell at us for not being in class.

So I had no idea how Jackson was feeling about any of it—my news, its implications, or the fact that I'd seen his blond hair.

But we needed to work together to fix this, and I might've found a way.

When my mom dropped us off after school a few minutes ago, I had run straight up to Nana Marie's room and pulled her address book out of the nightstand. I went right to the T section of the alphabetized notebook, searching for anyone with the initials A. T.

And the very first person on the page?

Archie Todd.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and when I pulled it out, I saw a text from Kennedy.

Kennedy

Is that you on Jackson Matthews's porch??

Dang it. I turned around, waved toward Kennedy's house, then replied: Group science assignment. AKA kill me now.

It felt weird lying to Kennedy, but I didn't know how else to make this make sense to her.

I knew she'd be mad that I was talking about the magic and trying to change it. Allie would be, too, if she found out, because I'd told them a hundred times what Nana had told me a hundred times—don't talk about the magic, don't mess with the magic.

Behave as if you've never heard of the lore, because one wrong word can ruin everything.

But surely I was allowed to try to right one tiny little wrong.

Surely the powers that be would want the mistake corrected.

I convinced myself of that as I adjusted my backpack (I'd been so distracted by my mission that I'd forgotten to take it off) and waited.

I heard footsteps, and then the door opened.

It was Jackson, but his hat was a little sideways, like he'd rushed to pull it on when he heard the bell.

"Oh, look. It's my I-believe-in-magic neighbor."

"Oh, look," I replied, "it's the neighbor who stole my wishes. You can take off the hat, by the way—there's no point in hiding it."

His eyes narrowed, like he wanted to make a snarky comment, but instead he said,

“Go around to the backyard and I’ll meet you there.”

“Oh,” I said, surprised he was willing to talk to me. I nodded and said, “Okay.”

I walked around the side of his house, taking deep breaths of fresh-cut grass while reminding myself to stay calm. I needed to convince him to help me, so getting mad at his annoying Jackson-ness wasn’t going to help anything.

Just be cool, Emma.

I was also nervous because I wasn’t used to visiting boys I barely knew.

When I opened the gate to their tall wooden privacy fence and entered the backyard, he was already there, casually sitting on a patio chair like he’d been there for hours.

The hat was nowhere to be seen.

And— wow .

Jackson’s hair wasn’t simply blond, it was the most incredible blond I’d ever seen. It was like spun gold. The sun was on him and it made his hair almost shimmer .

“Your hair—”

“Is a lot, right?” He gave me a sarcastic smile, like he was making fun of himself, but there was also a little stress on his face when he said, “I don’t need that much attention.”

Which I understood.

I couldn’t imagine how everyone at school would react to his lustrous head of golden

hair. Something like this wasn't a tiny style change that only a few people would notice. No, this was the kind of thing that every single person in school would be talking about for an entire week.

At least.

"It's beautiful," I said breathlessly, unable to look away from it. "I feel like I've never seen that color before."

"But you think it's meant for you, right?" he asked, and his tone made it clear he still thought I was a magic-believing weirdo about this. "That I stole your cosmic dye job?"

"Oh, I know it is, and you did," I said, a wave of irritation rushing over me as I realized that I would have been rocking that stunning color if he hadn't ruined everything. I dropped down into the chair across from him and said, "We need to find a way to reverse the magic. Or at the very least, transfer the rest of it back to me."

"No way," he said, giving his head a shake as he scowled at me. "Not that I believe in this town's lore or your grandma's bizarre conspiracy theory, but I'm not messing with legends and magic. The last thing I need is for the magical mysticals to replace my head with the head of a frog or something."

"Your head is fine," I said calmly. "And there's been a tiny mistake that we might be able to rectify."

"No," he said.

I cleared my throat. "I totally understand that you might not want to lose your new, um, look, but—"

“Absolutely not,” he interrupted, holding up a hand to stop me. “I grew because people do that—they grow. It’s not magic, it’s the biological way that kids end up as adults; they get bigger. I’m sorry you haven’t hit that growth spurt yet, and that you weren’t picked to be a senator or whatever, but we’re talking about a few random and very normal things that I definitely did not ‘steal’ from you.”

“Yes, you did!” I heard myself growl—okay, so maybe he was right about that—before I said, “It’s the only explanation for the senate and for your hair. Like, you can’t tell me it’s a ‘normal thing’ for someone’s hair to change color overnight. How do you explain the hair, Jackson, if there is no magic?”

“Marie Antoinette syndrome,” he said, shrugging like it was no big deal, even though there was a wrinkle in his forehead as he said it.

“What?”

His throat moved like he was taking a big swallow before he said, “It’s a genetic disorder where your hair can turn white overnight.”

“But,” I said, looking at him through a squint, “it isn’t white. It’s golden.”

“Close enough,” he snapped, using a tone that told me he wanted to shut down this conversation.

“So you want this hair forever?” I asked, my stomach sinking. Was he really not going to help?

It was very unlikely I could get the wishes to transfer back to me, but without his help, it was impossible.

“Definitely not,” he said. “But hopefully it’ll grow out. That’s what my doctor

thinks.”

“Your doctor ? You went to see a doctor about your hair?”

He raised his eyebrows. “When you wake up one day looking like an entirely different person, your parents consult a doctor.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” I said, imagining what their reactions must’ve been when he showed up to breakfast with that hair and that height.

“Yeah, it was pretty wild around here. My parents were convinced I was dying or something.”

“Oh my gosh,” I said, my mouth dropping open in surprise, because our situation really was ridiculous. “They’ll be so relieved when we reverse this.”

“Not doing it, Rockford,” he said, shaking his head yet again. “Let it lie.”

“Come on!” I said (shouted, actually). “You can’t be okay with stealing someone’s wishes.”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s not magic, I didn’t steal anything, and I’m definitely not going to help you attempt some witchy spell reversal.”

“Of course you’re not,” I muttered, shaking my head. “Why would you want to risk losing your cool new appearance? Far better to look good by stealing than look... normal by being noble. I get it. I see you, Jackson Matthews.”

His smirk came back. “You are so dramatic.”

“I am not dramatic!” I yelled, sounding absolutely and totally one thousand percent

melodramatic. “If it was only the hair and height—”

“And chest—” he interrupted with a sarcastic grin.

“Please shut up about that,” I bit out, angry and frustrated and terrified he wasn’t going to help me. I took a deep breath and said, “If it was only the things you’ve already stolen from me, I think I could accept that. But my last wish is too important. I need it.”

“What is it?” he asked, sitting up straighter. Suddenly, he looked very interested.

And suddenly, I wasn’t sure I wanted to tell him.

It seemed so babyish, desperately wishing for your mom to find a husband so you could have a real family.

“I can’t say it out loud,” I said, which was the truth. I couldn’t jeopardize the shot of getting my final wish by telling him. “That could ruin the lore.”

“Then I can’t help you.” He crossed his arms over his chest and shrugged. “Sorry, Rockie.”

“Please don’t give me terrible nicknames.”

“What? Rockie’s cute,” he said, looking amused.

“Stop trying to be funny when this is important,” I begged, wanting so badly for him to cooperate. “Because it is to me.”

His expression changed, the amusement disappearing, replaced by something more serious, like he cared that this mattered to me. I took a deep breath and wondered—

did he care?

He kind of looked like he might.

Or like he's bored with this entire interaction.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Is there a way you can tell me without saying it out loud?"

"Let me think." I pulled off my backpack, torn between what I wanted to do and what I needed to do. Because as much as I didn't want him to know what my babyish final wish was, he sounded more open right now than he had since I'd brought it up.

And maybe when he realized he didn't want my last wish—his parents were married, so it would be a wasted request—he might consider being selfless and doing the right thing.

Doubtful , but not impossible.

The rule was that you couldn't tell anyone what your wishes were. So... what if he saw them?

"Hang on." I unzipped my backpack and pulled out my planner. Setting it on the patio table, I flipped through pages until I found the spot where I'd carefully written my four wishes. I put a piece of paper over the first three, so he couldn't see them, and then I stood.

"Okay, so I'm going to go look at that tree," I said, giving him a knowing look and pointing at the huge oak in his backyard while gesturing with my head to the planner. "I'm just going to leave my notebook out because I have to write in it when I return. Make sure you don't look at it."

He gave me a sarcastic half-smile, like I was ridiculous. “Okay.”

I walked over to the tree, counted to five, then turned around.

But when I looked at Jackson, he wasn’t smiling anymore. He was pacing around the patio, his face a mask of seriousness. His eyes met mine and he said, “How do we stop this?”

“Wait—you’re on board now?” I said, shocked.

He gave a nod, without a hint of sarcasm or smirking.

“Why?” I asked, blown away by the near-instant change in him. “Like, what changed your mind?”

He looked so intense, so upset, that I almost didn’t think he was going to answer. The boy looked too keyed up to speak, honestly.

But then he swallowed, dug his fingers into his hair, and said, “If what you’re saying is true, and what really happened is I am getting your wishes, and your final wish comes true, my parents will get divorced.”

“What?” I squinted and tried seeing into his brain as he looked at me like his world was ending.

“Okay, I’m going to tell you a fictional story, like a hypothetical,” he said, giving me ultradirect eye contact. “Nothing to do with anything real, just a random anecdote.”

Okay, so he was telling me without jeopardizing the lore. That was good, the fact that he was finally taking it seriously.

“Please tell me your fictional story,” I said, dropping down into one of the patio chairs.

“So, one time, on TV, I saw a show where a girl made a wish for one of her parents to meet someone new, fall in love, and live happily ever after, right?”

I nodded. “Right.”

Jackson said, “But her friend was in an entirely different situation. His parents fought all the time and his dad traveled a lot for work.”

His eyes looked sad when he said that, like it bothered him a lot, and even though he was Jackson Matthews, I didn’t like him looking that way.

“He knew it was only a matter of time until they got divorced,” he continued, “because his mom was super unhappy.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said, even though I hadn’t meant to say it.

His blue eyes landed on mine and he clenched his jaw and gave me a closed-mouth smile. “Thanks.”

“So,” I said, waiting for him to say it.

“So. If the girl’s friend was to accidentally get her wish—for their mom to meet someone and fall madly in love—that would mean his married mother would meet someone else —”

“And fall in love with them!” I said with a gasp, finishing for him.

“I mean, even if those parents were happily married, this wish would be bad news for

them,” he said. “But the way things are right now, it’s catastrophic.”

His mother would meet someone and fall madly in love.

With someone who wasn’t his father.

“Oh. My. God.”

“Indeed,” he agreed, still looking stressed out. “So do you know a way that we can stop this?”

“I know someone who might know a way to transfer this,” I clarified. “I don’t think the wishes can be ungranted or stopped, but I think there’s still time to transfer the final one back to me.”

“How much time do we have?”

“I’m not a hundred percent sure,” I said. “The legend is that one wish is granted per week, starting on August fourth. So since you got my appearance changes last week, and my senatorial appointment this week, technically we’re probably safe the rest of this week, although Allie got backflips the same week she got pretty, so it’s not exact.”

“Wait. Allie down the street is a grantee?”

Nooooooooooooooooooooo!

Had I seriously said that? Had I spoken that out loud?

Did I just ruin Allie’s magic?

“N-no,” I said, telling myself it was fine, that it’d been a slip and her magic was going to be A-okay. “I didn’t say that. It was a joke because she kind of got gorgeous over the summer.”

He stared at me for a second, watching me ramble, and then he said, “I see.”

“Yeah, she’s just the supermodel with the hair and the face,” I said with an awkward laugh, my voice too loud and peppy. “So I called it ‘magic.’ I don’t know why. It’s magical, I guess, haha, what do I know?”

Shut up, Emma!

“So...” he said.

“So I’ll fill you in on everything once I know you’re serious.” I tucked my hair behind my ears and stared into his eyes, trying to gauge if I could trust this person who’d been utterly untrustable since the day he’d hit my wishes with a rock. “So, Jackson—are you actually committed to helping me with this?”

He gave a nod, a solemn agreement that I could tell he meant.

“A thousand percent, because I can not get your final wish,” he agreed. “We cannot let that happen.”

“We cannot,” I agreed, squinting because his hair was blinding me.

“So,” he said, “care to become my magic-fixing partner, Rockie?”

I nodded, a little in shock. “There’s no one else I’d rather be fixing magic with.”

We sat down and went to work after that. I ran home and got Nana Marie’s journals,

and he listened carefully as I explained my theories. By the time we were finished, we had a plan.

It wasn't a good plan, but it was a plan.

A plan that started with Archie Todd, the notorious lunch lady.

not hot hat

T HE NEXT DAY MOVED in slow motion, mostly because Jackson and I were going to do some investigative work after school and I couldn't wait to get started. Every moment that ticked by was a moment closer to him getting my final wish and for everything to be over, so I was buzzing to get the show on the road.

Lunch was better and worse than usual, all at the same time.

Allie, Kennedy, and I found a table and started eating all by ourselves, without anyone joining us. It felt good and normal, only the three of us, and it relaxed me a little.

It felt like the old days.

"I can't believe you're doing a science assignment with Hot Hat," Kennedy said (for the third time that day), stabbing her chef's salad with a fork.

"Why do you keep calling him that when you know his name?" I said, irritated.

"Because I heard someone else say that, and it fits," she said, raising her fork to her mouth. "How long were you at his house?"

"Long enough to do the assignment," I said, rolling my eyes. "Why are you being weird about him?"

Allie giggled and said, "Because he's so freaking cute. I. Would. Die."

Usually I thought it was funny how boy crazy they were, but for some reason, this attitude, when pointed at Jackson, annoyed me. Maybe it was because he was the official face of my non-grantee status, or maybe it was because they literally knew nothing about him other than the fact that he looked hot now.

In reality, he was still the same guy who'd thrown a rock at our wishes.

Although since they'd gotten theirs, they probably forgave him.

Maybe that was what annoyed me.

Still, regardless of my conflicted feelings toward Jackson Matthews, they were missing the fact that Evan Winters was the hottest of all in the land.

And he didn't even seem to be on their radar.

"He's just Jackson," I said, shrugging. "We're friends, so it's no big deal."

"You can't be friends with a guy who looks like that, Em," Kennedy said. "You can be study partners but not friends, because trust me, the second you were to hang out in a non-science way, you'd totally catch feelings."

"True," Allie said, nodding like this was sage advice.

"Not true," I said, picking up my tuna salad sandwich. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. Jackson could be a drooling idiot for all you know. I wouldn't catch feelings for a drooling idiot, even if he were cute, so you're totally wrong."

"Is he a drooling idiot?" Allie asked.

"Who?" Becca Bicking, one of Allie's beautiful new cheerleader friends, set down

her tray across from us and sat. “Is who a drooling idiot?”

“Hot Hat,” Kennedy said.

Stop calling him that!

I wanted them to stop talking about Jackson because A, I didn’t want him to overhear and think I was acting like a loser and calling him “Hot Hat”; B, I didn’t want to know their opinions on Jackson because I was committed to our wish-fixing partnership for better or worse; and C, it somehow seemed rude to Jackson for them to be discussing his hot-hattiness.

“Why are we talking about Jackson Matthews?” Becca asked, smiling like the conversation was incredibly interesting.

“Em is his lab partner,” Allie said, “so she had to study at his house.”

Shut up! For some reason, I didn’t want anyone to know about that.

“Lucky,” Becca said, her eyes landing on me as if she’d never seen me before.

Spoiler: We’d been in the same class three out of the six years of elementary school.

“No, we’re friends,” I tried explaining again. “It’s not like that.”

“I’d like to be his ‘friend,’” she said, and I wanted to yell at all of them while they giggled like that was hilarious.

Why was it so impossible to believe that Jackson could be actual friends with a girl?

“So, uh,” I said, desperate to change the direction of the conversation. “Who’s the

cheer captain this year?”

Becca looked at me like I’d asked her if she was potty-trained. “There isn’t one yet.”

“Oh,” I said, nodding.

Allie was giving me a weird look, like she was disappointed in me, and I was back to feeling like I didn’t belong at that table as my attempt at a joke fell the flattest of flat.

The table where my two best friends absolutely and totally appeared to belong.

I waited for Jackson in front of his locker after the final bell went off.

It was time for us to visit Archie.

“Em!” I looked to my right and Allie was making her way toward me in the crowded hallway. She was smiling like she was happy to see me, which was the tiniest bit irritating after she’d acted like I was annoying at lunch.

“Hey.” I looked behind her but didn’t see any of her cool new friends. “Don’t you have practice today?”

A tiny wrinkle formed between her brows. “Tryouts are tonight, remember?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said, feeling bad I’d forgotten. That was why they’d acted like I was a moron for asking about the captain; tryouts hadn’t even happened yet. “Are you excited?”

She did a little shrug that made her ponytail bounce. “Excited but so nervous. Last night when I was practicing, I kept falling when I tried my backflip.”

“You did?”

I looked at her worried smile and my face was instantly hot, because what if that was my fault? Was she losing her gracefulness because of my slipup to Jackson? Or was it possible that the mere idea of us messing with the magic was enough to start ruining it?

I tried reassuring her (and me) by saying, “Don’t be—I know you’re going to make it.”

“I’m so nervous,” she said, then leaned closer and whispered, “What if the things we can’t talk about are going away? What if I’m falling because I’ve lost the... thing .”

“That’s ridiculous,” I said, desperately hoping that was true. I’d never read anything in Nana Marie’s journals about someone losing their magic, so surely this would be fine, right?

“How come you’re in this hallway?” she asked, looking confused. “Isn’t your locker in the east hallway?”

“Um,” I said, not sure of what exactly to say. Because not only did I not want to mention Jackson’s name, but suddenly it seemed like a bad idea to even be near her when I was trying to mess with the magic. Since she was getting everything she’d wished for, it seemed like a not-great-friend thing to do, didn’t it?

The last thing in the world I wanted to do was jeopardize my friends’ magic.

As much as their good luck might make me feel luckless, I still wanted them to have it.

“Move it, Rockford,” I heard from behind me, and when I turned around, Jackson

nudged me out of the way so he could open his locker.

I looked back at Allie, and she was watching us through squinty eyes, like she was trying to figure something out. I cleared my throat and said, “My mom is forcing me to carpool with Jackson.”

