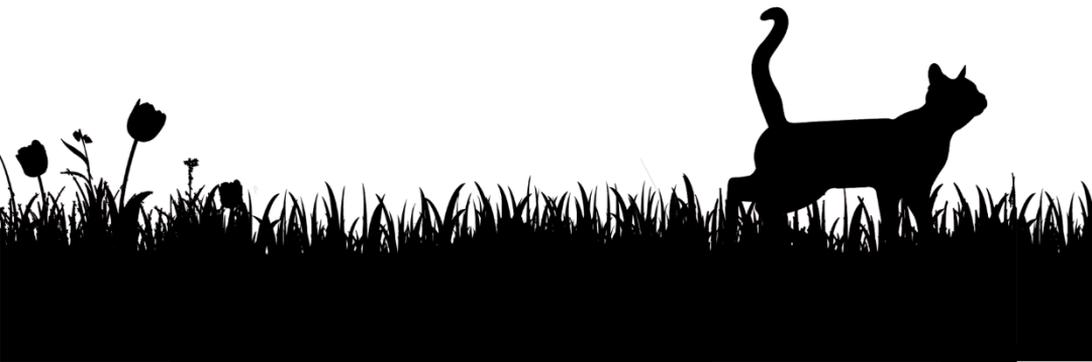


# I Wish for You

(A HAPPILY EVER AFTER ROMANTIC COMEDY)

CAMILLA ISLEY



# One

## The Day After

*I rush back into the building and hide pressing my back against the wall and out of sight of the revolving glass doors. As I flatten my palms against the cool marble, I can't help the heavy breaths that make my chest bob up and down. Did they see me? She did. I'm sure I caught a flash of evil blue eyes looking my way before I retreated into my office's building. Before she kissed him. James. My James.*

I abruptly wake up thanks to the racking sound of my alarm clock piercing deeply into my skull. I come to a sitting position and silence the damn thing, slamming my right hand on the off button.

Was it a dream? *No, it was real.* As my comatose brain regains consciousness, I experience a stream of increasingly awful emotions. It starts with a choking pain, immediately followed by fear, anguish, and a strong wave of nausea. Ouch, heartbreak sucks!

I lie back on the pillows, trying to abate my squeamishness. Sugar, my black and white rescue cat, decides this is a good moment to jump on my belly and meow for his breakfast.

“Not now, baby,” I say, pushing him aside. “I need five minutes before I get up.”

No. No. No. I don't want to get up and go to the office, not today, *please*, not after what happened. I'm not ready to face Vanessa. Not while I look awful, and I'm being optimistic.

After spending the whole night crying, my eyes will be horrendously puffy-red and my skin ghastly, in-between a putrid mustard and greenish coloring. There will be no mistaking my utter state of distraught. Damn! I can already picture the evil grin of triumph on her face. Of course, she's going to mask it as one of her best I-want-world-peace beauty pageant smiling faces, pretending nothing's wrong.

I hate it when someone is vicious, and I'm the only one who can see it because they pretend to be the kindest and most caring person in the world. Well, she's the kind of two-faced poser who manages to make people feel in the wrong even when it's *her* delivering a sucker punch to their stomachs. She does it with such grace and poise that no one ever dares argue or be angry.

She must know exactly how badly this hurts for me. *Yep*, now many of the little nasty remarks she's been making in the past months about the guy she was dating begin to make sense. She seemed to take my unconcerned responses as a personal affront. Maybe she thought I knew! Well, from my reaction yesterday it must have been pretty clear I didn't. Wait a second, how long has she been doing it? When did she start? Did she say dating? Did she use the word boyfriend?

Oi.

Picturing James and Vanessa in a committed relationship, makes my heart skip a beat. I gasp for air. Wow, this hurts... this physically hurts! There's this huge ball of pain in my chest that expands all the way down to my stomach. I can hardly breathe and I'm dizzy. Lying back on the pillows is not helping. My heart is beating so fast I can't suck in air, and I feel trapped. Yeah, trapped in my horrible, disastrous life.

I need to calm down. I'm just having a panic attack! Aha! Mark the roots of a problem and then find the solution. What did Dr. Oz say? Ah yes, I simply need to take deep, profound breaths: air in, air out, in... and out...

Gradually, my respiration returns to normal and I'm able to inhale and exhale properly. What should I do next? Clearly, I can't go to work in this state. The mere thought makes me sick. Well, sicker than I already am! Wait, sick... I am ill! This is my way out. I'm going to pull a sickie. Genius!

I haven't taken one illness leave in the five years that I've been with my company. Surely no one is going to suspect me, and it's not going to affect my career too badly. I mean, it's just one day. Yes! I just need the one day to calm down, regroup, and think of a strategy

for what to do next. Of course, she will guess why I'm not there today. Oh, screw her! She can think whatever she likes.

Where is my cell phone? I need to put on my glasses because without them I am basically blind. Usually, I do that on autopilot before even opening my eyes. So I can pretend I can actually see, but I guess today my routine went out the window. I grope the nightstand, grab the glasses, and put them on.

Ah, this is better. I scan the bedside table for any trace of my cell but it's not there. Instead, nicely perched next to my table lamp, there is an innocent-looking Sugar. I follow his not-so-innocent gaze to the floor and finally spot my mobile lying discarded on the carpet. I grab it before I change my mind and dial the office's number, all the while shaking my head at my vindictive cat.

