

Secondhand Wishes

Anna Staniszewski



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Chapter 1

The day I found the wishing stones, I was running late. Really late. Like “disrupt the entire order of the universe” late.

Austin had thrown a fit at breakfast because he didn’t want to drink the kale smoothie I made him. He said it looked like slime. (And okay, maybe it did.) After he dumped it all over himself in protest, I had to mop up the floor while Mom changed Austin’s clothes.

When I finally got to the footbridge where Cassa and I always met in the morning, I was out of breath and she was gone. I glanced at my watch. Almost seven

minutes behind schedule. Since I was never *ever* late, Cassa probably figured I wasn't coming. *Or maybe she walked to school with Marina instead and forgot all about you*, an annoying little voice inside me whispered.

I lingered there for a minute, drumming my fingers on my jeans, trying to decide if I should wait a little longer, just to be safe. But my watch was practically screaming at me to get moving, so I finally took off at a run, as if I could make up the time. But time doesn't care how fast you go when you're behind it. So the bell was already echoing through Adams Middle School as I rushed up the front steps. I sped through the seventh-grade hallway—without actually running because that was Not Allowed—and practically fell into first period.

“Late,” Mrs. Connor said, pointing at me. Her finger felt like an arrow. “Detention.”

“B-but—” I stammered, my stomach sinking into my knees.

“Sorry, Lexi.” She tore a pink detention slip from the pad and dropped it on my desk. “Those are the rules.”

Mrs. Connor was everyone's favorite math teacher, but she was also big on "tough love." I never thought she'd use it on me, though. I was plenty tough on myself already.

I tried to pay attention through the rest of class, making my notes on ratios and percentages perfectly color-coded for Friday's test. But my eyes kept wandering back to that pink piece of paper. How could I stay after school when I always helped out at the Antique Barn on Tuesdays?

After class, I hurried up to Mrs. Connor's desk, but she wouldn't even let me plead my case. "I know you're usually very punctual, Lexi, but the school has clear rules about tardiness."

"It's just that my brother . . ." I stopped, realizing that, unlike my previous teachers, Mrs. Connor had no idea about the genetic disorder that messed up Austin's intestines and made my family's life unpredictable. It would be nice to keep it that way, especially since Austin had been doing so much better lately. And really, it wasn't his fault I'd been late.

“I help out at an antique store after school on Tuesdays,” I said instead, even though I knew that Cassa’s mom would understand. “I really can’t miss it.” Being late to school *and* to work in one day was more bad karma than I could handle.

“You’re a bit young for a job, aren’t you?” Mrs. Connor asked, but she sounded impressed.

“I like doing it,” I told her. And it meant I didn’t have to ask my parents for an allowance. They had enough to worry about with all of Austin’s medical bills.

“I’ll tell you what,” Mrs. Connor said. “How about you come to lunchtime detention, instead? It’s all full today, but there should be room for one more student tomorrow.”

“During lunch?” A tight feeling spread through my chest. Cassa and I had been sitting together at lunch every day for four years. I couldn’t change my routine just like that! But I could tell by the look on Mrs. Connor’s face that she wasn’t going to budge, so I had no choice but to agree.

Normally, I was glad school had so many rules. It meant you always knew what you were supposed to be doing and when. Just this once, though, I wished she could have let things slide.

“Oh, and, Lexi,” Mrs. Connor said as I turned to go. “I saw you got a B-plus on the last quiz. Nice improvement!”

I could only blink in response. Because even though my math grades had been getting better on the weekly quizzes, a B-plus was still far from good, at least for me. That’s why I had to ace our first test.

When I got to lunch later that day, I sat down with Cassa at our usual corner table. I expected her to ask me where I’d been that morning, but she had her nose buried in a book about English castles. Her shoulders were hunched as if she were cold, but that usually meant she was really into whatever she was reading.

“Sorry I wasn’t at the bridge earlier,” I said, unzipping my lunch bag. “Things were kind of hectic this morning.”

“What?” Cassa asked, glancing up from one of the glossy pages. “Oh, I thought I told you. Mom had to pick up some stuff for the store, so she dropped me off at school on her way.”

Phew. She hadn’t ditched me for Marina. Of course not. I was just being paranoid.

Cassa frowned across the table. “Is that an old sponge in your lunch?”

“Yup!” I said. “I saw this video the other day that said to use a frozen sponge instead of an ice pack to keep your food cold.”

Cassa picked it up between two fingers. “Why?” she asked, wrinkling her nose.

“It costs less and doesn’t weigh as much,” I said. Then I noticed a moldy smell coming from the sponge. I groaned. “But I forgot to put it in plastic!” My wrapped sandwich was still edible, but a sniff of my apple told me it was a goner. Great. I’d have to scrub my lunch bag when I got home so Mom wouldn’t throw it in the

trash. She was a little nutty about protecting Austin from germs.

“Lexi’s Life Hacks strike again!” Cassa said with a smile.

I self-consciously touched the industrial-strength hair clips on top of my head. Maybe trimming my own bangs using Scotch Tape hadn’t been the best idea, but they were almost back to their normal length.

“So what happened this morning?” Cassa asked, offering me some of her baby carrots.

As I munched, I told her about the slime smoothie. “It’s been taking Austin forever to get over a stomach bug, so when I saw a video about Leafy Green Diets, I thought it might help. But of course Austin wouldn’t even take a sip.” I sighed. “Mom was going on about how there was ‘no convincing medical evidence’ that the smoothie would do anything.”

Cassa chuckled. “Plus, what four-year-old kid likes *kale*?”

I had to laugh too. “I guess it was kind of a stretch. Not even ‘medical miracles’ like to eat leaves.”

That was what Mom was always calling Austin, her little medical miracle. Mom and Dad had always told me that one day I’d be an older sister, but it took years of doctors and tests and more doctors before it actually happened. Then Austin was born and we knew right away that something was wrong. It was as if the universe had finally given him to us, but with strings attached. No matter what we did, we couldn’t seem to untie them.

My smile faded. “By the way, I got a detention for being late, so I won’t be at lunch tomorrow, okay?”

“Wow,” Cassa said, brushing her dark curls over her shoulder. “Lexi Block gets in trouble? I guess there’s a first time for everything. Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I said automatically. But I was all twitchy inside. Ever since school had started, I’d felt behind on my luck. I needed to catch up, and fast. “Maybe if I do really well on the math test, it’ll balance stuff out.”

“Of course you will,” Cassa said. “You love math.”