Which was an outright lie. Heck, I didn’t even have a ride that day and was going to be walking home, so no cars would even be involved in pooling.

“Oh,” she said, looking like she believed me, like that explanation made sense to her.

I could feel Jackson’s eyes on me, but I kept my eyes on Allie. “What time are tryouts?”

“Four,” she said, glancing down at her Apple Watch. “I should go change, actually.”

“Well, good luck!” I said cheerily. “I’m sure you don’t need it, though.”

Please don’t need it.

“Thanks,” she replied, and when she smiled at me, she looked like her old self.

“Text me the second you’re done, okay?” I said, excited for her.

“I will.”

As soon as she started walking away, Jackson said, “Such a little liar.”

I turned around and looked up at him— man, he was tall —and he almost looked hurt.

Which couldn't be right.

Still, I felt the need to explain. "I can't tell her that we're trying to mess with the magic."

"Understood." He hitched his backpack over his shoulder and slammed the locker shut. "So, what is our plan?"

I liked that he was now calling it our plan. It somehow felt more possible to fix the magic when I wasn't trying to do it by myself.

Although he didn't really have much choice.

We started walking down the hallway, in the direction of the lunchroom, going to see Archie.

Archie Todd was the weird old lunch lady who'd worked at the school since the day it opened. She was tiny and hunched over, with red hair that had never not been in a bun on the top of her head, and she pretty much muttered under her breath constantly.

The woman rambled incoherently—without stopping—while she slapped spoonfuls of food onto kids' trays every day.

But for some reason she was in Nana Marie's address book, and her initials matched those of the person who had maybe transferred a wish to my nana.

It might mean nothing, but it was definitely worth a shot.

archie

“A RCHIE? C AN WE TALK to you for a second?”

The old lunch lady, who'd been peering into the industrial refrigerator, whipped around at the sound of my voice. I gasped, and so did Jackson, because her brown eyes were so intense and bright they virtually glowed. And they weren't brown, but more of an iridescent amber.

They felt eerily familiar.

She hadn't said a word, yet I felt frozen in place as those glowing eyes burned into me.

I felt like she was reading my every thought.

It was quiet in the kitchen as she stared at me, my body pinned in place by her gaze. I couldn't move or avert my eyes, and after what seemed like an hour, she let me go.

It felt like I was being dropped when she looked away from me to Jackson, like I was falling to the floor. He met her gaze for a solid minute before she looked away from him, too, and said, “Are you two serious about this?”

I didn't think I'd ever heard her speak an understandable word before, so I was shocked by the clarity of her sentence.

And also by the fact that it seemed like she knew why we were there.

I nodded and said, “Y-yes.”

“Well, sit down, then.”

Jackson and I each took a spot on the stools that were placed beside the stainless steel kitchen counter. I cleared my throat and said, “We need to transfer a wish, like you did.”

“Okay, well.” Archie opened a drawer and pulled out a fat black dry-erase marker. “You want to do the impossible, so it’s going to take some bribing. Those lords are tough to convince and have all kinds of rules and traditions, so it’s basically impossible. They’re so stinking unyielding it’s maddening, but they’re Ultimate Fae, so what do you expect, right?”

“Right,” I muttered, nodding, unsure of what else to say, because the woman who never spoke in actual sentences had launched into a complete paragraph about bribing the Ultimate Fae lords.

I was equal parts shocked and thrilled that we’d obviously come to the right place.

I glanced at Jackson, and his face made it clear that he thought she was out of her mind.

Which wasn’t surprising. I wasn’t sure what exactly my brother had told him about the wishes, but if he hadn’t mentioned the history of the legend, this would be Jackson’s first time hearing references to things like Ultimate Fae and lords .

She made a noise in her throat, like a low hum, and then she started scrawling on the silver countertop.

All over the countertop, frantically, like she was being timed and had to finish her

drawing in under a minute. It looked like she was sketching some sort of map.

She was drawing trees—really bad trees, the stick kind that kindergarteners drew—all over the place. “What’s the one thing they can’t get in Hyorithipithidian?”

I shrugged, unsure if she was talking to herself or us.

She rolled her eyes and loudly stated, “Fish.”

I swallowed and wondered if this was a mistake. Just because the woman seemed to know why we were there didn’t mean she knew what she was talking about. She could’ve been magic-obsessed, like Nana, but absolutely clueless about how it all worked.

But I was desperate. I asked, “Fish?”

“The Flords—fae lords, the highest governors—are rigidly opposed to transferring a human’s wishes. Period. They won’t do it.”

The woman used the words Flords —maybe Jackson was right.

“Unless you give them the one thing they can’t get in Hyorithipithidian.”

Jackson snorted, and when I looked over at him, he was smiling like this was hilarious.

“And this thing that the Flords can’t get is fish ,” Jackson said, not even bothering to disguise the doubt in his voice.

“It sounds nuts, because Hyorithipithidian is a perfect world, right?” Her voice was high-pitched, and she seemed overexcited as she kind of giggled. “It’s a flawless land

created to perfection, where the water is the color of turquoise, the mountains are covered in exotic flowers, and food is delicious and abundant, but fish simply don't exist there. Were never created. So if the forest fairies can gift the Flords a fish, those guys will sometimes agree to help a human out."

"Because they like to eat fish." Jackson crossed his arms and tilted his head. "Are you telling us that the 'magical fae lords' of 'Hyorithipithidian' enjoy a good fish dinner so much that if gifted a slab of salmon, they will consider breaking the rules of the land?"

I wanted to tell him to stop air-quoting. Even strange people knew when they were being insulted.

"Not for salmon —are you kidding with that?" Archie said, squinting her eyes and looking at Jackson like he was the strange one. "Who wants salmon? No, wisenheimer, they want catfish."

"Oh, it's catfish specifically that the Flords want," Jackson said, suppressed laughter in his voice. "Got it."

I shot him a look, because even though her bizarre words made her seem less than trustworthy, I wanted her to keep talking. Somewhere in her old lady ramblings might be something we could use.

Her name had been in Nana's address book.

This lunch lady was literally our only hope, so I needed her to give me everything she had.

"Archie," I said quietly, "will you tell us exactly what you did?"

I touched her arm, which made her jump and bark out a little eep noise, but then she turned to me and those glowing eyes found mine again. She watched me like she was looking for something. Archie's gaze bored into mine for a solid twenty seconds, and everything in the kitchen—in the school, in the world—melted away.

For twenty seconds, my universe was her eyeballs.

Then she abruptly said, “Okay, but I warn you, it’s gonna sound crazy.”

That made me smile.

“You gotta get back to the forest, okay?” She immediately launched into more drawings, scribbling illegible directions on every chrome surface in the kitchen as she ran around with an agility that belied her age.

“Get back to the magic hole at four o’clock!

“Not one, not two, but four catfish! Forty pounds of them exactly !”

She scrawled out a new chant on four separate surfaces in the kitchen (which I added in my notes app), saying what Jackson needed to say aloud as she wrote it:

“Four golden stones, four fishes planted. I humbly request my former fourth be ungranted.” She closed her eyes and covered her heart, like she was making sure we understood the importance of the words. “By the power of four on the forest floor, I seek to give my fourth wish to Emma Rockford evermore!”

She yelled the last line, and a chill went down my spine.

Goose bumps covered my skin, and every tiny hair on my body felt like it was standing up as she slowly opened her eyes and looked at me. Something was there,

buzzing around her in the kitchen—a magical electricity, a supernatural awareness.

I was breathless as we looked at each other, feeling like my chest was being squeezed as something important passed between us.

“He’s probably gonna lose the first three, by the way,” she said quietly, glancing over at Jackson, “because that’s what happened to me. When I gave away my fourth, I lost the ones already granted almost immediately. I woke up the next day like they’d never happened.”

I looked at him and felt guilty.

Even though they were my wishes, I felt bad that he’d be losing things because of me.

Especially when he looked back at me with a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“But that was how I knew it worked,” Archie said.

That brought my attention back to her, and I realized that she suddenly seemed completely lucid. Absolutely normal.

Until she gave us her parting words.

“If it doesn’t work,” she said, shaking her head, “you’ll have to talk to the hamburger. The hamburger has the answers, even though he is who he is. French-fried annoying with the pickles on the side, cooked to a well-done interior of boorishness. So don’t screw this up, because hamburger.”

plans

B ECAUSE H AMBURGER.

“She’s obviously, uh... a little eccentric,” Jackson said the minute the door to the kitchen closed behind us, and we started walking down the hall.

“Obviously,” I agreed, noticing the hallway was totally deserted. I had no idea how much time had passed since we’d visited Archie; could’ve been five minutes, could’ve been five hours. Regardless, it didn’t appear any other students still remained at school. “But what if she is?”

He looked at me like I’d burped the alphabet. “You can’t be serious.”

I stopped walking and grabbed his arm. Pulled him to a stop and stepped a little closer, because I needed to convince him to try. It was my only hope. “It all sounds unbelievable, but something turned your hair blond. Something got you the senatorial appointment when you didn’t even apply. Something caused you to grow six inches overnight, Jackson.”

His throat moved around a swallow, and his bright blue eyes moved all over my face, like he was trying to solve a puzzle. Reach a decision.

I knew he was probably struggling with the idea of losing his physical transformation, and I felt a little pinch in my chest at the thought of him being sad.

“I’m sorry that you’ll have to give up your... everything in order to fix number four.”

His eyes narrowed. “You are?”

I nodded, but didn’t know what else to say, because as much as I hated him being sad, we couldn’t give up.

“But we still need to try, don’t you think?” I asked. “For your parents’ sake? I mean, if we spend a couple hours buying fish and trying to reverse the magic and it doesn’t work, what have we lost? Nothing.”

“Well, we’d have lost four fish in a hole,” he teased, his eyes squinting around a smile.

“And our dignity, of course,” I added, smiling along with him.

“Of course.”

“But I’m willing to try because I need that final wish and you need it to not be granted for you. Is it really that big of a deal to give this a shot?”

He didn’t answer, but he didn’t say no, either.

He was still smiling at me, smiling in a way that made my cheeks get hot.

“It’ll be an epic adventure,” I said, blinking and looking away from him, wondering what that had been. Chill, Emma. “Running around in the forest with a sack of catfish selected especially for the Flords? That is the stuff of legends.”

“An epic adventure,” he repeated, sounding almost reverent as he said the phrase.

“So...?” I said, hoping he was in.

“So.” Like a switch had been flipped, Jackson was all in. “We need to buy some fish.”

“Yeah.” I nodded, trying to remember her every word. “Although maybe we should ask where she got the fish, just in case it’s still in business and we can replicate down to the detail.”

I turned and jogged back to the kitchen, but when I opened the door, Archie was gone.

And so was all the evidence of our conversation.

“Whoa.” I looked around, and every stainless steel surface in the kitchen was bare, entirely free from wildly drawn sketches of catfish and magical rhymes. We’d been gone for, like, one minute .

“Don’t say it, Rockie.”

“I won’t,” I said, shaking my head in awe. He could deny it all he wanted, but the only way someone could erase everything that quickly was by using magic. It was physically impossible for anyone , much less an old person, to wipe it away instantaneously. “But you know I’m right.”

We spent the entire walk home coming up with a plan to do the fish thing. He was convinced his great-aunt would give us a ride wherever we wanted to go, so we decided to tell our parents we were going to a “Saturday science hike” that was available for extra credit.

I knew my mom wouldn’t question it because I always wanted extra credit and I never broke the rules, and he seemed confident that his parents wouldn’t, either.

“How are we going to get forty pounds of catfish, though?” I asked when we turned onto our street. “I mean, is that something stores carry on the regular? And how much will it cost?”

“Money is no object, Rockford,” Jackson said like he was a billionaire. “I won a five-hundred-dollar gift card to Haverman’s Grocery last year and have only used it for Red Bull and candy bars. I’ve got all the fish funds we could ever need.”

“Wow,” I said around a laugh, mostly because he was puffing up his chest like he was flush with cash. “So impressive, Daddy Warbucks.”

“I am, in fact, King Daddy of Haverman’s Grocery.”

“King Daddy does not sound as cool as you think it does,” I teased, rolling my eyes.

“Oh, that’s where you’re wrong, peasant.”

It was a little shocking how much fun I was having with him. Not even that, though—the shocking part was how comfortable I was with him. How comfortable we were with each other. Being with Jackson suddenly felt like being with Allie or Kennedy.

Was he becoming my friend?

That couldn’t be possible, could it?

I wasn’t sure whether he was or not, but I was sure glad he was there. Trying to transfer the magic by myself would’ve seemed overwhelming. But, somehow, doing it with Jackson made it seem possible.

auntie bev

“I ’M LEAVING,” I YELLED, grabbing my backpack and opening the front door.

“Okay,” my mom yelled back from her room. “Have fun! Love you!”

My stomach lurched as I lied to the woman who did everything for me, but it was for her own good.

I had to lie.

“Love you, too—bye!”

I stepped out onto the porch and pulled the door closed behind me. It was a warm, sunny Saturday morning; the perfect day for tossing fish in a hole to transfer some magic. The car in my driveway looked like some antique throwback from the eighties, and I could see that Jackson was in the front seat, sitting next to a sweet-looking little old lady.

Must be Auntie Bev.

He’d called her on our way home from school yesterday and basically begged her to drive us to the state park. And she hadn’t even hesitated or asked why. They’d been on speaker, and she’d immediately responded with, “Of course, dear, I’ll read a book at the marina for a few hours while you play.”

I didn’t have a big family, so maybe that was just how great-aunts were.

I did a double take as I reached for the back door, shocked to see Jackson's blond hair. I'd gotten so used to the hat that I was surprised to see it.

I opened the door and climbed inside. "Hi."

"Good morning, dear," the woman said, looking at me in the rearview mirror. "Did you get a good night's sleep? Are you ready for some fishing?"

I glanced at Jackson, who was turned around in his seat, giving me go-with-it eyes.

"I did," I said, slamming the door and reaching for my seat belt. "And yes. Um, yes, I am ready for some fishing."

"Oh, good," she said, beaming at me. "We're going to stop at Haverman's so you can get some bait, and then we'll be on our way."

"Awesome," I replied, grinning back at her. I kind of wanted to give this adorable stranger a hug. Nana Marie used to love shopping at Haverman's, too, because they still had bag boys and a butcher who "knew his head from his butt when it came to beef."

I swallowed down a pang of longing as I looked at Auntie Bev in the mirror.

Nana would've liked her.

I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't for the tiny woman who could barely see over the steering wheel to squeal out of the driveway like she was being chased. When she stopped to put the car in drive, she smiled at me in the mirror and said, "Sorry about that. Roberto's a little touchy."

"Who's Ro—"

“The car,” Jackson interrupted, shaking his head like it was a whole thing as he put his hat on. “Roberto is her car.”

“And he’s going to lead us on an epic adventure today. Let’s go, kids!”

Auntie Bev stomped on the gas pedal, peeling rubber in front of my house as Roberto shot forward like a missile and started speeding down our street.

“Auntie Bev,” Jackson warned as the car flew over the pavement, “you can’t afford another ticket.”

“You’re right,” she replied in a happy little singsong voice. “But they only give you tickets when they see you. The fuzz is not speed-trapping your sleepy little suburban lane, so shut it.”

I grabbed onto the back of Jackson’s headrest as we flew down my street. I glanced out the window and saw Kennedy in her driveway. She was walking toward the car with her mom, and it was only a split second but our eyes met, and I knew she saw everything.

The high rate of speed, the elderly driver, the Jackson Matthews in the front seat.

Yeah—this was going to be tough to explain.

Especially when Auntie Bev mowed over a mailbox two houses down.

“Aunt—”

“Save it!” she yelled, her face all lit up with an enormous smile. “That thing was obviously too close to the road, not up to code, and it needed to be removed. Now keep your worries to yourself and hold on tight!”

fishy business

A UNTIE B EV PULLED INTO a parking spot at Haverman's and cut the engine.

"Do you need money, Jackie boy?"

"No, thanks," Jackson said, opening his door. "C'mon, Emma—let's go get our bait."

"Jackie boy," I said, getting out and following him into the store. "Explain how Auntie Bev will believe we're fishing when we come back with a boatload of dead fish."

"Auntie Bev is cool—and she trusts me. So she's going to sit at the marina and read her little book while we 'children' take off and 'go play.'"

"She won't check up on us?" My mom was great at letting me hang out with my friends, but every twenty minutes or so, she always checked in on us to make sure we weren't burning down a building or talking to strangers.

"Nope." He sounded confident, and I had no choice but to trust him.

We went straight back to the meat counter of the tiny old grocery store, and as we approached, I wondered if this might've been where Archie got her fish way back in the day.

"Excuse me." Jackson stepped right up to the butcher like it was normal for him to be out purchasing bulk meats on a Saturday morning. And not just bulk meats, but a ton

of disgusting fishy meats.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes, uh, I would like four ten-pound catfish, please,” he said, pointing to one of the enormous fish that was laid out on ice in the window like it had just been caught.

The butcher, a round man in a bloodstained apron with the name CARL patched on his chest, glanced at me before telling Jackson, “That’s not how we sell whole fish.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you buy a fish—that’s it. You say ‘I want that one’ and you get the whole fish. We weigh it for price, but you can’t request a specific weight.”

“But,” Jackson said, his eyebrows scrunched together, “since you’re already weighing it, can’t you—”

“No,” the man snapped, looking at Jackson like he wished he could make him disappear. His eyes were on Jackson’s hat as he muttered, “You get what you get, Beanie.”

I couldn’t stop the snort noise that left my body when I heard the nickname, which made Jackson give me a mildly threatening look that was ineffective because his eyes were squinted like he wanted to laugh, too.

“Sir,” I said, hoping he’d be nicer to me because I was a girl. Specifically, a girl who still looked like a little kid. Adults were always nicer to the younger kids. “Would you allow us to get them, like, trimmed?”

I really sweetened up my voice, leaning hard into the kiddie thing. “We’ll happily pay

for the whole fish, but if it's over ten pounds, can we just get a little taken off?"

He looked at me like I'd suggested he make out with the catfish. Still, he asked, "You want four catfish that each weigh exactly ten pounds?"

I nodded and wondered if Carl knew his head from his butt when it came to fish. "Yes."

"For what?"