"Good morning, you've reached Crispy Koob Corporation." Instead of hearing Michelle's voice, the company's receptionist, I am redirected to voicemail. "Our offices are open Monday through Friday, from 7 a.m. to—" I end the call.

This is weird. The answering machine is never on during the week; they only turn it on for weekends and holidays. Hold on a second. What day is it today? I look at my phone's screen and there it is, the sweetest writing ever:

### **Saturday, May 16**

Yes! Yes! This means I have not one, but two full days before I'll be forced to face the world. This is so much better. I'll have time to recover, think a little, and craft a plan.

Duh, why am I always this dumb? What made me think it was a weekday? As my self-questioning goes on, I spot the culprit standing right there on my night table—the abominable alarm clock. Why the hell did it wake me on a Saturday? I never—and I swear never—turn on my alarm clock on weekends. I mean, sleeping in is the best part of the weekend, so why...

Bizzzzzt.

The doorbell rings, interrupting my train of thought. Who's at my door this early on a Saturday morning? Surely it's not going to be

any of my friends; they all went away on a couples' weekend. I was supposed to go, but I wasn't really in the mood for being the only single person in a romantic cabin lost in the woods amidst three perfect examples of fairytale-like happily ever after. Of course, in that moment, *that* seemed the worst possible scenario for me. I certainly didn't foreshadow what heinous threats would await me in the city.

Why didn't I go? Anything would have been better. *Anything*. Now I wouldn't be in so much pain; I would still be in oblivious bliss. Well, ok... I still wouldn't exactly be in very high spirits, but at least I would not find myself in desperate, hopeless awareness! What do they say? What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over, right?

Anyhow, back to present. Who can it possibly be? No one ever visits me unexpectedly. I don't have intruding neighbors. The landlord never shows up, unless of course, you're late with the rent (even if it's merely by one day and definitely a genuine mistake on your part, as you forgot there are only twenty-eight days in February). And the handyman is a fugitive in hiding, unfindable for the life of you... so, who's left? Awk, I gasp. Could it be...? My stomach does a double flip. No, I won't even allow myself to go there. Those things only happen in movies, not real life...

Bizzzzzt. Bizzzzzt. Bizzzzzzzzzzzzt.

The buzzer goes off again in such an annoying way that any hope that might've been rising in my heart is promptly dissipated as only one person in the world could think that buzzing people this way is funny. My mom.

Now it all comes back to mind. Why my alarm clock was on, and another reason why I said no to the weekend gateway. I promised my mom to accompany her to the flea market. The flea market? Really? Am I in this state of misery for a stupid flea market?

I ponder telling her that I'm not well and that I don't want to go. But if I do, she will come up anyway to check on me and she will plant herself in my apartment for the rest of the day. I should just go,

be done with it in a couple of hours, and have the rest of the weekend for myself.

I get up, crawl all the way to my tiny entry hall, and push the intercom button.

“Hi Mom, did you find any parking?”

“Hello, dear. Yes, I got lucky. I’ve found one of those two-hour off-street parking.”

I live near Lincoln Park in the north side of Chicago, finding an available car spot on the street is a rare stroke of luck.

“Great. I’ll be down in just a sec.”

“Do you want me to come up?”

“Actually, I didn’t have time to make coffee, so would you mind going to the Starbucks across the street and getting it for the both of us? I’ll meet you there.”

“Ahhh, always trying to get any second of sleep you can, huh? Alright, don’t keep me waiting too long.”

“No, Mom, I just need five minutes. I promise.”

Since I’m nowhere near ready, the second I release the buzzer button I rush back into my room to dress at top speed. My mom was right in saying I always try to sleep until the last minute; I’m definitely not a morning person. On the bright side, after years of waking up late, I’ve acquired the useful skill of being able to get ready as fast as the flutter of a butterfly’s wings. Anyway, the coffee shop across the street is always super busy on Saturdays, so it will take her at least fifteen minutes to order, pay, and for the coffees to be ready, which is plenty of time for me.

I select my favorite pair of stretch jeans, a classic plain white t-shirt, and an old pair of Converse. This is one of my all-time favorite casual looks; it makes me always look good and never goes out of style. I don’t have time for a full shower, so I quickly wash my face and other body parts, brush my teeth, and arrange my brown hair in a bubble bun. A small, ridiculously poor-looking bun, as my hair is so thin that not even folding my ponytail over twice accomplishes much of a volume. I don’t have the time to do a sock bun, which usually helps a little.

Of course, Vanessa has great hair! Long, silky, *and* voluminous. Bitch! Oh, forget her! I'll deal with her later. Mmm, deodorant, a bit of perfume, clothes, shoes... et voilà, I'm ready to go.

"Meeeoowww." Oops, just one more thing to do. I select one of Sugar's premium feline meals and serve it to the prince of the house who shows his appreciation by purring loudly.

Before exiting, I grab my maxi bag and the biggest pair of sunglasses I own to try to conceal my puffy eyes. I don't hope to maintain the secret from my mom for very long because she's going to notice. Somehow, she always does. I just want to postpone the interrogation for after coffee.