None of your business, Carl. I shrugged and said, "Science...?"

He stared at me for like a full minute—felt like an hour—before he threw both of his hands up in the air. "Science my butt, but whatever. I'm in."

Carl picked up a catfish in one hand and a large knife in the other, and with a quick slashing swing, he lopped off its head.

"Are you scared of that guy, or is it just me?" Jackson murmured.

"Terrified," I agreed, giggling a little as the butcher really got into it. The guy did the exact same thing with the other three fish, seeming to take pride in his supernatural ability to select the perfect fish and torture it the right amount to leave it at exactly ten pounds.

"That was impressive," Jackson said as the guy wrapped the fourth fish. "You really know your stuff, Carl."

We took the fish to the checkout—Jackson carried two and I carried two—and our arms nearly fell off while we waited in a long line. Twenty pounds wasn't a massive amount of weight to hold, but it felt like twenty tons when it was in dead fish form.

The cashier scanned our fish, then looked at us like she thought we were going to bolt when she totaled the order. “That’s two hundred forty dollars. Even.”

I glanced at Jackson and he was looking at me with the same excitement in his eyes. The fact that the cost of four fish—forty pounds—came to two hundred forty dollars felt like a sign.

We were doing it right.

This was the way.

This was going to work.

magical jams

“Y OU’RE NOT GOING TO DIE.”

“Yes, I am,” I panted, my shoulders on fire as we trudged through the forest. We’d each put our fish in our backpacks, which was better than trying to haul those slippery suckers in our fists, but still awful.

Also, I was fairly certain our backpacks would never recover from the smell—like, no way would we be able to take them to school again.

“We have to be close, right?” he asked. “Because I’m not sure which is worse—the smell or my aching back.”

“Yes,” I said, huffing and puffing as I pointed toward the stream. “Start counting as soon as we cross.”

When we crossed the stream, we counted trees until we found the one.

Number forty-four.

“Okay, let’s do it,” I said, dropping to my knees to clear the leaves away from the hole.

It was hard to believe it’d only been a few months since we’d made our wishes. So much had changed since the field trip.

Jackson said, "I'll get out the fish."

All of a sudden, the wind whipped around us. The branches above our heads rattled, the leaves sounding like falling rain as they shook against each other. I pushed back my hair as it blew across my face, covering my eyes and getting in my mouth, and it almost felt like the wind didn't want me to be able to see.

"Are we supposed to get storms?" I asked, raising my voice so he could hear me over the wind. It'd been sunny and calm one minute ago, but now it felt like a tornado was upon us.

"I don't think so," he yelled back, "but let's do this quickly, just in case."

I glanced over at him, hatless once again, and his golden hair wasn't moving.

Like at all, even though mine was blowing like crazy.

"What are you looking at?" he asked, his dark eyebrows furrowing together.

"Nothing," I said, turning back to the spot where the hole was covered.

While I moved the rocks and leaves that were covering the hole, which wasn't easy because the wind kept whipping more leaves in my way, Jackson pulled the four fish out of our backpacks and laid them on the grass. They smelled horrible.

I gagged, then swallowed and pressed my lips together.

You could almost taste the nastiness.

"Okay," I said, wiping my palms on my jeans when the hole was finally exposed, "so now I guess it's time for you to toss the fish in the hole."

“I guess it is,” Jackson agreed, nodding, looking a little nervous.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, trying to hold back my hair as it slapped at my cheeks.

“Nothing,” he said, picking up one of the fish with two hands, his face tense.

“Do you need me to hold up my phone so you can read the chant?” I asked.

“No, thanks,” he said. “I think I’ve got it.”

That surprised me, that he’d paid close enough attention to remember what he was supposed to say. His face had been all disbelief in the kitchen while Archie rambled, but obviously his brain had been tuned in.

Jackson cleared his throat, looked down at that disgusting fish, and said:

“Four golden stones, four fishes planted.

I humbly request my former fourth be ungranted.

By the power of four on the forest floor,

I seek to give my fourth wish to Emma Rockford evermore.”

And he dropped the fatty fish down the hole.

“One down, three to go,” he said, giving me a weird smile before grabbing another fish and holding it out in front of him. He went through the chant and tossed the second fish, and I was glad he was focused, because the wind was picking up, gusting around us like storms would be arriving at any second.

I closed my eyes as he grabbed the third fish and said:

“Four golden stones, four fishes planted.

I humbly request my former fourth be ungranted.

By the power of four on the forest floor,

I seek to give my fourth wish to Emma Rockford evermore.”

I opened my eyes, squinting as a leaf smacked me in the face, and watched him drop the fish down the hole.

Only this time, I heard a sound. As in, I swear I heard it land. It sounded like it’d slapped against something else, like it maybe thwacked against the other fish, and I glanced at Jackson to see if he’d heard it, too.

“Could the other fish be stuck ?” he asked, looking down at the hole. “I mean, I don’t see anything, but you heard that, right?”

I nodded, not wanting to slow down in the middle of the magic. Especially not when it was this windy. “I heard it, but maybe it was something else, like the wind. That hole is more than big enough for the fish.”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding and picking up the final fish.

“Four golden stones, four fishes planted.

I humbly request my former fourth be ungranted.

By the power of four on the forest floor,

I seek to give my fourth wish to Emma Rockford evermore.”

Only this time when he dropped it down the hole, that fish definitely got stuck. It was the smallest one, so it still had a head, which looked garish. It went in, but the face pointed up and out above the hole, so the top of its fish face was gawking up at us with a gaping mouth, as if he were shocked to find himself jammed in a hole.

“What the heck?” I said, leaning forward to look into the opening.

Jackson did the same thing, so we literally butted heads.

“Gah!” I said at the same time he said, “Ow!”

We each rubbed our foreheads and kind of smiled, because it was ridiculous that it’d happened.

“Do you mind?” he said with a little smile, making an exaggeratedly angry face.

“Do you ?” I teased back, wondering how we could be having a moment of fun amongst the disgustingness.

“Hmm. Maybe the first fish was too big,” he said, rubbing the red spot on his forehead while looking down into the hole. “I think it’s plugging up the opening.”

“How can that be?” I asked, leaning down next to him to look at the portal.

“I don’t know,” he said, his voice rising as the wind grew noisier. “But we’re going to have to find something to unjam it with.”

“Like what?” I yelled, because we didn’t have any tools or equipment with us.

“Like maybe a stick.” He reached over and grabbed a big branch off the ground. “This’ll do.”

Jackson picked up the branch and poked at the fish a little, but it didn’t really seem to do anything. He was pushing, trying to nudge that slimy fat guy down into the hole, but all he was doing was jiggling the stinky fish.

“I think you probably need to poke the ones underneath it,” I yelled, trying to see through my hair as it blew around my face. “If they’re lodged in there, they might need a nudge to slide through.”

“Good idea,” he shouted, leaning closer and jamming the stick around the fish and the ones underneath it.

“Does it feel like it’s going to budge?” I asked, watching as he leaned the weight of his upper body on the stick. “At all?”

“No!” he shouted. “Which doesn’t make sense. It’s soft and squishy, so it should move, right?”

“Maybe lean a little harder on one of the edges of the fish,” I suggested, panicking a little at the thought of us not being able to finish this. This was too much work to be a fail.

Failure was not an option.

“Emma. Does the hole look smaller to you?” he said as he leaned with both hands, pressing his entire body weight onto the branch that wasn’t even bending. He groaned, pushing hard, but it was like the fish had turned to stone or something. “I swear it’s not as big as it was last April.”

I leaned forward and gasped, pushing back the hair that wouldn't stop blowing in my face as my chest tightened in panic. "It's not as big as it was when we got here , Jackson!"

"Could it be closing?" he asked, his eyes suddenly a little wild. "Is the portal closing?"

"I don't know, I never read anything about that," I said, my heartbeat pounding in my ears as I looked at it and it appeared even smaller. "But it's the four hundred forty-fourth year, so it's possible!"

Jackson froze, staring down at the hole.

"We have to get them to go down the hole before it goes away," I said, looking around for a larger branch. "If it closes forever we will have no chance!"

"I'm not sure this is a good idea," he said. "Maybe we— gahhhhhhh !"

Something in the hole gave way, and the stick he was leaning on drove down into the portal, throwing Jackson off-balance. His body lurched forward like he'd been tripped, his hands landing in the dirt on the other side of the hole while his body fell in .

"Jackson!" I screamed as he dug his hands into the soil and tried pulling himself out.

"It's closing," he said through clenched teeth as his fingers grasped at the ground and his legs moved like they were trying to find something to step on. "It's closing, Emma!"

As I watched, the hole was growing smaller.

And smaller.

It was almost touching him on all sides.

“Jackson!” I dropped to my knees and lunged with both hands, grabbing at his shirt and trying to pull him out. The wind blew dirt in my face as my fingers tugged, tugged so hard I worried the fabric was going to rip.

“Get a branch!” he yelled, his arms visibly shaking as he held himself up. “I can pull myself out with a branch. Hurry!”

“I don’t want to let go!” I said, terrified of what would happen if he fell into the hole.

“It’s going to close around me if you don’t—get a branch now !”

I let go of his shirt—carefully—and scrambled to my feet, running over and grabbing a huge branch off the ground and holding it out in front of him.

“Don’t let go, Emma!” he yelled back. “No matter how hard I pull!”

“I won’t!” I screamed, petrified that I would.

My heart was in my throat as he reached out with his right hand, now only gripping the dirt with his left.

His grasp landed hard on the branch— yes! —and I wanted to cry with relief that he was halfway there.

My entire body was shaking as I held onto my end with both hands, dirt slapping at my cheeks as the wind whipped around us.

“Come on, Flords,” I said through my teeth as I waited for him to make the next terrifying move of releasing his tentative hold on the ground to grab the branch. “Help or something!”

At that moment, Jackson’s left hand grabbed onto the branch and he wrenched his body forward. I almost dropped it—I almost dropped him—but then it was like I became stronger. I looked down at Jackson and jerked the branch as hard as I could, giving just enough momentum for him to dig his knees into the ground and scramble free of the hole.

I yanked again, grunting as I held on tight, dragging him away from the portal.

“Oh my God,” he panted, letting go of the branch but staying on his knees.

He put his hands on his thighs and looked down at the ground, breathing hard.

“Jackson,” I whispered in disbelief as I watched the hole disappear behind him. “It’s gone.”

“What?” he said, because of course he hadn’t heard me in this weather.

I pointed at the ground and said, “The portal is gone!”

“What?” He climbed to his feet and turned around, staring at the ground with huge eyes. “No way. No. Way. ”

I looked at the spot where we’d all tossed our wishes last year, and it was like the hole had never been there. There was the forty-fourth tree and the earth it was planted in; no dip in the ground whatsoever.

I’d always thought I believed in the magic, but this was, like, definitive proof of its

existence.

And it was incredibly intimidating.

“There has to be a logical explanation,” Jackson said, but his wide eyes made me think he wasn’t so sure. “Like, it’s some sort of a sinkhole or something.”

I gave him a look.

“I know, I know,” he said, nodding as if I’d spoken. “But...”

He just gestured with his arm toward the spot.

I’m not sure how long we stood there, both numbly staring at the place where the portal had been, but a loud clap of thunder made me jump out of my skin and brought us back.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said, giving his head a shake before finally looking away from the spot. “I don’t know about you, but I’m not that comfortable in this place anymore.”

“Yeah, same,” I agreed, and we gathered our backpacks and took off running in the direction of the marina as fast as we could.

“Grab my hand,” he yelled as we ran through the woods.

“Why?” I yelled back.

“Because you can’t see through all that hair and I don’t want you to fall,” he shouted, grabbing my hand and wrapping his around it. “Let’s fly.”

In the midst of the most chaotic event of my life, I found myself feeling oddly happy as I ran through the forest. The thunder went nuts after that, loud and cracking while lightning lit up the sky above us. We sprinted, Jackson pulling me along with him as his long legs propelled us a lot faster than mine would've alone. We lowered our heads and bolted as it started pouring.

When we finally exited the forest and got to the marina, Auntie Bev was sitting on a bench next to the water, sound asleep in the rain.

“Aunt Bev!” Jackson said, letting go of my hand and lightly shaking her as it started raining harder. “Wake up!”

Her wrinkly eyelids fluttered open, but instead of looking shocked by the rain or worried about the storm, her lips curled up into a huge grin. Her silver hair was getting plastered to her face, but she calmly said, “Sounds like Mother Nature is telling us to get lost.”

It kind of did feel like that.

Jackson helped her up and we hurried to the car, but the rain was cold as it drenched the three of us. My hair, my clothes—they were soaked and totally plastered to my body by the time we got to the car.

The entire drive home, as Jackson's kooky aunt (whom I loved) raced like a NASCAR driver and I shivered violently in the back seat, I couldn't stop worrying about the wish situation.

As much as I liked to think our fish donation would please the Flords, the storm made me seriously doubt our chances. Because the winds hadn't picked up until we'd reached the portal, and the rain didn't start until we'd finished our disgusting attempt.

Our disgusting attempt that made the portal close .

I bit down on my thumbnail as I stared out the window, wondering if there was still a small chance that I was going to get all of my wishes back.

Was it even a possibility?

As soon as I thought that, the rain stopped and the sun started shining.

It instantly went from dark and rainy to bright and sunny.

I peered out the window and there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

Which felt important.

I felt like the bright sunshine was the power and magic of Mother Nature, acknowledging that rightness had been restored.

When we got to our street, Auntie Bev stopped at the corner. "I don't want to have to talk to your mom, Jacko, because she's gonna be mad about that mailbox. So get out here."

He didn't even look surprised. "Okay. Love you, Auntie Bev."

"Of course, of course," she said in a singsong voice. "It was a lovely shower."

I thanked her, too, and she smiled at me in the rearview mirror. "You're welcome, dear."

She squealed away when we got out, leaving Jackson and me standing on the corner.

He pulled that stupid hat out of his pocket and put it on his head.

“If this works, I think I’m going to miss your shimmery hair,” I teased as we started walking, meaning it. It was weird, but I’d gotten used to it. In fact, I’d kind of gotten used to him .

And as that thought hit me, I realized that if the magic worked, we’d probably go back to being simply... acquaintances. Two people who were in the same seventh grade.

Yes, he would be my neighbor and lab partner, but we wouldn’t be going on any more adventures together.

The thought of not having Jackson to talk to anymore made me feel sad, but surely that was only because things with my friends were weird right now.

“Well I think I’m going to miss my pecs if that happens,” he said, smiling and nudging me with his elbow. “Not really looking forward to going back to being scrawny and invisible.”

“You weren’t scrawny,” I said, nudging him back with my elbow. “Or invisible.”

“I don’t know, it sure didn’t seem like anybody saw me before I stole your wishes.”

“I’m pretty sure nobody sees me now that my friends have become spectacular, so I get it.”

“I see you,” Jackson said, shrugging.

“Only because I saved you from dying in a hole,” I teased, because something about the way he said he saw me, or the fact that he really did see me, made me feel a

little... shy.

“Did I thank you for saving me, by the way?” he asked, turning and walking sideways so he was facing me as we moved down the block.

“Oh, don’t thank me, it was the Flords.”

“Stop using that word.” He laughed, shaking his head. “I may be your partner in whatever this bizarre adventure is, but I refuse to accept Flord as a noun.”

“All I know is the second I said that noun, the hole burped you up.”

“It did not burp me up,” he said loudly, laughing harder. “My godlike upper body strength allowed me to defy hole gravity. That is what happened.”

“Hole gravity?” I said, laughing with him. “Really?”

“Emma!”

I looked toward my house and my mom was standing on the porch. “Do you want to get a pizza?”

I glanced at Jackson and didn’t want to go in. It felt like things would be different the next time I saw him, which was what I wanted, of course, but that made it hard to leave.

“Yeah,” I shouted. “Pepperoni?”

“On it,” my mom said, going back inside the house.

“You’re so lucky,” he said. “I’m sure we’ll have something like nasty pot roast at my

house tonight. By the way, text me or come over as soon as you wake up tomorrow.”

He wants to see me tomorrow? Were we still going to hang out? I was so happy to hear him say that, to confirm that our friendship wasn’t going to end as soon as the wish stuff was over.

“Okay, although I don’t have your number.”

“Here.” He gestured for me to hand over my phone, so I pulled it out of my pocket and gave it to him, a little surprised as I watched him text himself so I’d have his number.

“I’ll be dying to know if it worked,” he said, and disappointment landed hard in my stomach as he explained himself. He didn’t want to hang out, he wanted a progress report. “If I wake up with my old scrimpy shoulders and concave chest, I want to see if you feel different.”

“Yeah, sure,” I said, irritated with myself for how pathetically rejected I felt. “See you later.”

I ran up the stairs to my house, and I was almost in the door when I heard him yell, “Emma?”

“Yeah?” I answered, turning around.

His smile was wide as he crossed his arms over his chest and said, “Is it weird if I tell you I had fun on our disgusting adventure?”

“Yeah, that would be weird,” I said, smiling back at him. “But I did, too. Later.”

“Yeah,” he said. “See you later.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:47 am

NOPE

Jackson

I look exactly the same.

I stared at my phone as I lay in bed, desperate to believe that didn't mean what it probably meant.

Because if the magic transfer didn't work, what now? Was I stuck in this place where my mom was overworked and lonely and it was only me, Noah, and my mom, like, indefinitely?

Something about the fact that my actual father lived happily ever after without my mom, and also without my brother and me, made the need for us to have the same seem of the utmost importance.

Like it was urgent that we get ours soon.

Like a timer was ticking.

And then there was Jackson. What if his parents split up now because of my wish?

Nana Marie had spent so much of her life filling me with the information I needed to be a grantee, sharing it with a passion that made it obvious it was so important to her, yet I'd failed to deliver.

I felt tears welling up. By losing this connection, this string that tied the living Nana to my life now, it felt like I was losing her in a bigger way.

I texted back: Maybe it takes a little longer.

Jackson

Doubtful.

I wanted to yell at him, because if he hadn't thrown that rock, none of this would've happened, but how could I when his family might fall apart because of that throw?

He didn't text anything else, which made my anxious stomach hurt even more.

I sent: Are you okay?

Still no answer.

I spent the morning being grumpy and quiet, lying like a lump on the couch in front of the TV, but in the afternoon, when Allie and Kennedy asked me if I wanted to go to the mall with them, I finally got up and showered.

At least getting out and hanging with my friends would make me feel a little less depressed, right?

But when we got to the mall, everything was almost worse.

For starters, I realized that I couldn't tell them about what Jackson and I had done because I knew they'd be mad. Anyone messing with the magic had the potential to ruin it, and I knew my friends would never forgive me if I ruined what they'd been given.

So I couldn't talk to my best friends about the biggest thing in my life.

Not only were they hanging with people I didn't know and doing things that didn't include me, but I couldn't tell them anything about the hugely major thing that I was dealing with.

I'd never needed them more, and they'd never been more... not there for me to talk to.

"Allie!" yelled a tall blonde with bright pink lip gloss all over her mouth. She was sitting in the food court with two other girls, both in equally bright lip colors, and they ran over like they were thrilled to see her. "Come sit with us!"

Allie squealed and headed for their table with Kennedy following behind her like a happy puppy. I didn't have a choice, apparently, so I followed behind them like a grumpy old hound dog.

As soon as I sat down, I was forgotten. Allie and Kennedy were talking a mile a minute to these girls I'd seen around school but had never spoken to, and they all seemed to be in the know about everything I knew nothing about. While I'd been focusing on the magic, they'd apparently been immersing themselves in a social realm I was clueless about.

So, not only was I stressed about the whole magic mess, but now I felt left out and didn't really know how to hang with my friends anymore. The girls stayed with us while we walked around the mall, and I started counting the minutes until it was time to leave.

It wasn't until Allie's sister, Nicole, picked us up and we were on the way home that they finally noticed I hadn't been participating in any conversation.

“What’s wrong, Em?” Allie asked from the front seat. “You haven’t spoken in, like, hours.”

“Yeah, you have been quiet today,” Kennedy said.

If they’d noticed my muteness when their shiny new friends were around, they hadn’t cared enough to ask then. Now, in the stupid minivan when there were no cool people to distract them, they suddenly were aware.

“Nothing, I’m fine.”

“If something’s wrong, you can tell us,” Kennedy said, looking at her phone.

“I’m fine,” I snapped, immediately cringing at my snotty tone. I didn’t want to be a jerk, even though they kind of deserved my jerkiness.

“Come on, we’re the AT3 and we share everything,” she said, putting her phone away. “Spill it.”

I looked at Kennedy’s face and realized she was right. They were my best friends—I should have been able to tell them.

Everything.

“I’m just really bummed that I’m obviously not a grantee,” I said. “I don’t know who—”

“No!” Kennedy interrupted, giving me big eyes and slapping her hand over my mouth. Her voice was a little crazed as she said, “Let’s be careful of the words we are saying. I think what you mean is that you’re bummed things aren’t going the way you’d hoped for this year, right?”

“Dude,” I snapped, pushing her fingers from my face. “Don’t put your hand over my mouth.”

“You guys,” Nicole said. “Don’t fight.”

“I mean, Em,” Allie said, ignoring her sister entirely. “We knew going into this that we might not all benefit from the situation. It’s certainly understandable you feel that way, but you have to recognize the odds were against it.”

“Of course I do,” I said through gritted teeth, still smelling the faint hint of french fry oil that was on Kennedy’s fingers.

“We get that you’re bummed,” Kennedy said, “but it feels like you’re mad at us right now, and that’s not fair.”

“I’m not mad at you,” I said, sounding totally mad.

And it was fair, not that I felt like arguing that point with them at the moment.

“It sure feels that way,” Allie said in a sugary-sweet, patiently parental way, like she was explaining to me why you couldn’t eat cotton candy for dinner. “And if the situation were reversed, we would totally be happy for you.”

“If the situation were reversed,” I said, “I wouldn’t be ignoring you for all my cool new friends.”

“We weren’t ignoring you, you were choosing not to talk!” Kennedy said defensively.

“Because I don’t know those people. What would I say to them? Hello, girls in makeup who don’t seem aware that I exist? ”

“You shouldn’t judge them for wearing makeup, Em,” Allie said, scrunching up her Disney nose like I was offending her. “They’re really cool. Maybe you should try a little harder to get to know them. Or, like, any new people at all.”

“Oh, I get it, you think I’m the problem for not running around with a million new friends like you guys,” I said, rolling my eyes and turning my body to look out the window. “How ridiculous of me to expect my best friends to act like my best friends.”

“That’s not fair,” Kennedy said. “We—”

“Why are you saying we when I was talking to Allie?” I snapped, so annoyed that it felt like the two of them against me. “What are you guys, a team now?”

“Em—”

“Whatever,” I interrupted.

“No, listen. I’ve been thinking, and I’m not even sure these random things have to do with, um, the thing you told us about, to be honest,” Kennedy said. I noticed she was wearing black nail polish—I thought she hated black nail polish—as she lowered her voice and said, “I mean, getting my braces off isn’t anything magical, and neither is hitting my gaming stride. It’s entirely possible that this—and Allie growing up over the summer—is just life, Em.”

I felt my mouth drop wide open into a gaping O as I stared at my friend.

How could she think their amazing lives weren’t related to the magic?

“I mean, it’s possible, right?” Allie said, looking at me like she wasn’t entirely sure.

“Whatever,” I repeated, shrugging and looking out the window.

But the truth was, I was so mad at them for suggesting that their good fortune was somehow natural and not at all lore-related that I wanted to not talk to them. How dare they deny Nana at least a little credit?

Allie’s sister started talking about the newest Marvel movie—thank God—so I was able to tune them all out and focus on pouting. When we got to Allie’s driveway, I muttered as I got out of the car, “Thanks for the ride.”

I started walking toward my house, feeling weighed down by the heaviness of my frustration, but then I saw Jackson shooting hoops in his driveway.

And I felt a little lighter.

Because Jackson was a friend who kind of got me.

That kept tripping me up, that he was my actual friend.

Because he was a guy.

And I hadn’t even known him until recently.

But he was my friend, wasn’t he? And at the moment, he was sort of my best friend.

I was halfway across the street, walking toward him, when he yelled, “I’m sorry I still have my hair and pecs.”

“So am I,” I shouted back, smiling a bit for the first time all day.

“Are you okay?” His eyes moved over my face like he was legitimately worried

about me, and something about the concern in his gaze made it feel like I was holding my breath.

Like those blue eyes were really seeing me.

He said, “I know you were really counting on this working.”

“I suppose I’ll have to get over it,” I said, swallowing hard as the reality of my failure settled over me. But worse than that was the reality of his . “Are you okay, though? I feel so awful about the fourth wish. I wonder if there’s something we can do to keep your mom from—”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, rubbing his neck and shrugging.

He looked like he didn’t want to talk about it, so I said, “Are you going to be okay keeping your majestic golden hair?”

“I’ll survive,” he said, reaching up a hand to touch his hat. “I’m starting to get used to hatting up every day. So, where’d you go?”

I set down my bag and gestured for him to give me the ball. “To the mall with Allie and Ken. I thought it was going to be fun, but we just ended up arguing.”

“About what?” he asked, passing me the basketball. “It’s hard to imagine you three fighting.”

“We usually don’t.” I dribbled and took a shot, sending up an airball as I wondered what it meant that Jackson had noticed us. For a second I thought about telling him everything that’d happened with the AT3, since he knew about the wishes, but I realized I still couldn’t. Even after everything, I couldn’t risk ruining it for them.

“But suddenly they’ve got all this new stuff—cheerleading and gaming mastery and all of the things—and I’m happy for them,” I said. “Truly. But their other friends were at the mall and I was, like, invisible. As in, no one spoke to me for hours . So I guess I miss them, like, caring enough to notice.”

I assumed he thought I was a girl being all emo, but he grabbed the ball and said, “I totally get it. Since we moved here, I don’t really have any best friends, and I kind of miss people who know me well enough to care if I’m happy or not.”

“Well, I’m your friend,” I said, realizing that I wanted him to know it was true. “So I care.”

“You do?” he asked, dribbling, and I felt like my answer mattered to him.

I nodded. “I definitely think I do.”

“So we really are friends. Wow—I’m not sure if this is allowed,” he said, grinning.

“It’s allowed, but people are going to assume there’s more to it. You know they will.”

“Well, then they’re dumb,” he said, and I nodded.

“The dumbest,” I agreed.

“So, do you want to be done trying, then?” he asked, going around me to throw up a shot. “With the wishes?”

There was something about the way he was asking what I wanted to do when he had as much at stake—more, actually—that made me feel a little... soft toward him.

Because he was really a nice guy.

“Yeah. I’m not sure what else we can try,” I said, clearing my throat in an attempt to clear away the melancholy.

“Yeah,” he agreed, and the way he looked at me made me feel like he was trying to read my mind.

My phone buzzed in my pocket; my mom was texting me to come inside. I was bummed to leave Jackson, because not only did it seem like he was the only one who “got” me anymore, but I felt like he needed me.

But I said goodbye and went home.

Only the second I walked in, the silence of the house was as loud as a scream. Noah was somewhere, Nana was gone forever, and my mom was sitting at the table, wearing pajama pants and staring into space.

“How was the mall?” she asked when I walked into the kitchen. “Fun?”

“Yeah,” I lied, because her eyeliner was smeared and there was a stack of bills on the counter. I sat down on the stool beside her and reached for a slice of leftover pizza, trying to reel in my suffocating disappointment, because I didn’t want it to be contagious.

“By the way, I’m working a double tomorrow,” she said, running a hand through her hair.

“You are?” I asked, pulling off a piece of pepperoni. I wanted to cry at the thought of her being gone more than she already was, but that definitely wouldn’t help anything.

“Yeah, but Noah will be here,” she said, and I must’ve sounded bummed because she added, “So, no worries.”

“Cool,” I said, pinning on a smile so she wouldn’t think I was unhappy. “So, how was work today?”

“It was good,” she said. It was what she always said, that everything was good, but I’d seen my mom happy before Nana Marie died, so I remembered what happy looked like.

And I hadn’t seen her look like that in a long time.

It felt like she was so worried about work and me and the house that she didn’t have time to be happy.

Of course, the second I thought that, the disappointment returned, because now that I knew I wasn’t a grantee and never would be, I knew she wasn’t going to be getting her happily ever after.

At least not through magical means.

“The Hunger Games is on tonight,” I said. “Want to watch it with me?”

I’d seen that movie three million times, half of them with her, but I knew she loved it. I also knew that if I didn’t suggest it as something mother-daughtery that we could do together, she’d probably do something super adult with her evening, like scrub toilets or meal plan for the week.

At least this way, she’d give herself a break.

“I was going to clean the bathrooms tonight,” she said, shrugging her shoulders, “but I suppose I can do that tomorrow night instead.”

“The toilets will definitely still exist tomorrow,” I agreed, grabbing another piece of

pizza. “So it’s Peeta and Katniss tonight.”

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:47 am

they don't all look alike in hairnets

S CHOOOL WAS WEIRD the next day.

Kennedy and Allie acted like everything was normal, but it felt really fake, like they were walking on eggshells, trying not to make me mad.

Which made me mad, which I knew was stupid , but that was the way it was.

At lunchtime, they tried including me, but that only made things feel worse. Because no one at the table cared that I was there, yet no matter what was said, Allie and Kennedy added something about me in a ridiculous way.

You like that show? Oh, Emma likes that show, too.

I was doing my best not to roll my eyes when I happened to catch Jackson's gaze. He was a few tables over, sitting with Jared, the redheaded kid from down the street, and when I looked at him, he gave me a little smile.

And I suddenly felt better. I leaned over and said to Kennedy, "I'm going to go talk to someone—I'll be back."

But I wasn't going to be back. I took my tray and my backpack, walked over, and sat down beside Jackson, even though the "Hot Hat" girls would probably have something to say about it. I didn't want to be the topic of their conversation, but I wanted to sit with Jackson enough to risk it.

“Do you care if I sit here?” I asked.

“No,” he said, “but weren’t you the one who was worried about people assuming we were friends?”

“Yeah,” I said, “but I don’t feel like I care today. Do you care?”

“I didn’t ever care,” he said, shrugging.

“Well, I care,” Jared said. “I’m out of here.”

And the guy stood up and walked away.

“What is his deal?” I asked as I sat down.

“Well, he said—right before you came over—that he was going to the library to study, so I think that was his attempt at being funny.”

“Oh, so he’s not very good at being funny?” I picked up a fry and dipped it into my ketchup.

“Obviously not,” he replied, and we both kind of laughed at that. “So, the popular table isn’t doing it for you today?”

I gave him a duh look as I popped the fry into my mouth.

“Well, I’m glad you’re here, because I was thinking.” He held up a finger while he chewed, then said, “We need to go see Archie.”

“What?” That was the last thing I expected him to say.

“I was lying in bed last night, stressing about everything, when it hit me,” he said. “She did say that weird stuff about talking to a hamburger if it didn’t work. Why would she say that if it didn’t mean something?”

“Probably to...” I tilted my head and looked into his blue eyes. “I... don’t know.”

“Right?” He pointed at me and said, “It makes me wonder if there’s a plan B.”

“A plan B,” I said, wondering if he could be right.

“It might be that she’s just... odd, but isn’t it worth it to toss out one final ask before officially giving up?”

“Yes,” I said, realizing he was right. Even if my wish was dead to me, Jackson and his family needed that wish flipped too much for us to give up without trying everything. So I said, “I think that’s a great idea.”

Sometimes I couldn’t tell what Jackson was thinking, but as soon as I said that, his face changed. Relief smoothed over the crinkle between his eyebrows and he sounded excited when he asked, “So, you’ll go with me to the Flordish lady?”

“Of course. We should go right after school, if you can,” I said. “But don’t get your hopes up. Archie is... well... Archie .”

He chugged the rest of his water before setting the bottle on his tray. “You never know, Em. We might’ve missed something simple, and now we can fix it.”

“You’re saying that to make us feel better, aren’t you?” I asked, wanting him to be right so badly.

“Absolutely I am,” he said, stealing one of my fries. “But it’s possible.”

“Right,” I agreed, nodding. “It is.”

“O-kay,” he said. “So listen. I was thinking.”

“Yeah?” I said, suddenly distracted by Evan Winters going through the pizza line. He was wearing a basketball jersey with jeans, which looked so good on him.

“Evan Winters is an alien,” he said.

“Huh?”

When I looked away from Evan, Jackson was watching me with a know-it-all look on his face. He shook his head and said, “You have no poker face, Rockie. You get all goo-goo eyed whenever you look at him.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You actually do,” he said, picking up his slice of pepperoni pizza.

“Whatever. I think the bigger question is how are you still getting away with that hat,” I said, changing the subject.

“A, there was no question. I was calling you out on your crush, and you’re trying to change the subject, Rockford,” he said with a smirk. “And B, my mom called the principal about my Marie Antoinette hair, so it’s allowed—I got the override.”

I rolled my eyes, but it was a waste because I couldn’t hold back my smile.

So I grabbed a fry and asked, “Well, now that you might be stuck with Marie’s hair forever, are you going to ditch the beanie soon?”

“Are you missing my hair? Is that it?” he teased.

I shook my head but my cheeks were warm when I said, “I forget you even have hair, Matthews.”

“Yeah, I don’t know what I’m going to do about it,” he said with a shrug. “I guess I’ll have to take it off at some point, but I’m not looking forward to the reactions.”

“I get that,” I said, because people were going to freak when they saw his hair.

The bell rang a minute later, so Jackson hurried off to class.

As I watched him walk away and started walking in the other direction, I wondered how things were going to go with Archie after school. Was there a chance she’d have another option for us? I knew the odds weren’t in our favor, but I really hoped there would be something for us to try.

“Em!”

I looked over my shoulder, and Kennedy and Allie were both running to catch up with me.

“Hey,” I said, feeling awkward as I waited for them.

But as they came over, Allie looking like a middle school goddess and Kennedy moving with the confidence of an influencer, my stomach hurt with how much I missed them.

With how much I missed us , the us from before the lore.

And it occurred to me that maybe I was being a fool.

I didn't like the changes in our friendship, but that wasn't worth losing it entirely.

And I could try to get to know their new friends, right? Suddenly I felt like I'd been making everything harder than it needed to be.

"Listen, you guys, I'm really sorry," I said, meaning it. "We should do a movie night tonight, if you guys don't have anything going on."

"We totally should," Allie said, nodding and smiling, looking relieved.

"Like old times," Kennedy agreed. "I'll bring the Milk Duds."

"I'll bring the popcorn," I chimed in.

"And I've got the soda," Allie offered, grinning at the way we always fell into the same roles. "And you know, Em, we won't be mad if you want to bring Jackson."

"Jackson?" I searched her face, trying to see if she was accusing me of something more than friendship with him, but she looked like she was for real.

"I know you said he's your friend now," she said, "so it's okay with us if you want to include him."

"Oh," I said, wondering what that would be like. I'd never thought about the four of us hanging out together before, but I kind of liked the idea. "Let's just do the AT3 tonight. But he is really cool, so we should all do something together sometime."

Would he want to? I kind of felt like he might.

"So, what do you two talk about?" Allie asked with a little smile. "Like, I know you have a class together and all that, but when Ken saw you going somewhere with him

and his grandma, where were you headed?”

My guilty stomach dropped. Did they somehow know we’d been messing with the magic?

“Platte River State Park,” I admitted, wondering if I could tell them about the fish now, since it obviously hadn’t worked. Maybe they’d understand and find it hilarious. “It sounds ridiculous, but I thought that if—”

“You didn’t go to the place , did you?” Kennedy interrupted in an annoyingly loud whisper, her eyeballs so huge they nearly bulged as her eyebrows went all the way up.

Okay—question answered. Kennedy looked like she was on the edge at the mere mention of Platte River State Park. I said, “If by place you mean marina , then yes—we went to the place. ”

For half a second, I’d been foolish enough to think I could tell them the story and they’d be amused that I’d failed.

Obviously I’d underestimated what their response would be to magic-messing.

“Ohhhhhh,” she said, her eyes and brows returning to normal. “Got it. Sorry—I’m a little paranoid about... things , if you know what I mean.”

“Understood,” I said, nodding.