As I shut my building's heavy glass door behind me, I spot my mom coming out of the coffee shop holding two big cups in her hands and looking around for me. Despite the situation, a big smile spreads across my lips and a surge of affection rises in my chest. I love my mom. I wave and run toward her. We hug tight, and I gladly take my cappuccino.

"Darling, what's wrong? Have you been crying? Something happened?" she immediately fires worried questions at me.

Ouch, I should've known I didn't stand a chance, not even for five minutes.

"No, Mom, I'm ok. Don't worry," I state unconvincingly.

"So you haven't been crying?"

"Yes. I mean, no! I don't know."

"You don't know?" She is silent for a moment. Then she sighs, deeply inhales, and asks the question. "Is it still about James?"

I flinch at the "still" in her question and say nothing in response, bracing myself for what's coming next; something I've already heard not just from my mom, but pretty much from everyone I know. In fact, here it comes pronto.

"Sweetheart, it's been more than a year. I know it has been hard, but the time has passed for you to move on."

I keep my silent treatment going.

“You are young, smart, and beautiful—you will find someone else. You just have to stop thinking he was the only one for you. It’s just silly. The world is full of—”

And here I snap.

“I am not silly,” I almost shout. “He was the love of my life—he is the love of my life. You don’t forget the love of your life. Not in a year, not even in ten years. You never forget. NEVER!”

It’s her turn to be quiet. After my little outburst, we walk in silence until we reach the car.

“I’m sorry, darling.” She stands beside her door, not opening it. “I didn’t mean to say you were silly or to hurt your feelings.”

“No, Mom, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap that way. It’s just that everybody keeps telling me how I should feel... and well, I just feel the way I feel, and I can’t do anything about it.”

“Ok, I will not do it again. But would you please tell me what happened this time? Did you see him?”

“Yes, I did see him.”

“How was he?”

“He had his hair shorter,” I reply evasively.

His soft curls were no longer visible, a pang of longing crosses my chest. She probably had him cut it.

“Did you talk?”

“No, he was... he was busy,” I say, my voice slightly cracking. Silence on both sides. She’s giving me time to elaborate.

“Was he with a woman?” she finally asks, when I don’t offer anything further.

“Mm-hmm.”

“Do you know her?”

“Yes,” I confirm. “And that’s the worst part—I don’t just know her. I see her every day and I hate her!”

“Oh hush, darling, you don’t hate anyone. It’s such a horrible thing to say. And just because this person is going out with James, it doesn’t mean you have to have all this, well... animosity for her.”

“Oh, Mom! Would you please stop being ever trusting in humanity? Not everyone deserves the benefit of the doubt. And Vanessa most certainly doesn’t!”

“Vanessa? Not that nice girl you work with.”

“See, this is exactly what I’m talking about,” I say, exasperated. “She isn’t nice, or sweet, or even polite... she just pretends to be. She’s pure evil, and I hated her way before I saw her with James!” She winces at the word “hate.” “Yes, Mom, hate. Because that’s what it is.”

“I find that hard to believe. When we met her, she seemed so genuine.”

“Well, yes, she’s very good at pretending,” I reiterate.

“What did you do when you saw them?”

“I panicked,” I admit, flushing. “I froze in the middle of the street, turned around, and ran away.”

“Did they see you?”

“I’m pretty sure *she* did.”

“So, is there something serious between them?” Mom asks.

“Mmm... that, I don’t know. But I’m sure she’ll fill me in first thing Monday, enjoying every minute of it,” I whine. “And she’s going to flaunt it in my face every single day after that. She has already tried, only I hadn’t noticed because I didn’t know.”

“Oh darling, I am sure she can’t be that bad.”

“Mom, haven’t you been paying attention?” I ask rhetorically. “I told you she’s a wolf in sheep’s clothing.”

“Ah well, anyway, what do you plan on doing, sweetheart?”

“I don’t know yet, Mom, and I don’t want to think about it right now. Can we just enjoy the market and not talk about it anymore?”

“Sweetie, I’m sure everything will turn out all right,” she says with a big, loving smile, finally opening the car for us to get inside and head toward the market.

## Two

### A Little Coffe

We are going to the Randolph Street Market, a European-style indoor and outdoor antique market located in the historical West Loop neighborhood of Chicago. It is one of the largest and liveliest urban antiques market in the USA. My mom adores it.

We don't say much on the ride there. I stare out of the window most of the time, admiring the skyline of my city, which I never tire of. Upon spotting the rusty elevated railroad of the central line, I also think I am glad Mom came with her car so I don't have to use public transportation... at least for one day. Traffic is not too bad and we get there in good time. Luckily, there's a cheap valet service, which means we won't need to circle around for an hour to find a spot or pay thirty dollars for a two-hour stop.

"So Mom, what do we need to find today?" I ask her as we exit the car.

"Well," she answers, while handing over the keys to the valet, "I need to find a corner wrought-iron rack for my vases. With different layers like a stair, but sort of rounded."

I take her arm under mine and we jump into the search of the numerous stands displaying all kinds of antiques. The market is bursting full of people and sounds. There are some vendors shouting to attract the attention of passers-by, others vivaciously negotiating with their customers, and the general chitchat of shoppers enjoying the market's colorful display on this sunny day. A live band is playing traditional bluegrass music on a side stage, adding more verve to the already kinetic-energy filled environment.