“It’s weirdly stressful,” Allie said quietly, a crinkle in her perfect forehead. “Getting what you want all of a sudden. I constantly feel like it’s going to disappear.”

I looked at the worry on her face and for the first time since she’d changed, I felt bad

for her. Because what would that feel like, having everything you wished for but constantly worrying that you might lose it?

“Right?” Kennedy said, nodding. “I feel the exact same way, like, all the time.”

“And the day I kept falling when I did my flips? I was freaking out,” Allie said, laughing to herself. “Thank goodness I went back to normal—well, new normal—the next day.”

I smiled, but it was hard to get my lips to slide upward when so much guilt was pulling them down. Guilt over messing with the magic, over telling Jackson Allie was a grantee, and over the fact that we were still trying to mess with it.

“I never thought about that,” I admitted, and then I added, “But that’s not going to happen. You and your life are a thousand percent you and your life—no givebacks.”

That made the crinkle disappear, and a huge smile crawled over her face, a smile that reminded me of the old Allie and made the guilt even worse. “That’s right. No givebacks.”

I was torn between feeling better as I went to the rest of my classes, because my friends and I were headed back to solid ground, and terrified that I might do something to ruin their happiness.

But as soon as I met Jackson at his locker after school, I got crazy-nervous for a different reason altogether.

These were the last few minutes of hope.

Once we saw Archie and she officially told us we were out of luck, we’d have to accept the final verdict—that we were never getting that wish transferred.

It was like Jackson somehow understood that, because he cracked jokes the entire walk from the lockers to the cafeteria, as if he was trying to distract me.

But when we walked into the kitchen, all the lights were off.

There was no sign of Archie.

I walked farther into the darkened room, needing to find her. My eyes dipped into every corner of that empty space, because we couldn't not talk to Archie.

Without Archie, we had nothing.

"She has to be here," I said in a panic. "Maybe we can come up with some story and ask the office to page her. What if we—"

"Wait," Jackson said, tilting his head and narrowing his eyes. "Listen."

There was a sound coming from the back room—it sounded like chopping.

Oh, thank God.

Relief settled over me as I looked at Jackson and listened to the chopping.

Archie was there. It was okay.

I followed him over to the door, but when we looked inside, it was a different lunch lady.

I gasped in shock, which made her look over at us. "Hey, kids, do you need something?"

We need you to be someone else!

“Um, yeah,” I stammered. “Uh, do you know where Archie is?”

“Archie?” she said, looking confused. “Archie’s gone. She retired last year.”

Jackson’s eyes narrowed. “She retired ?”

“That can’t be right,” I said, shaking my head while trying not to panic. “We talked to her last week.”

“In Florida?” The lady looked from me to Jackson like she was trying to crack a code.

“No,” Jackson said slowly. “We spoke to her right here.”

“You must be thinking of someone else,” she said, shrugging. “Archie’s been in Florida for weeks now.”

“Impossible,” I said, my stomach feeling weird as I tried making sense of it. We’d talked to her last week, in this very kitchen.

So how could she have been in Florida for weeks?

“Sorry, kiddo,” the lady said. “We all look alike in hairnets, though. Can I help you with something?”

“No, no,” Jackson said, taking over. He was so good at faking it around grown-ups.

And then it hit me—my third wish.

Is that why he was always so smooth with adults? Because he'd gotten my wish to be not awkward ? Something about that realization, the reminder of the magic's power, made this feel even more urgent.

Jackson smiled, looking charming and smart as he said, "We've been helping her with a few things and we wanted to follow up and see if she needed more help. The last thing she said was something about a guy she referred to as a hamburger, but I can't remember the details of that. You don't by chance know who that might be? Is he in administration or something?"

I was a little impressed and a little terrified by how easily he was able to come up with a cover story, especially when he had to be freaking out inside, just like I was.

I also couldn't help but wonder—would I have been that charming if I'd gotten my third wish?

The woman gave him a weird look, so I was positive she wouldn't be able to help us, but then she said, "I wonder if she means Hamburger Man."

Jackson looked at me and said, "Hamburger Man."

"The Hamburger Man," I repeated. Could it be that easy? "Do you think that's it?"

"What's it, kids?" the lady asked.

The Hamburger Man was like a local celebrity, if celebrities were grumpy and uncool. He owned a hamburger food truck, and everybody in town knew it was good. Like, the best burgers you'd ever tasted in your entire life.

People stood in line for hours when they saw the neon green OPEN light buzz to life.

But he was only open when he felt like it, he was rude to customers for no reason, and sometimes he denied people hamburgers simply because he “didn’t like the looks of their faces.”

The Hamburger Man was an enigma.

But... was he a magical enigma?

It was pretty far-fetched, but then again, his burgers were out-of-this-world good.

Jackson shook his head with a smile, like he was being silly. “We forgot that she’s friends with him. Now it makes sense.”

“Well, good,” the lady said, smiling back at him. “Because I have to get back to my chopping now so I can go home.”

We thanked her and said goodbye, but the second we stepped out of the kitchen and into the hallway, I freaked out.

“How can she possibly be living in Florida, Jackson Matthews?” I whisper-yelled, squeezing his arm and shaking him back and forth. “She was here last week!”

“I have no idea, Emma Rockford,” he whisper-yelled back, grabbing my arms and shaking me while also shaking his head. “It doesn’t make any sense. What was she, the ghost of a lunch lady or something?”

I couldn’t tell if he was reading my mind or mocking me.

“She must’ve come back for a day,” he said, as if that was the only explanation.

“Yeah, because senior citizens love to leave Florida to go clean out kitchens at their

old job,” I said, making a come-on face, because that didn’t make any sense at all.

“Maybe she missed us,” he said, but we both knew he didn’t mean that.

“Sure, that’s it,” I replied with an eye roll.

“It seems ridiculous,” he said, looking behind me to make sure no one was around, “but what other explanation is there?”

“I think you know,” I said, certain that the magic was at play here.

“I do,” he agreed, his eyes moving all over my face as it felt like we had an unspoken conversation. “So, what’s our plan?”

“I have no idea.”

He let go of me and shook his head again. “Same.”

“Well, I know we can’t go to Florida,” I said. “So—”

“We don’t need to go to Florida, we need to go to the hamburger stand.”

“Oh.” My mouth snapped shut. “Yeah. Duh.”

“Tonight, if possible.”

“Well, I’m supposed to go watch movies with Ken and Allie,” I said. “But I can—”

“I can’t until later, either,” he interrupted. “My grandparents are coming over. And you need to hang out with your friends tonight, Em. You miss them.”

I don't know why, but that made me feel a little pinch in my chest. His blue eyes were nice, like really nice, as he smiled at me. I said, "I do?"

He tilted his head. "You should see your little face when you talk about them. Go chill with your besties tonight."

"Yeah," I said, surprised that he was so in tune with my life. "Okay."

"But Auntie Bev loves going for late-night drives," he said, his eyes twinkling as he talked about his aunt. "So if you can sneak away at, like, nine, we can knock it out tonight."

"I don't know," I said. "Nine is kind of late on a school night, and I hate lying to my mom."

"Can you just say you're going with your friend Jackson to get hamburgers? Wait, wait, wait," he said, interrupting himself. "Don't word it like that or she'll think it's a date thing. Maybe say that my aunt is going on a hamburger run for a whole bunch of people, and you want to go."

"A hamburger run?" I repeated, my cheeks hot at his mention of dating. Why are my cheeks hot? "If I make it sound like Ken and Allie are going, she'll for sure say yes."

"Excellent."

He called Auntie Bev and she was all in on burgers, so we made plans to connect after movie night.

Just as I was shoving a box of microwave popcorn into my backpack so I could walk over to Kennedy's, my phone buzzed with a text.

Jackson

Pic of my ACTUAL best friend

And it was a picture of a fat orange cat who appeared to be lying on Jackson's neck. I snorted and texted:

I'd be jealous but he's too cute. Name, please.

Jackson

Orange YouGlad

I replied: Please tell me you're kidding

Jackson

Sadly, no. I named him when I was six and super into joke books.

That was adorable. I tried picturing Jackson as a kindergartener, but it was impossible because now I could only see Jackson in a hat, or with shimmery blond hair.

Neither of which he would've had when he was little.

I sent: Do we have a plan for hamburger stand yet?

Jackson

Auntie Bev will pick us up in my driveway at 8:45. Think your mom will go for it?

I texted: She already said yes. See you at 8:45.

honk

M OVIE NIGHT WAS BLISS.

It was like a throwback to the “before,” where it was only the AT3, binge eating snacks while watching Enchanted (our favorite classic), talking nonstop about nothing and everything.

At eight thirty, when it was almost over, my phone buzzed.

Ken and Allie both looked at me as I took it out and read the message.

Jackson

Auntie Bev is early. Can you come now?

“Who’s texting?” Kennedy asked.

My face was instantly on fire as I tried coming up with a story. “I, uh, it’s my mom. She wants me to come home now.”

“Noooo,” she said, shaking her head. “I mean, at least we’ve seen this a hundred times already.”

“True,” I said, relieved that she wasn’t questioning my answer.

My phone buzzed again, and I gritted my teeth. What were the odds they wouldn’t

notice?

“What is her deal?” Allie said, and they were both watching me.

“Is everything okay?” Kennedy asked.

“Who knows,” I managed, looking down at the message.

Jackson

Hurry before she starts laying on the horn.

“Ah, she said she doesn’t feel good and wants me home so she can go to bed,” I lied, my face hotter than it’d ever been.

“Okay, it’s hilarious how red your face is right now,” Kennedy teased. “You look sunburned with rage, Em.”

I sputtered a fake laugh. “It’s so annoying.”

I was putting on my backpack when the horn started honking.

It wasn’t a honk, or a casual beep.

No, it sounded like Auntie Bev was literally laying her entire body on top of the horn.

Come ON, Bev, gimme a break.

“What the heck?” They ran over to the window and looked outside. “Who is doing that?”

“Okay, well, I’ll see you guys later,” I said, unsure how I was going to get into the honking car without them seeing me get into the honking car.

“Wait—hugs,” Allie said, running over. “I’m so happy things are normal with us again.”

“Me too,” I said as she hugged me. It really had been nice just being us together again.

“Hold up,” Kennedy said as she wrapped her arms around us, making it into a group hug, which made us all laugh.

“Okay, now I have to go,” I said, still laughing.

But as we pulled apart, I dropped my phone.

Kennedy leaned down and grabbed it, then held it out to me.

It felt like everything switched to slow motion when it buzzed and my display lit up with the message.

Jackson

LET’S GO, ROCKIE! The magic isn’t gonna reverse itself!

I snatched the phone and shoved it into my pocket. “See you guys—”

“You’re going somewhere with Jackson right now?” Allie asked, using the same tone she’d use if she were asking me if I’d stomped on her hamster. “Were you lying about your mom texting you to come home?”

“And what does that mean, the magic isn’t going to reverse itself?” The expression on Kennedy’s face—the narrowed eyes, the frowning mouth—told me she knew exactly what it meant.

“Nothing,” I said with a fake chuckle, waving a hand as my guilt engaged my word-vomit reflex. “He’s so weird. Like, the guy says the strangest stuff, like tells me about when he needs to clip his toenails or what he ate for—”

“What are you going to do?” Kennedy demanded, putting her hands on her hips.

“Nothing,” I said, louder this time. “We’re literally going to get hamburgers with his nutty great-aunt.”

“Then why would he say that about magic?” she asked.

“I have no idea,” I lied yet again, rolling my eyes. “He always thinks he’s funny when most people don’t even get him.”

“You wouldn’t do anything to mess it up, would you?” Allie asked, her voice quiet.

I looked into her eyes, the eyes I’d known as long as I could remember knowing things, and I felt queasy from how guilty I felt.

Guilty and so, so worried.

Because if we got our wishes fixed but somehow reversed Allie’s or Kennedy’s, they’d never forgive me.

I’d never forgive myself.

But how could I not try when my other best friend’s happiness was at stake, not to

mention my mom's? I told myself it was going to be okay because Nana hadn't written anything about a firsthand knowledge of wish reversal.

"Of course not," I said, swallowing and not looking toward Kennedy's accusing stare.

"We're just getting hamburgers, so chill."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:47 am

you can't change a burger back into a cow

WE DIDN'T TALK on the way to the hamburger stand, mostly because Auntie Bev had her classic rock cranked so loudly it was pretty much impossible. Jackson kept looking at me like he knew something was wrong, but I kept trying to seem chill as I convinced myself it'd be fine.

Odds were not in our favor that this was going to work, and if it somehow did, no way would it screw up the existing magic. I mean, Archie hadn't said anything about that, and she'd been very specific about everything else.

Still, I kept picturing Allie's face as she talked about her paranoia.

Please, Nana—help me out with this one.

When we pulled up to the street where the hamburger stand was parked, Jackson basically jumped out of the car like he was a man on a mission. Auntie Bev looked at me in the rearview mirror as I unbuckled my seat belt.

"I hope you get what you're looking for."

"Thank you," I said, giving her a nervous smile. "I'm looking for a burger, so the odds are in my favor, right?"

"Sure, kid," she said, shaking her head like she knew I'd told a blatant lie. "Now get outta my car so I can cruise for a while."

“Getting out,” I murmured as I climbed out of the car and shut the door.

The car immediately peeled rubber and squealed away.

“We should really take her keys away,” Jackson said with a grin as she disappeared from our sight.

“She’d probably run you over if you tried.”

“Yeah,” he said. “She totally would.”

There was a huge line at the hamburger stand, which wasn’t uncommon. Everyone knew that the truck was perpetually swamped until Hamburger Man ran out of burgers for the day, and then he’d yell “GO HOME!” and slam down the sliding shade.

We got in line, and while we waited, I watched him.

The Hamburger Man.

I found him to be a little scary, to be honest. He was short, bald, and round, wearing a tuxedo T-shirt and a stained apron with a huge H on its center. And he had a literal tattoo of a hamburger on his right biceps.

How can this man possibly fit into the magic?

But something about his bright eyes freaked me out. They reminded me of Archie’s, like they were staring into my soul; intimidating, like they hid some sort of power inside his hamburger-wielding self.

Not only that, but he really didn’t seem like a very nice person. A tiny blonde lady

got to the front and wasn't sure what she wanted, and instead of helping her, he yelled, "I don't have time for wishy-washy customers—get outta my line!"

"Call me crazy, but it might be difficult to get him to talk to us," Jackson said, giving me a look. "He doesn't exactly seem like the type of person who's excited to help people."

"Right?" I agreed, a knot in my stomach. This super-rude man was our only chance, our last hope, and I didn't find that to be very promising at all.

"Don't worry," Jackson said, reaching out to squeeze my arm. "We didn't expect Archie to help, but it almost seemed like she knew we were coming. So let's see what happens."

"I guess we have no other choice, right?"

"That's right, Rockford," he said, giving me a half-smile.

Something about Jackson—his face, his voice, his eyes—reassured me. It always felt like everything would be okay when I was with him.

Which was a little next-level when it came to this, because he had as much at stake as I did. His family might fall apart if we couldn't fix this, yet here he was, telling me it was going to be okay.

"Thanks for being so cool about... um... everything," I said, shrugging and trailing off in embarrassment.

"That's what friends are for, right?"

He grinned and once again, I felt a little lighter, like he'd taken a pound off my

shoulders.

“Right,” I said, grinning back. Honestly, I was so busy looking at his reassuring face that I didn’t notice we’d made it to the front of the line until Hamburger Man yelled at me.

“What do you want?”

Suddenly his freakish eyes were on me, pinning me in place as I tried to remember how words worked. I cleared my throat and leaned a little closer, lowering my voice so the people behind us didn’t hear when I said, “We need to talk to you for a sec—”

“I’m not serving conversation, I’m serving hamburgers,” he interrupted, glaring at me like I was offensive for suggesting he allow me to speak. “Do you want one or not?”

“We have a really quick question,” Jackson said, using that adult voice (aka my third wish), which had worked for him so far during all of our expeditions.

“I don’t answer questions unless there’s a hamburger in your mouth,” the guy grumbled. “Get out of my line. If you’re not gonna eat, I don’t have time for this ticky-tack back-and-forth.”

What does ticky-tack back-and-forth even mean?

“Okay, well, give us two burgers,” Jackson said urgently, like he needed to hurry up and get to business.

“No pickles because I’m allergic,” I added quickly, glancing behind me at the growing line of impatient customers.

That made Jackson pause and give me a skeptical look, like I’d shocked him. “No

one's allergic to pickles.”

“Well, I am,” I said, smiling in spite of everything because Jackson .

“I don’t care!” Hamburger Man snapped.

“So can she ask you a question, now that we’ve ordered?”

“Make it quick,” Hamburger Man said around a big fat sigh, like we were sucking the patience out of his body. “Because I’m busy.”

“It’s about the lore of four,” I said quietly, leaning closer to the window while handing over a ten-dollar bill for the food.

That made him focus those strange eyes on me. He stared me down for a minute, amber eyes burning into mine, and then he said, “What the heck are you even talking about?”

I swallowed and said, “Archie said you were the one to talk to. Because there’s a problem with my wishes.”

“No problems—there are no problems. Once the wishes are wished, that’s it—they’re done,” he said through a clenched jaw, like he was trying to keep his voice down while wanting to yell at me. “I mean, that’s what I heard. I don’t know anything about stupid legends, but the definitive party line I’ve heard is that you make your wish and it is done. Boom boom boom.”

“But—”

“Boom boom boom. No buts. You can’t change a burger back into a cow, missy, and you can’t change a wish that’s been wished. Period.”

He gestured for me to move out of the way so the next person in line could order, and I could tell I was losing him. He was going to yell at me to leave any second now.

Be. The. Cow.

“But there’s a problem with my wishes,” I said, louder this time.

“Problem, what problem?” he snapped, obviously annoyed with me. “Not everyone gets their wishes, and people shouldn’t see that as a problem. It’s life.”

“But we think I got her wishes,” Jackson said from beside me.

“Yeah,” I added. “He got my wishes, and if he gets my last one, things are going to get all messed up for his family.”

Hamburger Man froze. For the first time since we’d arrived, he stopped moving and gawked at us like we were terrifying monsters who’d dropped in for some oversalted fries. He said, very slowly, “They aren’t oversalted, young lady, and what do you mean, he got your wishes?”