Weird and wonderful treasures may hide in this labyrinth of objects from all eras, but a lot of it just looks like heaps of rags and old junk for sale. We pass a giant stand completely covered in

mounds of bric-à-brac, porcelains, vases, plates, and, to my utmost disgust, even an old chipped chamber pot. It was no doubt something used by royalty given the evident finery, but it's still a used chamber pot. Ewww.

Despite this, the more we walk around the more I am enticed by the atmosphere of this place. My skepticism begins to evaporate, leaving me free to feel the pull of all these objects, of the lives that have been lived in them. Moving forward, I get more and more fascinated by the diverse array of vintage fashion, art, fresh flowers galore, jewelry, and decor stalls showcasing eclectic artwork and crafts. I am particularly taken by an old rusty booth displaying antique charcoal sketches. It transports me into a bohemian Paris, so I spend a long time leafing through them, imagining the secret history behind each one together with my mom.

After that, we wander around for about an hour. We have fun deriding the vast selection of plaster Snow Whites, old scratched toys, and various knick-knacks, and admiring the magnificent display of wood furniture, vintage accessories, and art from the fifties—one of my favorite decades.

As we're walking, a movement of the crowd separates me from my mom, pushing me against a cart of used shoes and her toward a lopsided scaffold acting as a stage for a bunch of colorful, old-fashioned furniture. This place is way too packed for me. I am becoming all sweaty and sticky, which is even less to my taste.

“Mom!” I shout. “I am moving over there to the side lane.”

“Okay!” she shouts back, “I just want to have a look there.” She points at the rear end of the furniture stall.

I give her the thumbs-up and push my way out of the crowd. When I finally manage to disentangle myself from the coils of this anaconda of humanity, I spot a drinking fountain at the end of one of the lateral alleys and head there. In my present overheated status, it appears as inviting as an oasis in the desert. I reach it with a few quick steps and quaff as much fresh water as I can without choking.

I already feel much refreshed, and since there is nothing else to do, I slowly find my way back to the uncongested part of the market.

As I poke around lazily, looking for an unknown object, two men are bargaining over an old fire fender, the bygone music of a lost opera plays from an ancient phonograph being tested, and the air seems infused with a mystical atmosphere.

I am attracted by the smallest stand. A very old lady is sitting behind it in a rocking chair, an odd hat obscuring her face almost completely. On each side of the stand are two vertical panels, and dangling from them is the most amazing collection of bizarre objects. The horizontal surface of the cart is covered by an amazing array of cute little boxes; jewelry cases, I think. I am particularly drawn to one, and I grab it to have a better look. It's made of some kind of metal, maybe brass. It's really shiny and beautiful, all carved with small opaque stones attached on each side and a roundish, protruding grip on the top.

"I see you have been chosen!" the old lady says out of the blue with a shrill, croaky voice.

She startles me so much that I almost drop the little case.

"You are a very lucky young woman, my dear," she continues, standing up. She seems completely unaware of my recent distress. "After today, your life will be changed forever."

"Mmm, yes. Sorry, I was just looking," I say, putting back the box.

This old lady must be nuts.

"Oh no, no. This will not do! It chose you, now it is yours," she insists.

"Eh. No, really, I was just poking around. I don't want to buy anything, thanks."

"Nonsense, nonsense, my dear." She shakes her head vigorously while retrieving the little box from the cart and offers it to me again, outstretching her arms in front of me with a pleading expression.

Her face is a crisscross of deep wrinkles that give her such an air of frailty that she's making me feeling sorry for her. I begin to think it would be easier to just buy the damn thing and be done with it. Granny here is either wacky, or she has the best selling strategy I've ever seen. I am about to ask her how much it is when I am saved by

my phone ringing. I grab it from inside my maxi bag and answer right away. It's Mom.

"Sweetie, you have to come and help me," she says. "I've found my rack, but I need you to carry it out of here."

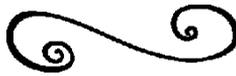
"Where are you, Mom?"

"Still at the furniture stall—do you remember how to get here?"

"Yeah, sure. I'll be there in a sec."

"Sorry, I have to run. Maybe next time," I say to Granny, glad Mom gave me a real excuse to escape.

I wave goodbye, turn around, and step away before she can trap me again. She mumbles something after me, but with all the surrounding noise I am already too far away to hear what it is... and, honestly, I don't care.



By the time I get back home it is already six in the evening. Mom insisted on having lunch together after the market, which took longer than I expected, and after lunch, I had forgotten I had a hair appointment, to which I added a mani-pedi and some beauty product shopping. I decided to load my weapons for Monday and at least try to appear my best, even if I feel the opposite inside.

Overall, the day went a lot better than I would have anticipated this morning. Well, except for nagging thoughts of James and Vanessa occasionally creeping on me unexpectedly and knocking the air out of my lungs, leaving me breathless for a second or two every time.

When I finished with the pampering, it was already five-ish, and since I had no intention of cooking tonight, I went to my favorite Chinese takeout and grabbed some dinner to enjoy at home in sad loneliness. So, right now I am entering my apartment with my steaming to-go order in one hand, a huge bag of beauty products in the other, and I'm just about ready to sag back into darkness and

self-commiseration. I deposit the food on the kitchen countertop and drop my maxi bag on the floor where it lands with a heavy thud.

Damn, my shoulder is sore! I must stop carrying everything around in my purse. I promise myself I will do an inventory check after dinner to see if there's something I can take out. After changing into some comfy clothes, I decide to eat at the bar of my L-shaped open kitchen. I set all the little white food containers on it and pull out two stools, one for me and one for Sugar. Once I break my chopsticks, I am ready to start.

I share the occasional shrimp or chicken treat with my furry friend, who is thrilled whenever he gets to eat my food... or human food in general. I don't know why; does he feel more involved? I should study feline psychology. Once he has had his fill, he strolls away to drink some water from his pet fountain. I know, he's spoiled rotten. He then disappears, probably to find a soft spot to sleep. Sometimes I wish I were a house cat; their life seems far more uncomplicated.

After just a few minutes of peace, I hear worrying meowing and clinging sounds coming from behind the counter. I lean forward to check what's going on, only to find that the little pest has scattered the contents of my bag all over the place and is enthusiastically playing with it. Quite the opposite of sleeping. My feline empathy is off today. In particular, he is attacking a little bundle that I don't recognize.

I hurry around the kitchen island to salvage whatever it is that Sugar is butchering and snatch it away. To my utter surprise, I find myself holding a small, nicely wrapped package whose origin is a complete mystery to me. I weigh the enigmatic parcel in my hands for a while before unwrapping it. It is quite heavy; no wonder my shoulder was so sore! What could it possibly be? I carefully undo the cover, recognizing immediately what lies beneath. It's the jewelry case from the flea market; the one the creepy old lady insisted I should buy.

This is impossible! I didn't buy it, and sure enough, I didn't steal it. I perfectly remember putting it back on the stand and then running

away to catch up with Mom. The old lady was never near enough to drop it in my bag, nor would she have had the time to wrap it so carefully. Then what?

Ughh! Now I'll have to go back to the market tomorrow and try to explain it all to Granny. Just what I needed!

Well, nothing I can do about it now. I am just going to finish my Chinese food, not thinking about stupid boxes magically materializing in my bag. But honestly, how can you not think about an ancient-looking little box that has magically materialized in your bag? It is impossible! I quit trying at once. I set aside my unfinished food and begin my examination of the object.

It certainly is very nice and, judging from the quality of its embellishments, very old. The metal is cold to the touch and has a golden shine to it, but it can't be solid gold! I peek at it more closely. The stones that appeared opaque this morning now seem changed; they are almost translucent. Someone must've cleaned this thing. Probably the same someone who put it in my bag.

I wrap my fingers around the little knob at the top, undecided. Finally, I gather my courage and open it. I gasp as I see... nothing. It's empty! Well, what was I expecting? I am being silly right now; even my heart is beating faster for no reason at all.

I close it again, turn it around in my hands a couple of times, and play a little with the knob on top, which suddenly turns producing a loud click. I study it for a second; the little knob seems to be attached to some sort of gear mechanism on the lid. I lift the cover again.

Argh! A nasty puff of dust just blew in my face, almost choking me. This is what I get for fooling with obscure objects I shouldn't have in the first place. Where did that dust come from? It wasn't there a second ago.

I need some water to ease the itchiness in my throat. I'm heading for the fridge when something odd catches my attention out of the corner of my eye. An even louder gasp escapes my lips when I turn around to check and find a man comfortably settled on the living room sofa. I don't know if I am more stunned by the fact that there

is a stranger sitting on my couch, by how he is dressed, or by the fact that he must be the most gorgeous man I've ever seen.

He has dark, chin-length hair, deep blue eyes, and a fair complexion. He is sitting, but I can tell he's tall. *Very* tall. He must have some sort of costume on because he looks like an English gentleman from the eighteenth century.

The man is wearing a double-breasted dark blue tailcoat with large gilt buttons that are unbuttoned. The coat opens on a figured silk vest that is tightly fastened over a white and perfectly ironed and starched high-collared shirt, which is complemented by a creamy silk knotted cravat. His pants are a pair of tight fall-front breeches made of pale yellow buckskin that have an orderly line of three covered buttons at the knee. His footwear consists of black leather Hessian boots adorned with golden tassels. As if this wasn't enough, he's fully accessorized with black gloves, a gold-mounted cane, and a black top hat.

I am so dumbfounded that when I open my mouth to speak, nothing comes out, so I close it. I try to speak again, but nothing happens. I must look like a fish underwater. Now I understand when they say how fear can completely paralyze you. He stands up, and I instinctively withdraw until my back is pressed against the fridge. He really is tall, at least six feet two.

"My lady," he announces, "I am deeply sorry if I have startled you. May I introduce myself?" Then he bows. Yes, a full gentlemanlike bow.

"So you *are* British." It's all I can come up with when I find it in me to speak.

"That would be technically correct. However, I would rather be addressed as English, if you please," he states with extreme politeness, coming toward me.

"Stay where you are." I try to make it sound like an order, but it came out more like a plea.

"As you bid, milady," he says, sitting back on the couch.

"Who the hell are you?" I ask, exasperated.

“Arthur, your most humble servant. Pleased to meet you, my lady.”

“Lady who? How did you get into my apartment?”