I gasped.

Because... he’d read my mind.

I felt breathless as he stared me down, but I told him about what had happened with the rock, the way Jackson hit my wishes at the very moment I was tossing them into the hole. I wasn’t sure if it was his strange gaze or the crowd behind us, but for once I was able to tell a story without the unimportant rambling details.

Hamburger Man’s eyes were wild as he listened. They moved all over the place, like he was memorizing my words and thinking through the entire thing, and his breath

was a little wheezy—I could hear him taking breaths.

And then he leaped into action.

“We’re closed!” he yelled abruptly, switching off the sign that said OPEN .
“Everybody go home. Now!”

“Wait, what?” I said. He couldn’t leave .

Hamburger Man started grabbing burgers and hurling them out at the crowd, reminding me of someone chucking snowballs in a snowball fight. The adults all looked shocked and horrified, supremely insulted, but the kids started jumping up in the air, trying to catch them like it was a game where the ultimate prize was a delicious cheeseburger.

I ducked to dodge a burger, which caused it to bounce off the forehead of a lady behind me, who bellowed “Gah!”

“Here!” Hamburger Man scooped a couple of drink cups into the fry bin, filling them with crinkled potatoes. Then he pulled back his arms, flipped his wrists, and let the french fries rain down upon the people who were now less in line and more defending themselves from the barrage of incoming foodstuffs. “Take it all!”

“Dude!” Jackson caught a wrapped burger as he yelled at Hamburger Man, who was reaching for the window shutter to slam it down and lock it up tight. “What should we do? About the wish fiasco?”

“I’ll have to get back to you,” Hamburger Man said, not even looking in our direction as he grabbed the bottom of the window.

“But—”

Someone started laying on their horn in the parking lot, and then I heard, “Jackson! Emma! Get over here!”

We both turned, and Auntie Bev was hanging out of her car window, shouting in our direction with her hands cupped around her mouth.

“One sec!” Jackson yelled, but when we turned back around to the action, Hamburger Man jumped into the front of the food truck and started it up.

“Wait!” I shouted.

“Stop!” Jackson bellowed.

But as we stood there screaming, Hamburger Man raced off in that truck, leaving us in the literal dust.

I watched the taillights disappear, frozen in place by my disbelief.

“What do we do now?” I whispered, to myself more than to Jackson.

“I guess we’d better go,” he said, and his voice cracked.

He looked as dumbfounded as I felt, utterly defeated, because it’d seemed like we were close, and now... now we were back to nothing.

“Come on,” he said, shaking his head as he grabbed my sleeve and pulled me along with him toward his aunt’s car. “Auntie Bev is waiting.”

When we got into the car, all Auntie Bev said was, “I saw that guy snap and wanted to get you kids outta there before it got too wild.”

“Thanks,” Jackson said, handing her the hamburger he’d caught.

“What, no fries?” she said with a grin as she unwrapped it.

“There are probably some in Em’s hair,” he joked, but there was no amusement in his voice.

They started talking, but I closed my eyes and rested my head on the back of the seat, suddenly so, so tired.

Because it was crushing, the fact that we weren’t going to get any answers.

We’d come so close to finding hope, but now we were back to having none.

It was exhaustingly depressing.

Which explained how I was able to fall into a deep, dream-filled sleep.

joyride

“T HERE HE IS!” J ACKSON SAID, pointing at the windshield as we approached an intersection where the hamburger truck was stopped at a red light. “Come on.”

He opened the door when we came to a stop and leaped from Auntie Bev’s car, grabbing my hand and pulling me out behind him. I followed him as we ran up to the hamburger truck, and when we reached the back, Jackson pulled open the door and said, “Get in!”

We stepped into the food truck, slamming the door behind us as it started moving again.

“Are we sure about this?” I asked in a panic.

“It’s our only option,” he said.

My heart was pounding in my chest as a sudden turn of the truck sent us stumbling. My hands flailed as I searched for something to grab onto.

“Here,” Jackson said as he reached out and gripped the counter with both hands, steadying himself.

I grabbed onto the stool that was mounted to the floor in front of the center island, and even though the truck seemed to be picking up speed, we were both able to catch our balance.

I didn't want to panic, but it felt like the truck was going faster and faster. Too fast. It was hard to hold on as the vehicle flew down the road, bumping like an airplane about to take off, almost as if it were trying to pick up as much speed as possible so it could lift off the ground.

"This is too fast, right?" I said, my voice loud with panic. "He's going way too fast!"

I knew that if I let go of that stool, I'd go flying into the stainless steel surfaces that spanned the mobile kitchen.

I glanced at Jackson, and he had the same scared look on his face as when he'd nearly fallen into the massive hole.

"We need to sit," he said urgently, "because if it goes any faster, we won't be able to hold on."

I watched as he slowly moved toward the floor, always keeping his hands firmly wrapped around something. When he was finally seated, he wrapped both arms around the stool across from mine.

"Now you," he said.

"I don't know if I should—"

"Go!" He gestured with his chin toward the floor as the truck started shimmying, like it was going too fast for its wheels and would explode into a million pieces. "Hurry!"

I did the same thing as him, moving to a sit while carefully going one hand at a time, never letting go of a solid, one-handed grip.

"It feels like a rocket taking off!" he said, yelling, because that was the only way to

be heard now that the hamburger truck was trying to break the land speed record.

Right when he said that, the motor went completely silent.

The truck was still driving, but suddenly it was at a smooth speed, without a single bump, and it was quiet as if we were floating through the sky instead of flying over the road.

“What is this ?” Jackson muttered, glancing toward the windows that were too high and too far back for us to see out of.

I followed his gaze, and even though we couldn’t see out the windows, we could definitely see the bright light coming in. It was like the sun was amplified, shining brighter than it’d ever shone, and shafts of blinding yellow sunshine were streaming into the truck.

The gorgeous sunlight terrified me.

Because it was nighttime. How was it sunny?

It had to be lamps of some sort, but it really, really, really looked like sunlight.

I wasn’t sure why, but it accentuated the awareness that everything was very wrong.

The sun shouldn’t be that bright, the world shouldn’t be that quiet.

What was happening?

And then I felt brakes.

There was a loud squeaking sound as the truck started slowing down.

“Thank goodness,” I whispered, scared of where we were but relieved we’d no longer be in a speeding hamburger wagon. All I wanted was to step outside and stand on solid ground.

“Okay, if he opens the back doors, I say we act all happy, like thank you so much , and hug him, as if we were so scared and are grateful that he’s rescuing us.”

“O-kay,” I said, my heart racing as the truck slowed even more.

“And if he doesn’t, and we hear him walk away, we quickly and quietly get out of this thing and figure out what’s going on.”

“Got it,” I whispered the second the truck came to a complete stop.

“It’ll be fine,” Jackson said, giving me a serious look as he stood to his feet. “I promise.”

There he was again, making me feel better simply by being there. My breath caught in my throat as I looked at him, because sometimes the way I liked him felt like more . Not like a crush, but like we had something that wasn’t a thousand percent a normal friendship.

Okay, maybe a little bit like a crush.

I swallowed and nodded, because now was not the time to get emo about Jackson Matthews. “It will .”

Jackson held out a hand and pulled me to my feet, and we stepped closer to the back doors. I felt it when Hamburger Man slammed the front door, and then we waited for what came next.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:47 am

for flord's sake

“H E’S NOT COMING.” Jackson looked down at me, his eyes intense. “It’s been a good few minutes, so he obviously went somewhere. At the count of three, I’m going to crack open the back door and peek out. If it looks clear, I’m grabbing your hand and we’re running. Got it?”

I nodded, fear making it impossible for me to speak.

Jackson turned the door handle and opened it the tiniest bit. I stared at him as he stuck out his head and peered out the back door, but instead of grabbing me and running, his eyes got huge. Like, comically big. His mouth dropped open into a gaping O as he stared at something, like Ellie Sattler in Jurassic Park the first time she saw a dinosaur.

“What is it?” I asked, terrified of the answer. “What are you looking at? What’s the plan, Jackson?”

I felt his hand wrap around mine, and without saying a word, he stepped out of the truck and pulled me with him. I jumped down on wobbly legs, but then I forgot about my legs and the universe because WHAT IN THE WORLD WAS I LOOKING AT?

Where in God’s name were we?

It looked like we were in the middle of a forest, but not a normal forest.

As far as the eye could see, there were huge trees.

Like, the tallest, fullest trees I'd ever seen.

With the most vivid foliage I could ever imagine.

Ruby-red leaves, lilac-purple leaves, leaves the color of blood oranges. A grove of hot-pink pine trees was off to the right of the truck, but beyond that was a forest of ice-blue weeping willows that looked like they were dancing as the wind softly blew their branches.

A crystal clear turquoise stream ran between the two tree groupings, so clear that I could see each and every rock that lined the bottom, and I was nowhere close to the water.

And the ground—the ground was covered in something similar to grass, but softer and thicker, like a carpet.

A golden carpet, adorned with flowers of every style, shape, and color. Tall yellow sunflowers stood in groups, rose-colored flowers lay flat on the surface as if leisurely soaking up the sun, and lilies in every conceivable hue were scattered across the landscape.

As I looked out at the space in front of us, the rolling hills of gold were so beautiful that I wished I knew how to paint. Someone should paint what we were looking at. The sky beyond the hills was the softest shade of lavender.

But actually lavender, not the hints of purple that we sometimes saw in the morning if the light was right. This sky was all purple.

With no clouds.

That was it—that was why the sun seemed so bright. There were no clouds at all, and

the sunshine seemed to fill every space in the land.

“Where are we?” I asked breathlessly, unable to look away from everything . I could see mountains in the distance, lush hills of pastel and gold without a speck of snow. I reached down and plucked the tiniest blue rose from the grass, lifting it to my nose and inhaling an otherworldly blueberry smell.

“I don’t know,” Jackson said, watching me smell the flower.

I quickly shoved it into my jacket pocket.

I turned in the other direction and couldn’t see a single building. Of any sort. We were out in the middle of nowhere, an ugly food truck parked in the lush wilderness of this unexpected paradise.

“So where did he go?” I asked, looking around. My wonder slid into a panic, and I suddenly longed to see the grouchy burger man, because without him, we suddenly had no path back home.

“He’s here somewhere,” Jackson replied, turning in a full circle as he searched.

He said the word here ominously, as if we’d landed on another planet or something.

That sent a chill up my spine, because there was something threatening about this perfectly beautiful place, like it was too perfect for humans to inhabit it.

We don’t belong here , I thought. We shouldn’t be here.

There was no litter, no smells in the air except for the scent of flowers and trees, no signs that another person had ever been there.

“Look,” Jackson whispered, setting his hand on my arm as if to warn me to be quiet.

I turned my gaze to where he was staring, and I saw someone.

Only... this figure was way too big to be a human someone.

The figure was crossing the field, walking in the other direction. He was terrifyingly large—maybe ten feet tall—and wearing a long red robe with its hood pulled up. And not a bathrobe, but like a judge’s robe. He moved like royalty, like he was a king headed toward his coronation, and I knew we didn’t belong there.

“Scarlet red robes are never a good thing, right?” I whispered, fear skittering through every part of me.

Jackson grabbed my sleeve, yanking me with him toward a lemon-yellow bush that we crouched behind.

Out of nowhere, five other tall figures—in matching red robes—appeared in front of the first one.

There was nobody there, and then boom—six robed giants.

“It’s okay,” Jackson whispered, but when he grabbed my hand and squeezed it, I felt a shake. He was scared, too, as he should be , and that made me feel better while at the same time being more afraid.

What on earth is happening?

I watched, holding my breath, as all six of the robed figures lowered their hoods.

And then I squinted, because it looked like—

“Fae?” Jackson said in disbelief. “Em, look at their—”

“Ears, oh my God.” I covered my mouth and stared at the pointy ears, wondering if this was a dream. Four of the figures were men, handsomely huge and hulkingly large, all with pointy ears and long, flowing hair. The other two were women, both tall and thin with long red hair, beautiful and also in possession of pointy ears. “Ultimate Fae.”

“The Flords,” Jackson said, and my stomach dropped.

The Flords.

And as I crouched there, I remembered Archie’s weird explanation of the fish.

It’s a flawless land created to perfection, where the water is the color of turquoise, the mountains are covered in exotic flowers, and food is delicious and abundant, but fish simply don’t exist there.

The figure we’d first noticed seemed to be in conversation with the other five, gesturing wildly with his arms, like he was excited or angry. The others seemed to calmly listen, as if entirely unfazed by his erratic behavior.

As we watched, one of the female Flords smiled and slowly shook her head, as if refuting everything he was saying with a mere gesture. I could see she was speaking, and then the overexcited Flord yelled loud enough for us to hear.

“That’s it!” he said, his deep voice booming across the lush terrain. “Thank you!”

He leaned forward and kissed her, and apparently that was it, because he immediately turned and started walking in our direction.

We quickly moved, trying to press ourselves into the yellow bush so as not to be seen, but his amber eyes found us. I sucked in a breath, feeling pinned against the branches as the Flord's amber gaze burned into me.

He sees us , I thought, my legs feeling like they might give out underneath me.

“He sees us,” Jackson whispered.

It felt like slow motion as that... creature stalked in our direction, those piercing eyes never wavering from us as he came closer.

“Should we run?” I asked, knowing that running from that glowing gaze would do nothing. If the giant Flord wanted to reach us, I was certain he could.

But suddenly, his eyes stopped glowing.

His eyes stopped glowing, and as we watched, it appeared that he was shrinking. His pace didn't slow as he crossed the field toward us in his flowing robe, but his height was decreasing with every step. His robe wasn't, so it was like his form was getting swallowed by the billowing scarlet fabric.

Not only that, but the man's long dark hair was getting shorter. With every step, his flowing mane of black hair seemed to be retreating into his head until he was completely bald. In the matter of a moment, he'd gone from having waist-length hair to a shiny head that could belong to The Rock.

When he reached a clearing, he pulled off the cloak and let it fall to the ground, exposing a short, round body dressed in a tuxedo T-shirt and a stained apron with a huge H on its center, and there was a hamburger tattoo on his fleshy biceps.

Hamburger Man?

“Holy catfish,” I heard Jackson mutter as Hamburger Man strode toward us.

“No way,” I whispered.

“How are you here?” Hamburger Man yelled in that familiar grouchy voice. He gestured with his hand for us to follow him toward the front of the truck and said, “What’d you do—hide in the back?”

“We didn’t—”

“Shut up and get in,” he growled, rolling his eyes. “Before the council sees you and this becomes a big thing for all of us.”

“Um, I’m not sure—”

“It’s fine,” Nana Marie said, suddenly appearing from behind one of the spectacular trees. “This is only a dream, and I’m catching a ride, too.”

She was smiling, her always lipsticked mouth turned all the way up like she’d missed me, too. Her silver hair was pulled up in a bun, like always, and those reading glasses she’d said she didn’t need were perched right on the tip of her nose.

It was my nana.

“Nana Marie!” I screamed, running into her arms and wrapping myself around her in the biggest hug, not wanting to ever let go. I closed my eyes and breathed her in, hyperventilating on the mix of mints and dryer sheets that were her smell.

She patted my back, her tiny hands feeling exactly the same as she gave me those reassuring taps she’d given me since I was a little kid. I laughed a little because I was instantly giddy that I could feel her again.

“Nice to see you, too, Emmer,” she said, and everything inside me instantly relaxed because everything was going to be okay now that she was there.

“This is Nana Marie,” I said proudly to Jackson, not even embarrassed that there were happy tears in my eyes.

“Nice to meet you,” he said with a nod.

“Right back atcha, but no time for chatter,” she replied. “We’ve gotta get out of here.”

I let go of her and we followed Hamburger Man into the truck, and when I hazarded a glance toward the spot in the field where the five figures had been, there was nothing there.

It was a beautiful field of extraordinary colors, without a being to be found.

“Let’s get you two home,” Hamburger Man said to Jackson and me before looking at Nana and saying, “And then I’ll get you back.”

“Back where ?” I asked, but it was like no one heard me.

When Nana sat down beside Jackson, she smacked his arm and said, “A third little partner in crime—loving this.”

Jackson gave me an eyebrow raise and looked confused as she patted his knee, but I just grinned as I sat down, because I knew everything was going to be fine.

Hamburger Man fired up the truck, mumbling under his breath about stupid kids, then said, “Hold on to your pants, boys and girls.”

“Shhhh—I’m going to take a nap,” Nana Marie said, resting her head against my shoulder the same way she did when we used to watch TV together after school before mom got home from work. And in typical Nana fashion, she said, “Try and drive chill, Sal.”

Hamburger Man put the truck in drive and floored it, tearing through the field like it was his personal runway.

“It’s none of my business,” Jackson said to Hamburger Man, “but are you fae?”

I gasped in shock, because my friend was asking a ridiculous question, but I wanted to know, too. “Yeah, are you?”

I expected Hamburger Man to rage, but he said, “What’s it to you? That’s personal. You don’t hear me asking you if you’re fae, do ya?”

What a weird answer. He said it like Jackson had asked if he was a vegetarian, not whether he was a mystical faerie from another world or something.

“No,” Jackson answered, his eyes narrowed in confusion, like he was thinking the same thing I was. “So, I mean—”

“I suppose there’s no harm in telling you, since I’m doing an erase.” The engine went quiet and everything out the window turned into a blur. “Yes, I am a fae lord. Surprised?”

Was he serious? No one in the human world who’d met him would ever—and I mean ever—believe that Hamburger Man was a mystical being.

“ Yes ,” I answered, because it was impossible to believe that the squatty man who grilled meat patties for the masses was some sort of mystical creature.

Also, what the heck did I'm doing an erase mean?

"I mean, I wasn't born a fae lord. I was born Salvatore Bray, a kid who liked stickball and cheeseburgers. But I fell in love with Archiandece, who's half-fae and a descendant of Ultimate Fae, which is how I gained the lordship."

I don't know what I'd expected from his story, but it wasn't that. "How did you meet her?" I asked.

"She smelled the hamburgers and followed the scent," he said, and then he grinned. When he smiled, I could see a glimmer of his handsome Flord face. "She ordered five doubles, I told her she could never eat them all, then she challenged me to watch. It was love at first bite."