“I believe you summoned me.”

“I didn’t summon anyone!”

“Did you not turn the Wheel of Destiny and open the Coffer of Fortune?”

“I didn’t turn any destiny thingy, or open any fortune widget,” I say angrily. “Listen, I’ve no idea who you are or what you’re talking about. I just think you’re some kind of weird lunatic dressed funny who somehow has broken into my apartment.” Admittedly, a very good-looking lunatic.

Ally, get a grip. Ogling psychotic burglars... Have I sunk so low?

“But the Coffer of Fortune is right next to you!” he protests, pointing at the jewelry case.

“What are you saying? That by opening this stupid thing, I somehow magically summoned you to my apartment?”

“That would be accurate.”

“And why exactly?”

“I am enslaved to the coffer and eternally cursed to grant the wishes of its owner.”

“Ah, well. You should have said so in the first place. Now it all makes perfect sense. You’re the genie of the lamp, arrived here to grant my wishes,” I say ironically.

“Djinn are merely a myth, ancient legends created by men in the hope of—”

“Enough hocus pocus for me!” I briskly interrupt him. “I don’t know who you are or what you want, but I am asking you to leave right now or I’ll call the police!” I grab my phone and dial 911.

“Oh, I am mostly apologetic. Were you planning on visiting someone tonight? This police friend of yours? Have I made you late?”

“You are completely crazy! This is the last time I ask you nicely. Please get out of my house now!”

“My lady, the only way you can rid of me is by letting me grant your wishes.”

“I’ve had enough of this—I am calling the police!” I press the green button on my phone.

“911, what is the nature of your emergency?” a metallic voice comes from the speaker.

“I see I have to resort to extreme measures,” the lunatic says.

“Hello, my name is—” I begin to say.

**BANG!**

My living room is transformed into an African desert. The hardwood floor has been replaced with high dunes of fine, warm sand that my feet start sinking into. The furniture is gone, the kitchen is gone, even the walls are gone. I am standing in my PJs in the middle of the freaking Sahara. I gape at the view astonished, my mouth dangling open. The English gentleman is quietly sitting cross-legged on my couch, nonchalantly rotating his cane in the air, except the couch is now positioned atop an orange sand dune. Poor Sugar is meowing pitifully while he struggles to climb up a sand pile, leaving a trail of small paw prints behind him.

I look back at the stranger who is eying me from under his cylinder hat with an amused, challenging smirk.

“Miss, I am sorry I didn’t get your name.” The metallic voice comes from my phone, which I’m still solidly clenching in my right hand. Still mesmerized, I press end.

“Ok. You’ve made your point,” I say, still a bit dazed. “By the way, I’m Ally,” I add, as an incredulous smile spreads on my lips. “Ally Johnson.”

“Very pleased to meet you, Miss Johnson.”

## Three

### Rules

I am super excited. This is the most incredible thing that has ever happened to me. Some extra supernatural powers are exactly what I needed right now, and the timing is perfect. Then again, who wouldn't like some magic solution to all their problems?

I detach myself from the fridge and move into the living room, still feeling some sand grains slipping among my toes. Sugar escaped out of sight the moment my apartment went back to normal. Poor baby, he must be stressed. I, on the other hand, am hardly able to contain myself. I have so many things to ask my new magical friend. What was his name? Ah yes, Arthur.

He hasn't moved from his comfortable position on my sofa, and he seems impatient. In fact, as soon as I sit in the armchair in front of him, he starts talking in a matter-of-fact tone, as if nothing particularly out of the ordinary has happened.

"Now that your initial resistance is overcome, Miss Johnson, we need to discuss rules," he says. He takes off his hat and gloves and places them carefully on the empty seat next to him.

"Wait a minute, slow down. What rules? I have like a million other questions."

"All your questions will find an answer in due time."

"But I want to know now!" I protest. "Like, are genies the only magical creatures? Or are there also vampires, werewolves, elves, gargoyles, fairies, witches?"

"There are no such things."

"So the lady at the flea market wasn't a witch?"

"I do not believe so."

"But she knew about the box and she put it in my bag."

“The coffer has its own ways—the lady you are talking about was probably under its magical influence.”

“So you are the only magical creature in the whole world?”

“I believe I am the last one, yes.”

“Last one? How many were there? What kind?”

“It is a matter of little importance at present,” he states curtly, flaring his nostrils in annoyance. “Miss Johnson, I feel obliged to explain the instructions you have to follow first,” he continues. “I judge it might be wiser to do it at once, before dwelling on other things. Will you please allow me?”

“Oh, that. Don’t worry, I already know everything. I aroused the genie so I get three wishes—no killing, no resuscitating the dead, and no love spells. I saw the cartoon.”

“I am not aware of what a cartoon is, and as I explained before, I am not a Djinni.”

“What are you, then?”

“I don’t presume to fit in any particular category, milady.”

“Are you at least human?”

“I was human once, and I am in human form presently. However, it is not worthwhile to bore you with my history,” he adds politely.

Mmm, it’s not for *my* sake he doesn’t want to talk about his story. So I drop the subject for now, but I will get to the bottom of it, eventually.

“Okay, but since you will not tell me anything, I’ll keep calling you Genie.”

“I do not suppose you could call me by my given name.”