"So how did the Flord thing happen for you?" Jackson asked.

"Love," he replied, like it was simple. "It seemed impossible, as she was betrothed to another, but my Archiandece made it happen. She convinced the council to set her free of that wish, demanded she be allowed to marry me, and they found a way to magic the worst human parts out of me and replace them with faerie traits. Now we're both fifty-fifty fae and human, split our time between the human world and Hyorithipithidian, and we share a passion for food service."

This was fascinating, but we didn't have time for their bizarro love story.

"Okay, but back to the magic," I said. "We made a fish offering to try and fix the situation, but it didn't work. How can we fix it so Jackson can transfer the fourth wish to me?"

"Yeah, that was a disgusting mess," Hamburger Man said, shaking his head. "I nearly puked when I saw that shredded headless fish. What the heck did you do to that

thing?”

“It got stuck,” Jackson said, “so we used a stick to try and get it down the hole.”

“Like a crime scene,” Hamburger Man said in horror.

“So the Flords really do love fish?” Jackson asked, sounding like he still couldn’t believe it.

“Imagine if hamburgers didn’t exist—you couldn’t smell them or eat them ever—but on a random day, a couple Quarter Pounders showed up on a plate in front of you. It’s like that, multiplied by a thousand,” Hamburger Man said.

“But what about the wishes?” I asked, not wanting to talk about the Flords’ love of fish anymore. “Are they going to be fixed now?”

“They don’t need to be fixed,” he said definitively, shrugging and reaching out to turn on the radio. “Because he isn’t getting your wishes.”

“He’s not?” I asked, even though I knew that he was. It was the only explanation.

Hamburger Man looked at me with those unsettling eyes and said, “No, he’s getting his .”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:47 am

what in the epic adventure

“W HAT?” I LOOKED AT H AMBURGER M AN and realized he had no idea what he was doing, which totally destroyed my last shred of hope. I managed to sound calm when I said, “No, um, Jackson didn’t make any wishes.”

“Didn’t he?” Hamburger Man said, staring out the windshield in front of him.

“ Did you?” I asked Jackson, because there wasn’t a question in Hamburger Man’s tone.

And when his eyes met mine, I knew that he had.

I wasn’t sure how that could be, because he’d never said anything. “You made your own wishes?”

“Yeah, I mean, I—”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” My mind started whirring as it sifted through the memories of everything we’d done together in an attempt to undo the lore. “Why did you help me try and reverse the magic if you knew I was wrong?”

“I didn’t know—”

“How could you not know?” I said, angry. I felt like a fool, like the guy I’d considered a friend had been messing with me all along. “And did you seriously wish to be blond , by the way?”

I knew it was unfair to mock him about wishing for the exact same thing I'd wanted , but I was too upset to be fair.

"I definitely did not," he said, his eyebrows furrowed like I'd offended him with that question. "At first I thought I was a grantee, but then you made so much sense with your explanation that I doubted—"

"But why would you run around with me while I tried transferring this if you knew you weren't getting my wishes?"

"I didn't—"

"Sometimes things are sketchy with vague wishes," Hamburger Man interrupted.

"What does that mean?" Jackson asked, and his cheeks were red as he looked back and forth between me and Hamburger Man.

"It means I'm agreeing with you that you probably didn't know for sure you were a grantee."

"How would he not know, though?" I stared out the windshield at the blurry movement and said, "If he made a wish and got it, he'd know."

"Wait for it," Nana murmured, her eyes still closed, her head still on my shoulder. I felt her small hand patting my knee, and I knew she was trying to tell me to shut up and listen.

But I didn't want to.

This wasn't fair—I wanted to rage.

“Here are your wishes,” Hamburger Man said, flicking his fingers in front of his face.

An image appeared on the dashboard monitor, an image showing the pack I’d sent down the hole.

It showed my wishes, carefully written on Nana’s journal paper.

I wish for noninvisibility. I want boobs (nothing huge, just SOMETHING), blond hair (my mother refuses to let me dye it), and to grow past the shrimp-height I’ve been stuck at for two years (six inches would be perfect).

I wish to be appointed as one of the seventh-grade senatorial candidates.

I wish to no longer be awkward. I want to be able to say the RIGHT things in uncomfortable situations (without verbal diarrhea and oversharing), and not choke whenever people are watching me.

I wish for my mom to meet a good man and for them to fall madly in love.

“I thought they were private,” I snapped, embarrassed. It was mortifying to see them in print.

“Shhhh,” Nana said.

“I’m an equal opportunity sharer, so here are his,” he said, and Hamburger Man flicked his fingers again.

My wishes disappeared and another set popped up, these printed in Jackson’s all-caps handwriting. Instead of a packet, it looked like he’d scrawled them onto a tiny scrap of paper that was rubber-banded to one giant piece of pyrite.

The “rock” that’d hit my rock.

Wishes:

FIND A BEST FRIEND or FRIEND GROUP

GROW AND CHANGE APPEARANCE SO I’M LESS INVISIBLE

GO ON EPIC ADVENTURES

GET MY FIRST KISS OUT OF THE WAY WITHOUT EMBARRASSING MYSELF

I swallowed, and reread his wishes.

“Please make them disappear,” Jackson said, sounding as mortified as I’d felt.

“But see, Emma,” Hamburger Man said, “his hair and physique are the result of number two, and your shenanigans at the portal are the result of number three—and also probably number one. Vague wishes bring mysterious results.”

Hamburger Man flicked his fingers again and the wishes disappeared.

Suddenly it was quiet in the truck.

Jackson’s hand touched my arm, startling me. “Emma, I didn’t know—”

“That your funny ‘epic adventure’ consisted of me chasing something that was never going to happen? Yeah, no,” I said, gritting my teeth and trying not to get emotional. That’d be babyish and ridiculous. “You knew.”

“I wondered,” he said, “but I also thought you could’ve been right, so why not help you , just in case.”

I felt so stupid as he said that, because so many things made sense now. Of course he’d happily gone along with every bizarre thing I’d asked him to do. I’d thought he was so sweet for calling Auntie Bev and helping me, but it was just an entertaining adventure for him.

Epic, bro.

And I’d felt— man, I am so pathetic— lucky that Jackson wanted to be my friend. It’d felt special from the day he’d showed up at school wearing the ugly shirt, and it only got better when he went with me to see Archie, bought the fish, texted me memes when I was sad—I’d loved it all.

He’d become the best friend I never knew I wanted.

The perfect best friend.

But the reality was that Jackson wished for a best friend, and when I showed up, he grabbed me because he thought I was his wish. It wasn’t special; it wasn’t like he’d chosen me because he liked me.

He hadn’t even chosen me, really.

He’d taken me because he thought the universe had chosen me for him.

I don’t know why that mattered, but it did.

It mattered a lot.

Because while everything in my life seemed to be changing around me in ways I didn't like, the one change that felt good and right was Jackson.

But he probably didn't feel the same way at all, because he thought that we were supposed to be friends.

I sat there, staring out the window as the world blurred by, and I realized that I cared less about the fact that I was very definitely not a grantee than I did that Jackson wasn't really my friend at all.

"Can I go sit in the back?" I asked Hamburger Man, needing to disappear before I started bawling like a baby.

"What do you mean, sit in the back?" Jackson asked, his eyebrows scrunched together.

"She means that she doesn't want to sit up here anymore," Nana Marie said softly, like she didn't want to make him feel bad. "Climb over the seat and go, kiddo; I'll come with you."

"Yeah, give it a go, kid," Hamburger Man said, eyes on the windshield. "But better make sure you're holding onto something before we go back to human speeds, or you'll be a pinball back there."

"No," Jackson said, raising his voice. "That's terrible advice, Emma, and you don't need to be a pinball. If you stay here, I promise not to talk to you."

"How long do I have?" I asked, ignoring Jackson. "Before we hit human speeds?"

"About an hour," Hamburger Man said. "I was hauling butt on the way there because I was afraid I'd ruined the universe, but I can't go back at that speed, now that I know

I've got two babies on board."

"So you didn't ruin the universe?" Jackson asked, but he was still looking at me as he asked it.

"Not this time," Hamburger Man said. "Everyone got the right wishes."

"Even the fourth grantee?" Nana said, eyes still closed.

"Even the fourth," he murmured, and the two of them exchanged a look.

"Who is the fourth?" I asked.

"Can't tell," he said. "But if you're moving to the back, you better go now before it gets bumpy."

"Okay," I said, unbuckling my seat belt.

"Emma," Jackson said in a quiet voice. "Please."

Nana patted his knee before unbuckling and climbing over the seat with me.

ungrateful little turd

Y EAH—I CRIED when I got back there.

Kind of a lot , actually.

Part of it was because Nana Marie was there, with her arms wrapped around my shoulders and her fresh laundry smell wrapped around my nose, but in addition to that, everything felt wrong .

“Emmer,” Nana said, patting my shoulder and dropping a kiss on the top of my head like I was still little. We were huddled together on the floor in front of the stools. “Why with the tears?”

“I’m not a grantee,” I said, swallowing hard and wiping my cheeks, not wanting to be a baby when Jackson could come back here at any moment. “I failed you, Nana.”

“Oh, you did not,” she said, rolling her eyes and shaking her head. “Things happen the way they’re supposed to happen. The magic isn’t the be-all and end-all, kid.”

“But you always acted like it was.”

“Bah,” she said, pursing her lips. “What grandmother doesn’t want her babies to get a little magic? I wanted it for you , though, not for me.”

“Really?”

“Really,” she said, shrugging it off. “And I think your friend Jackson needs it more.”

“No, he doesn’t,” I said, sighing in disappointment.

Jackson wasn’t even my friend, not really. He only befriended me because he thought he was supposed to, and he’d kept the fact that he’d made his own wishes a secret the entire time.

So what I’d thought was something special was SO nothing.

“I think he was a sad, lonely boy before those wishes,” Nana Marie said, running her hand over the top of my head, stroking my hair like she always had. I remember falling asleep on her when she did that.

“Why do you think that?” I asked, letting my eyes close.

“It’s in the gaze,” she said definitively, as if there wasn’t a question. “A lot of blue in those blues.”

Was she right? I knew his parents’ situation made him sad, and I knew he’d said something about going back to being invisible.

Had he been a sad boy before?

“And you’re wrong about the wishes, by the way.”

“I know,” I said, assuming she meant the way I thought Jackson had stolen mine.

“Not that,” she said, shaking her head. “You’re wrong about the power of the wishes. You can wish for love or for a best friend, and the power of the wish might put a perfect person in front of you, but the magic can’t make that happen. Love doesn’t

work that way.”

“It doesn’t?”

“Of course not! I mean, that could be catastrophic, if someone could just wish for another person.”

I’d barely had time to think about that shocking revelation when Nana smacked my arm and said, “Hey—turn that on.”

She pointed to the radio dial over by the counter.

“I doubt it works... wherever we are.” I sighed again.

“Somewhere between Hyorithipithidian and Omaha,” she said. “But flip it on and see. Music would be nice.”

Nana Marie loved singing along to the radio. My entire childhood, her car had been like a karaoke party with her as the talent.

Man, she used to slay Taylor Swift.

I turned the power dial then gasped, because I could hear them.

I could hear Jackson talking to Hamburger Man.

“Why not?” Jackson asked.

“It doesn’t work that way, kid.”

It felt wrong, listening in when they didn’t know I could hear, but I also didn’t care. I

felt mad at both of them, and also, what could they possibly have to say to each other that would be remotely private? Was Hamburger Man going to tell a seventh grader his deepest, darkest secrets? Was Jackson going to confide in the grouchy, bald restaurateur who had a side gig as Lord of the Fairies?

No and no.

“You’re a Flord, and your father-in-law is, like, a super Flord, right?” Jackson said, sounding very serious.

“He’s considered Ultimate Fae, for the record,” Hamburger Man said. “And yes.”

“So your Flamily—”

“Don’t call it that.”

“My bad, your family is like royalty. You can’t use that power to grant this one tiny request?”

I narrowed my eyes and moved my ear closer to the speaker. What request? What was Jackson trying to do?

“It’s not a tiny request,” Hamburger Man said. “And it’s impossible. What’s done is done.”

“But I still have one wish coming, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So why not let me transfer it?”

“Wishes are nontransferable and do not have separate accounting. It’s four wishes as a chunk, period; you get them all or you get none. That’s law. Even the power of the entire council couldn’t change that.”

“What about you and Archie?” Jackson asked.

“That was different because she was fae,” he said.

“Well,” Jackson said, and I could tell by the way he paused that he was thinking. Formulating. I could picture the expression on his face, because it was the one he got when he was working on science homework or trying to figure out how to convince the butcher to chop up the catfish. “What if I give them all back?”

“Jackson for the win,” Nana muttered.

What? What was he saying? What did that mean? Was Jackson asking if he could give back his pecs and his height and his hair... and me ?

I took a deep breath and waited for the answer.

“I told you. It doesn’t work like that.”

“But it’s a bargain for the Flords, right? I’m returning four wishes and only asking you to grant one. So that’s a three-wish credit.”

“First of all,” Hamburger Man said, “why are you acting like wishes are money here? There’s not some wish bank account that’s gonna get fat by your return, bro.”

“I just thought—”

“And second of all,” Hamburger Man interrupted, “you’re seriously saying you want

to give back all your wishes so she can have her number four?”

“I don’t know why it would be a big deal.”

“Because that’s not how things work. You’re stuck with the terrible burden of having your wishes come true, you ungrateful little turd. Now hold on to your pants.”

Suddenly, the truck jerked and we were back to human speeds. I wrapped my arms around the base of the stool, holding on tight like I was on a roller coaster without a seat belt. The truck barreled along, careening and bumping as if it might break into a million pieces, and I missed Jackson beside me.

Everything always felt like it was going to be okay when he was there.

Kind of like the way I felt with Nana Marie.

I looked to my right and she wasn’t even holding on. She was casually leaning back like this was no big deal, seemingly unaffected by the wild ride as she threw me a wink and said, “No worries, sunshine.”

She might have been unfazed, but I was not . My mind cleared of everything but survival, and I prayed for the brakes to work. When we finally screeched to a stop, I let out a huge sigh of relief.

Nana held out a hand and I climbed to my feet on shaky legs.

“This is where you get off, kiddo,” Nana said, pointing toward the door. “So hug me like you mean it.”

I fell into her hug, more content than I’d felt in a long time as she scratched my back with one hand and patted it with the other. When we finally pulled apart, she gave me

a grin. “I’ve gotta get up by Sal before he messes up my drop-off. See you later.”

“See you later,” I said, and as she climbed up to the front, I very nearly skipped to the back door, feeling light as a feather.

I pushed open the door.

At the same time Jackson was pulling it open.

Which sent me falling.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:47 am

a kiss, for pickle's sake

“W HOA .” J ACKSON CAUGHT ME —literally—when I fell, his arms wrapping around me in an accidental hug as my feet touched the ground. “You okay?”

I looked up at his face and nodded, my heart racing as I tried to get a grip on the billions of thoughts that were bouncing around in my head. But all I could see was bright blue eyes moving over my face to make sure that I was fine.

That I was safe.

Eyes that belonged to the boy who was willing to give up all four of his wishes so I could have just one.

Wasn't I mad at him for something? I was pretty sure I was, but I couldn't remember now. Not when he smelled like that—a hint of soap and Jackson—and watched me like he was waiting to see what came next.

“You were going to give it all back,” I said, blinking fast.

Neither of us was moving away from the other. “For me. Why?”

His throat moved around a swallow, like he was nervous or considering denying it, but then he said, “Because I wanted my best friend to get hers.”

His words filled me with warm happiness, the emotional equivalent of being served hot, gooey cinnamon rolls on a cold winter morning. It was impossible for me to not

smile as I looked up at him, at the one person who always got me.

My very best friend in the whole world.

And as he grinned back at me, I wanted to give him something. I wanted my best friend to get his wish.

It felt like my heart was going to beat out of my chest as I looked up into those eyes and forced myself to say it, even though it felt absolutely terrifying to be so bold.

“Have you ever wished that you could get your first kiss out of the way without embarrassing yourself?” I asked quietly, my voice coming out tight and a little bit hoarse. He was looking at me like he wanted to read my mind, his eyes everywhere on my face.

I’d never been this bravely audacious in my entire life.

I’d always imagined the guy would take the lead, sweeping me into his arms and teaching me how amazing kissing could be.

Well, actually, I rotated between that imagining and the very real possibility that I would do something terribly embarrassing, like accidentally bite his tongue or make a weird sound with my lips.

I was so nervous that it felt like my entire body was trembling as I looked at Jackson, but I wasn’t going to back down.

Not tonight, not with this.

He swallowed again, his Adam’s apple bobbing, and I swear his eyes were bluer than normal as they met mine and he said, “I have wished that.”

“I mean, it kind of makes sense,” I said, my voice almost a whisper, it was so quiet. “For two best friends to knock out their first terrible one together, right?”

I heard him take a breath, like he was shocked or nervous, and his voice was a little gravelly when he said, “That makes more sense than anything I’ve ever heard in my entire life.”

“So...?” I said, moving my nervous hands up onto his shoulders.

“So let’s do this, Rockford.” Jackson’s voice set a thousand butterflies loose in my stomach. His eyes were all I could see. Long lashes, dark brows, so much blue. My heart was beating out of my chest when he brought his hands up to my cheeks, because the soft touch of his fingers on my skin as he held me in place felt more intimate than a hug.

And when he lowered his face toward mine— man, he’s so tall —I wondered if anyone in the world had ever felt this way before.

Too warm, too cold, too scared, too bold, too happy, too everything.

I felt everything at once and it was exhilarating.

For half a second I wanted to stop, afraid of messing up, but then I heard his shaky inhale, and the space between us disappeared into nothing. My eyes slid closed, and electricity buzzed through me.

Jackson Matthews was going to kiss me.

The sounds of the world went fuzzy, like I was a mile underwater, and all I could hear was my heart pounding in my ears and the slow sound of his breathing as Jackson angled his head and his mouth landed on mine.

His lips were surprisingly soft as he kissed me like it was something he'd been dying to do. His fingers tensed on my face, like he was being zapped with the same electrical current that was running through me, but then I couldn't think about the individual sensations at all anymore because his tongue touched mine and I was fully electrocuted.