“Tsk, no. Too boring.”

“I foresee you are going to be one of the difficult ones.”

“Why, how many have there been before me?”

“Many.”

“*How* many?”

“May we delay the interrogation for a more convenient time and keep our interests focused?”

“Okay,” I give in reluctantly. “But only for now.”

“Marvellous. Shall we get started?” he asks hopefully.

“Okay. So do I get three wishes?”

“No. You do not.”

“That’s not fair. The one time I get a genie I don’t get three wishes. Why do I always have to get crappy deals?” I whine, disappointed.

“I do not believe this is suitable language for a lady,” he says with contempt.

“What century are you from?” I retort. “There is no more aristocracy rubbish in this one.”

“To this purpose, I meant to ask. Pray, tell me what century is it now?”

“Twenty-first,” I answer curtly.

“Blimey!” he exclaims, utterly bewildered. “I have never been absent for so long—more than two centuries! I need to query—Did Napoleon lose the war?”

“Napoleon? How old are you?”

“Considerably old compared to the typical human life. Many hundreds of years.”

“I guess there’d be no point in asking how many exactly.”

“I would prefer to amuse myself with your curiosity for a little longer.”

“And *I* am supposed to be the difficult one.”

“I admit I can be pretty stubborn myself,” he concedes.

“You don’t say.”

“Hmm, so has he won or lost?” he asks again.

“Communication is a two-way channel—you tell me something, I tell you something. Tell me how old you are, and I’ll tell you everything about Napoleon.”

He seems torn between the two options, pondering a little longer before announcing his decision. “I think it best we leave idle topics for later. There are a few things you had better be aware of.”

“All right,” I surrender. “Go ahead, tell me all I need to know.”

“Very well—very well, indeed. First of all, I am going to grant you five desires.”

“Five! Whoa! That’s awesome. It’s—”

“However, some restrictions apply.”

He seems quite exasperated by my constant questions and interruptions. Maybe I’ll just be good and sit here nice and quiet.

“There are rules that cannot be contravened,” He keeps going. “I usually prefer my charges to write them down.”

“No, don’t worry. My memory is good.”

“If you cannot write, there is nothing to be ashamed of. I can write them down for you. Are you at least able to read?”

“What?” I shout back, affronted. “Of course I can write! What do you think I am, some kind of illiterate ignorant person?”

“Please accept my deepest apologies, Miss Johnson—it pains me to have offended you. In my last era, it was not unusual for common people to be analphabets, and since your house does not appear to be of much stature, I simply assumed—”

“Let me be perfectly clear,” I cut him short. “I’m not sure what kind of grandeur you’re used to, but insulting a person’s house is not a great way to apologize, not even to common people.” I totally air-quoted common people.

I then get up with the most indignant face I can master and go to fetch a notepad and a pen. Once I have them, I return to the living room and sit down again, maintaining an air of high countenance.

“Are you ready, milady?” he asks with extreme politeness and a perfect poker face.

I suspect he’s having fun at my expense.

“Yes!” I say acidly.

“Let us commence, then. As you already said, I do not kill, I do not resuscitate the dead, and I cannot make someone fall in love. But also be advised that I cannot make people fall out of love.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, confused.

“Let us imagine, for example, that you were in love with a man, and that this man was in love with another woman.”

He makes an infinite pause and observes me with a knowing stare that makes me very uncomfortable. As I start awkwardly shifting positions in my chair, he resumes his explanation.

“I simply could not dissipate said sentiment, as true love is sacred and it is not to be tampered with.”

“Ok, no falling out of love,” I repeat as indifferently as I can, scribbling it down on my notepad.

“You cannot ask for extra wishes.”

“Yep, pretty basic,” I say, unimpressed.

“All wishes must concern you in some way or another.”

“That is to say...?”

“For example, you could not wish for Napoleon to lose the war. By the bye, has he lost?”

“Yes, he *has* lost! He died alone in exile and misery. Are you satisfied?”

“Ah, ah. I knew old Wellington would take him down.” He laughs contentedly. “But back to us. Where was I?”

“Wishes must be self-centered.” Not bad, this one; no one can accuse me of being selfish for not asking for world peace. “Wait a second, does this mean that I can only use magic on myself? Or I can use it on others as well?”

“As long as you do not break any rule, you can use your wishes as you see fit.”

“But if I can use it on others as well, how do you determine if a wish is about me or not?” I ask, a bit puzzled.

“Let’s say, for example, that one of your dear ones was challenged to a mortal duel.”

“Not very likely these days,” I say.

“Likely or not,” he continues, unfussed, “you could wish for that person to win the duel, or not to get injured or die during it. On the other hand, if he was a soldier you could wish for him to never die in battle. However, you could not wish for no one to ever get wounded or die in a duel ever again, or for wars to have no more casualties. The magic has to affect you in some way or other.”

“Mmm. So, for example, could I wish for my best friend to have smaller boobs, like right now?” I am not being a bitch here; she hates her abundant D size, even though her boyfriend would probably kill me if I did something like that.

“I am not exactly sure what boobs are. Anyhow, to make anything happen to someone else you need to be in their proximity. But in theory, yes, you would be able to express that sort of wish even if it does not involve you directly because it is about someone you know.”

“Makes sense. Anyway, I’ll have you as a consultant if I’m ever in doubt. Anything else?”

“Ah, yes. You cannot ask for immortality.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that, but it sucks!”

“Trust me, eternity can be very tiring,” he comments mysteriously.

I want to ask him to tell me more, but there’s no point, so I patiently wait for him to re-start with his list of rules.

“No time travelling.”

“But why?” I complain, disappointed. I’ve always been fascinated with the past and, lately, obsessed with the future. Time traveling was definitely going to be one of my wishes. Stupid rules!

“Actually, it is very simple. Time only exists in the present—it comes and goes in the blink of an eye leaving no vestige to come back to.”

“Whatever.” I shrug, annoyed.

“This also means you cannot ask to learn the future or to travel there. It has not happened yet, thus it does not exist.”

Go figure. I make a face and add it to the list.

“Can I at least teleport myself?” I ask, struck by a sudden inspiration.

“From one place to another in the present? Yes, you may ask for that.”

“So, could I also ask to teleport other people?”

“Yes, exactly—it is another good example. You may ask to have a particular ability and ask to be able to use it on others. As long as you are near them it would work.”

“Cool! I’ll think about it. If I was able to teleport myself, I could see the whole world. I would never have to take a plane ever again. Wow!”

“What is a plane?”

“A machine that flies.”

He gives me a blank stare.

“With people inside,” I further explain, “you know, to move from one place to the other faster.”

“Mankind can *fly*?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“How marvellous.”

“Yep. Can we get back to my wishes now?” I ask eagerly.

“I am glad to have you interested at last.”

“So, are the rules over? Can we start?”

“Hmm. No, they are not. A few more remain.”

“Bummer. Go ahead, then.”

I feel as if I were a child again. Whenever I had a new toy, especially if it was a cool electronic one, my dad wouldn't let me use it before we read the whole instruction manual. I couldn't wait to try my new game, but no, I had to listen to endless boring instructions instead. And here they keep coming.

“You cannot ask for all my powers.”

“Ok.”

“You cannot wish me free of my curse.”

“Have you been cursed?” I stare up at him.

“Yes, as I told you before.” His face becomes a mask of pain and regret.

“Sorry,” I say sincerely. “I must've been over-excited by the whole situation. I didn't hear you. What happened? Who did it?”

“I do not wish to talk about it.” His tone suggests that I'd better back off, but he can't just say something like that and then refuse to talk about it!

“Is the curse unbreakable, or can it be broken in some other way?”

“It *can* be broken somehow, but I most certainly was not told how.”

“We could try to find a way, though, right?”

“I've tried before. Nothing has ever worked.”

“That doesn’t mean we have to stop trying.”

“Trust me, it is a painful endeavour, made of false beliefs that never prove truthful.”

“I’m sorry,” I mumble. “It must’ve been hard for you. But we can stay positive and keep hoping. Something will come up, I’m sure.”

“Hope is a good breakfast but a bad supper,” he comments cynically, shaking his head at my optimism.

From his bitter tone, I get the impression that the topic, once again, is making him uncomfortable. I’m sure he will be more ready to open up once we get to know each other better, so I’ll let it be for now. But I’m not giving up. If there’s a way to free him, we just need to find it; he simply needs some faith.

“Genie—” I try to lighten the mood by changing the subject. “Can I give one of my wishes to someone else? I mean, as a gift?”

“Absolutely not, and this is the last rule.” A note of strain is still audible in his words, but he seems relieved that the conversation has moved on. “You cannot speak to anyone about me, the wishes, or the coffer. It would make it all disappear the moment you voice your first word.”

“Ugh! I hate to keep secrets, and I’m not very good at it, either,” I grumble.

“I am afraid you will have to keep this one.”

“But when I am done, can I pass the coffer on to someone else and make them discover its secret?” I ask hopefully. “This way I would not need to break any rule. I wouldn’t be telling anyone. Can I do that?”

“No, most definitely not.”

“Why?”

“The coffer has its own will. When you are finished with it, it will go to whoever it sees fit. Ahem, here I was, thinking I had finally found my liberator... whereas you are already trying to hand me down like one of your possessions.”

“I—” I blush vividly, looking down in mortification. “That’s not what I... ummm...” I stutter. “I wasn’t really... I mean, associating

the two things in my head, I..." I look at him and see that he's messing with me; he's hardly suppressing a grin. "Oh, forget it!" I tell him, my face still very red.

Upon being discovered, the genie roars with laughter at my embarrassment. He's even more gorgeous when he's not sulking. I only wish it wasn't at my expense.

I look at him morosely. "Are you having fun?" I ask pointedly.

"Please excuse my incivility—I could not resist the temptation." He chuckles. Then, still grinning, he asks, "Is all that we discussed clear?"

I nod grudgingly and look down at my pad to do a mental recap.

## RULES

No killing

No resuscitating the dead

No falling in or out love

No extra wishes

Wishes must be self-centered

Proximity rule for magic on others

No immortality

No time traveling :(

No future telling :(

Teleportation ok

No Genie superpowers

No freeing the genie

No telling anyone anything

No gifting the coffer

Note to self: investigate Genie's

curse, age...

Even with all these stupid rules, I can still do a lot of damage. I smile in satisfaction, anticipating my first wish.

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