Please don't let me mess this up.

I don't know what I'd expected, but it wasn't for the kiss to feel so right, like we knew what we were doing. Please let it feel that way for Jackson. Because we were kissing like it was the final scene of a rom-com. Jackson's mouth seemed to know exactly what it was supposed to do, and my mouth only wanted to follow and do exactly what his lips were doing.

"For pickle's sake, kids," I heard, "knock it off!"

Jackson and I jumped apart.

Hamburger Man was standing beside us with his hands on his hips, shaking his head.

But he was smiling, like we were ridiculous.

"I—I, um," I stammered, embarrassed. I looked over his bald head and realized—what? —we were home. He'd dropped us on the street in front of our houses, but we hadn't even noticed.

"She fell out of the truck," Jackson said calmly, and if it weren't for the pink on his cheeks, I would've thought he was totally chill. "And I caught her."

"With your lips," Hamburger Man said. "Right."

Jackson looked at me then, but instead of things being awkward, his mouth slid into a huge grin. “Right.”

I laughed—I couldn’t help it as I said, “Right.”

Hamburger Man mumbled something indecipherable about irritants , then hopped into the truck and drove away.

We were left standing in the middle of the quiet road, looking at each other with stupid grins. Jackson said, “Did that really just happen?”

“What, the kiss?” I asked, hoping he didn’t regret it.

“Well, the kiss for sure, but I mean everything ,” he clarified, still smiling, which was a relief. “Did that really all happen?”

“I think so...?” I shrugged and said, “You know we can never tell anyone without sounding nuts, right?”

“Oh, absolutely,” he said, nodding. “Who’d believe us?”

“No one.”

“That’s right, no one.” He reached out a hand and tugged on my hair. “I’m sorry about your wishes, but I’m glad you didn’t get number one, by the way.”

“You are? ” My cheeks were instantly hot, and I wanted to die that he even remembered that wish—chest, hair, height—much less had an opinion on it.

A look of panic crossed his face, now as red as mine surely was, as he said, “I mean the part about your hair.”

“Oh,” I said, smiling in spite of my mortification. “My hair?”

He nodded. “I like the color of your hair.”

“You do?”

He nodded again. Swallowed. Said, “I should probably get home now.”

I nodded. Tucked my hair behind my ears, which were also hot now, and said, “Yeah, me, too. Thanks for the whole, um, wish fiasco thing.”

“It was the best day I’ve ever had,” he said, absolutely without a bit of teasing.

That cinnamon roll feeling was back as I admitted, “Yeah. Same.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:47 am

wildly vivid dreams

“WAKE UP, DEAR!”

I gasped and opened my eyes.

Auntie Bev was smiling at me from the front seat like I was an amusing little kid, and I could see my house through the windshield in front of her. “Those must’ve been some burgers. You were both sleeping like the dead.”

Wait. The entire thing had been a dream?

I felt a little unsteady, a little out of it. So none of it had happened?

No Flord visit?

No Nana Marie?

No kissing?

I looked at Jackson, sitting beside Auntie Bev, and he was watching me with a strange expression on his face.

He was watching me like he knew what I’d been dreaming.

Oh my God, did I say his name or make kissing faces in my sleep?

“Th-thanks for the ride,” I managed, reaching for the door handle. “Bye.”

I got out and went into the house, and I was relieved to hear that my mom and Noah were in the kitchen. I was too tired to deal with talking. I half expected my mom to hear me and yell, Is that you, Em? , but Noah was saying something, so she must not have heard the door.

I went straight to my room, quietly shut the door, and fell onto my bed. I toed off my shoes but didn’t even bother with changing; I just pulled the comforter over me and my clothes, my eyes immediately closing.

Our house was small, so I could hear Noah and my mom as they watched TV. It was quiet and diluted, muted white noise that lulled me toward sleep with only random words and the occasional laugh breaking through the haze.

“Thanks again for running that silly little errand for me last year, and for keeping it a secret,” I heard my mom say as I rolled over and snuggled into my pillow.

“Thanks for getting me out of school so I could do it,” Noah said, and I could hear the grin in his voice. “I’ll be your messenger boy anytime I get to ditch class and go to the park.”

I opened my eyes.

“Never again,” I heard her say, and I could tell she was smiling, too. She said something else that made Noah do his low-pitched chuckle, but I couldn’t hear what it was because the laugh track on the TV went loud for a second.

But then I heard her say, “That was a once-in-a-lifetime secret field trip, you little brat.”

Field trip? I flopped onto my back and stared up at the ceiling as I listened. Surely this was something else and I was taking it out of context, but it kind of sounded like—

“Don’t you mean a once-in-a-four-hundred-forty-four-years secret field trip?” Noah teased with a laugh in his voice, making me sit straight up in my bed.

Field trip.

Park.

Messenger boy.

Four hundred forty-four years.

“Shut up and watch the show, kid,” my mom said, and then I heard the kitchen sink turn on. I listened hard, but the only conversation I heard after that was between Phil and Claire Dunphy on *Modern Family* .

There was no way for me to know for sure what they were talking about, but I had a strong suspicion I knew.

The packet Noah tossed into the portal had belonged to my mom, not him.

Suddenly, I found myself grinning in the dark, feeling like maybe my most important wish would be coming true after all.

When my alarm went off the next morning, I sat up in my bed and glanced at the clock: 7:00 AM . I always meant to get up at six so I’d have time to attempt makeup or straighten my hair, but every single day, my body refused to live until it hit the seven o’clock hour.

I thought about yesterday while I showered. I was disappointed by the fact that Archie had retired and Hamburger Man was no help, because now we'd never know if there was another way to reverse the wishes, but I was handling it okay.

It could be the fact that I'd had that dream.

I'd never had a dream feel so real. I could remember every detail, right down to the color of the flowers in Hyorithipithidian, the smell of Nana's sweater as she'd hugged me, the feel of Jackson's lips on mine.

Gahhhhh—that kiss!

It'd only been a dream, but it'd been a dreamy kiss.

It made me excited to see Jackson at school because now I knew, without a doubt, that I had more-than-friends feelings for him. Was it weird that a dream had been the thing to show me how I really felt?

Yes.

Was I glad that it had?

Also yes.

I just wished I knew how he felt about me .

I probably wouldn't ever tell anyone—about the dream or my feelings—because Jackson was too important to me. He was my very best friend, so I couldn't risk freaking him out by telling him I'd kissed the crap out of him in a dream and now I like -liked him.

So I'd simply be his very best friend.

Somehow, in the morning light, that seemed like a pretty good thing.

And the good night's sleep—or maybe the closure—brought with it a new outlook on my life and my friends. Kennedy and Allie had new people and new activities; that was a fact.

But they hadn't really done anything to me. They'd included me like always—the mall trip, our daily lunches—and couldn't really help it if their new friends didn't know their old friend, right? I was going to try harder to find my place in all of that, and hopefully they would, too.

And if there wasn't a place for me there, I'd be sad but it'd be okay, because I also had new people.

Jackson Matthews was my friend.

My best friend.

He'd become my favorite person to hang out with, and why should it matter if people didn't get it because he was a guy? His friendship was worth the side-eye and nonbelievers.

I didn't see him until science, but when our eyes met as I entered the classroom and walked toward our lab table, that dream was all over my brain.

“Hey,” I said, grinning at him and sitting down on my stool.

“Hey,” he said, grinning back.

What is this? It felt like the smile that two people would share the morning after their first kiss. His blue eyes were searching my face, my cheeks were warm, and I had the ridiculous urge to reminisce about things that hadn't really happened.

I definitely felt more for him than I had the last time we sat in that classroom.

A lot more.

Mr. Shields started talking, thank goodness, because I wasn't sure I knew how to look at Jackson without showing him the 3,962 new feelings I was having toward him.

"Let's go over the assignment together, because a lot of you were way off in your answers." He launched into the first problem, and I spaced out. My brain was stuck on that dream and kept replaying parts of it, over and over.

It had been so vivid , so seemingly real, that I couldn't let it go. Fae lords in red robes, racing hamburger trucks, Nana Marie, holograms of wish lists—I got completely lost in my own head.

So I was absolutely unprepared to hear:

"Miss Rockford? Hello?"

I looked up and was immediately mortified to see Mr. Shields staring directly at me while everyone in the room looked my way.

"Um, can you, uh, repeat that?"

I heard a few snickers and felt my cheeks go red. "Mr. Matthews doesn't have number four, apparently, so I was hoping that perhaps you might. Do you have Jackson's number four?"

Jackson's number four is to get his first kiss out of the way without embarrassing himself. That thought raced through my mind and my eyes darted over to my lab partner.

Who was staring at me with wide eyes, almost as if remembering the very same thing.

But he couldn't be, right?

No way could he know what I'd dreamed.

That was ridiculous.

"I'm sorry, but I don't have number four, either."

"Mr. Shields?" The office was calling via the overhead speaker. "Can you please send Jackson Matthews to the office?"

He swallowed and watched me for another minute before mouthing the words dentist appointment .

"Saved by the proverbial bell, Mr. Matthews," Mr. Shields said sarcastically, and I didn't look at Jackson as he grabbed his stuff and left.

Saved by the proverbial bell, indeed.

impossible

I WENT TO KENNEDY'S AFTER SCHOOL and drank too much soda while she played Battle of Borgledoush . It was comforting, the old routine of basically doing nothing while she gamed, and I was glad she'd let me come over.

Because for starters, I needed to clear my head of that dream. My brain was obsessed and kept replaying it, over and over and over again. And it was so vivid, had seemed so real, that I could barely keep track of what'd actually happened yesterday and what I'd dreamed had happened.

But the bigger reason was that I needed to clear the air. I'd texted an apology about the whole Jackson thing from the other night, and they'd said it was fine, but I still felt weird about my relationship with her and Allie.

"So, how's everything going?" I asked awkwardly. "I feel like I've been a little weird lately, and I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize," Kennedy said, shrugging. "You really wanted something and didn't get it—I'd be the same way."

"Really?" I said, and my heart pinched a little in my chest. It was nice that she understood when I'd assumed she couldn't. "You would?"

"Sure," she said, nodding. "Although you didn't have to sneak around with Jackson when you could've just told us what you were doing. That was weird."

“Yeah, I mean...,” I started, clueless about how to explain it. Even though it was over and I wanted to tell her about everything, including the dream and the kiss and whatever was going on in my head about Jackson, it still felt too... fragile to share.

Especially when we weren’t quite back to the old us yet.

“You don’t have to explain it,” she said, pounding on the controller. “You apologized, so we’re good, but it didn’t have to happen. You could’ve told us you wanted to do something with someone else.”

“Yeah,” I said, “but we had plans, and it was one of our traditional movie nights.”

She looked away from the game and shook her head at me. “Sometimes things change. We can either get mad about it or roll with it.”

I coughed out a laugh and said, “I usually get mad about it.”

“I know,” she said, grinning. “And it’s fair—like, everything has been changing. But as long as we tell each other the truth, things don’t have to get ugly.”

I wondered if she realized that we were kind of admitting our friendship might never go back to what it used to be. New friends, new activities—our lives were already different than they’d been the day of the field trip.

I hated that, but it also felt like it’d be okay, because we were talking about it.

Her phone chirped, and then she let out a whoop when she read the message.

“Dude, my mom texted that the Carson’s food truck is on our street,” Kennedy said as she shut down her game. Her mom worked until six every day, so anytime there was a food truck on our block, she texted Kennedy for an easy dinner.

“Texting my mother as we speak,” I said, sending a message to see if it was okay for me to get food with Kennedy. Carson’s is here. Can I get food with Ken? I’ll bring you some.

She responded immediately. Yes, and I already ate, so just get me a chocolate malt.

“Let’s go,” I said, and Kennedy and I ditched her house and basically sprinted to the truck because we hated when we had to wait. We texted Allie when we got there, and she ran outside to join us.

“I need fries,” she said, looking up at the menu board.

But right when we were about to order, Jackson and Jared ran up and got in line behind us.

The sight of him made my stomach go wild with butterflies. I was shocked he was there, even though he lived on our street, so it made sense that he’d partake.

I gave him a smile, feeling breathless, and when his eyes met mine, it felt like something was there , hanging between us.

“What’s it gonna be?” asked the guy behind the window.

“This feels familiar,” Jackson said, his eyes a tiny bit squinty as he smiled at me.

“It does ,” I agreed, grinning back. “Only this guy looks nicer.”

“Ma’am?” the guy said.

“Oh,” I squeaked, turning back. “Yes. Um, can I please have the Carson burger and fries? And a chocolate malt?”

I looked down into my purse, but didn't see the ten-dollar bill that'd been there yesterday. So I started digging.

"You want ketchup?" the guy behind the window asked.

"Sure," I said offhandedly, rifling through my bag for the cash I couldn't find.

Where the heck is my money?

"So you want everything on it," the guy assumed.

"No pickles, she's allergic," I heard Jackson say from behind me.

I turned around, and Jackson gave me a grin that made my stomach feel light. His eyes were all squinty as he teased, "Even though no one's allergic to pickles."

I grinned back at him, then immediately looked down at my purse, because I was terrified every feeling I was having for him was being broadcast across my face. Since I had no idea how he felt, no way was I putting that out there.

"That'll be eight dollars and fifteen cents. Come on, there's a line, kid," the guy said.

Where had my money gone? I searched through my wallet and the outside pouch of my purse again while the dude sighed, and then I sighed, as well, because I didn't know where it could be, and there was a growing line behind me.

I reached my hand into my jacket pocket and pulled out a tissue and a straw wrapper. Dang it. I dug in the other pocket, but instead of finding cash, I only pulled out more trash.

A Haverman's receipt, a paper clip, and a little blue thing.

A flower, maybe?

My vision narrowed to a pinpoint, and the sounds of the world became fuzzy as I stared at that flower in my hand.

A tiny. Blue. Rose.

I looked down at my palm, at the perfectly miniscule flower resting on top of it, and I felt like my breath was frozen in my lungs.

I remembered picking that flower from the golden field.

In. My. Dream.

It smells like blueberries.

“Do you need to borrow some money?” Jackson said from behind me. “Emma?”

I slowly turned around, goose bumps covering every inch of my skin. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the small, perfect rose that didn’t exist in our world. It was like looking at a ghost, like an item from a past life, and I heard Jackson gasp.

He was staring at the flower like he couldn’t believe it.

Like he was seeing a ghost, too.

Like he recognized that flower.

But he couldn’t, right?

“Here,” Kennedy said, waving a ten-dollar bill in front of me. “Pay so the line will move.”

My eyes were locked on Jackson's, and I was frozen.

"O-kay," I heard Kennedy say to the guy behind the window. "This is for her."

I still didn't look away from Jackson as she paid, and he didn't look away from me, either. It was like we were having a detailed conversation without saying any words.

"What is your deal?" Kennedy said, and when I glanced at her, she was giving me big eyes like I'd officially lost it. "Why are you holding up that little flower like it's going to bite you?"

"Have you seen this before?" I said, my eyes returning to Jackson.

He swallowed hard, and his eyebrows scrunched together. "It looks a lot like a flower I saw in a dream once."

"Yeah?" I said in a near-whisper.

"Yeah." His eyes were the bluest they'd ever been as he watched me.

"So..." I felt lightheaded, because it almost seemed like we'd had the same dream.

But was it only a dream if the flower existed?

"So on the count of three," he said, his eyes staring intently into mine, "to test this, let's each describe the robes."

It would've made sense to say something like What robes? , but that was pointless. I just nodded as he started counting, wondering if I was going to faint.

Because I knew.

It was impossible, but I knew without a doubt.

“One,” he said, and I thought about Hamburger Man throwing burgers at the crowd.

“What’s this about?” Kennedy asked, turning her confused stare to Jackson.

But his blue eyes were on mine.

“Two,” he said, and I remembered following him into the back of the food truck right before it took off from the red light.

“What is this—a staring contest?” Allie teased, making Kennedy snort.

My eyes stayed on Jackson as he swallowed nervously.

He watched me like he knew what I was about to say.

And I was remembering a perfect first kiss when he barked out, “Three.”

“Scarlet red robes are never a good thing.”

“Scarlet red robes are never a good thing.”

The world seemed to go silent as we stared at each other in disbelief.

“No,” Kennedy said, stepping between us.

“No?” Jackson repeated, still looking at me with a million questions in his eyes.

“No inside jokes,” she said, smacking him on the back and forcing us to pay attention to her. “If you’re Em’s friend, you’re my friend, too, which means you should tell me everything.”

“Same for me,” Allie said, coming around to stand beside Kennedy.

“Oh,” Jackson said, a wrinkle appearing on his forehead as he shifted his gaze to stare at my friends while probably having the same mental freak-out I was having.

Were they seriously inviting him to join the AT3?

“You might not have asked for three friends,” Kennedy said with a smile, “but we’re kind of a package deal. So you can fill us in on whatever has you two looking like partners in crime—scarlet red robes, what the heck —while we scarf burgers in Em’s front yard.”

I opened my mouth but had no idea what to tell them. How on earth could I possibly explain away the scarlet red robes or the blue flower to my friends when I didn’t understand it myself?

Maybe it was time to tell them the truth—about everything .

I knew they’d understand... well, probably eventually , because they were my friends.

They knew me better than anyone else, and they’d understand why I had done it all.

Oh my gosh—they would!

As Kennedy grinned at Jackson, and Allie smiled, I was happy to know that if I ever wanted to tell them, I could.

But on the off chance there really was something to the whole don’t-talk-about-the-magic thing, I’d keep it to myself for now.

So, what to say?

But before I could spin into a full-blown awkward panic about how to explain everything, and before I could fall into an anxiety attack over the fact that Jackson and I had maybe actually kissed the day before and I could be head over heels in crush with him, he reached out a hand and gave my shoulder a playful push.

“Well, Rockie?” he said quietly, shaking his head as his mouth slid into a tiny little smirk. “You okay with me joining your friend group?”

His blue eyes danced as he waited for my answer, and it felt like we were sharing a hundred secrets as we watched each other.

“I guess so,” I replied, giving his shoulder a push back. “But please don’t give me terrible nicknames.”

“Rockie’s cute, though,” he said, and when he grinned at me, it was impossible not to smile back at my best friend(s) with my whole entire face.

the end