

Captain Wishy Bloke

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Pre-release preview

Part 1 of 4

(Act 1 only)

Chapter 1 - Telepathy SUCKS!

Question: If you could read minds, would it be a good thing, or a bad thing?

If you could know what everybody was thinking, would humanity fill you with hope... or despair?

And what about your relationships? If you could know *exactly* what your partner was thinking, would it take your relationship to new heights of intimacy or completely kill it?

Daisy was less than 24 hours into her new life of adulthood when she was unwittingly given the ability to read minds. It was an eighteenth birthday gift she hadn't asked for, didn't understand, and would quickly regret.

So far, her birthday had been explosively fun but safely predictable. That was until around 8:15 pm in the bustling terminal of Waterloo Train Station, London.

She'd bundled onto the train near her home in Oxshott, Surrey with a crowd of her giggling and squealing friends to head to London's West End to celebrate her birthday, and didn't think anything out of the ordinary when an elderly homeless-looking man approached her at Waterloo station. She was used to this. It happened all the time. So often in fact, that she carried a special coin holder with £1 coins *just* to give to homeless people asking for money in

London. Her friends teased her about it endlessly but it was no use: that was Daisy and everybody knew it. It went with the territory. It was just who she was. She was everybody's best friend, the girlfriend that every girl wishes she had. Caring, fun-loving, kind-hearted with *everybody* and absolutely genuine. She was a real-deal, help-the-world, everybody's-bestie, happy-hippy-chick, Californian beach-babe with flowers in her hair. The perfectly-packaged, save-the-planet, glass-half-full Barbie who always knew what to say to make you feel better even on the toughest days.

She'd moved with her amazing parents all the way from California to London, when her Dad landed a high powered job a couple of years earlier, and she was **LOVING** life. Contrary to most teenagers, Daisy actually had a really great relationship with her parents, which was a good job because they spent so many of their weekends together touring European cities. It was the lifestyle that dreams are made of for an American teenager. Paris, Rome, Amsterdam, Prague, Vienna, Berlin, Milan and a dozen other European cities had become her weekend stomping grounds with her parents, but when all was said and done, she thought of London as her European home from home, and she *loved* to spend time with her friends in central London.

So it was just another homeless guy and another trip through London for Daisy and her friends as she slipped

into her well rehearsed routine to flick open her coin-holder, pass the guy some money and wish him a great day until... he refused... REFUSED?! That's right, refused. Politely, but decisively, refused... and *that's* what got Daisy's attention.

"It's really kind of you, Miss, but since it's your eighteenth birthday, I've got a gift for you".

Now it was getting creepy. It wasn't the first time she'd had that pickup line from a drunk guy.

Her friends were squirming already and Daisy was trying to hide the awkwardness from her face as she politely tried to sidestep him.

"That's really kind", she said, "but I've had plenty of gifts already today."

"Oh no, Miss. It's not like that, I'm not that kind of gentleman", he replied. He sounded like a farmer with a thick west-country accent. Not too threatening, but hard to take seriously.

She fully intended to keep on walking, but as he held out an antique-looking walking stick with a handful of coloured gemstones embedded into the surprisingly polished base, something caught her attention about the pink gemstone. When she glanced at it, it was like a movie scene, where the world goes into slow motion and everything goes quiet... *really* quiet.

Her friends kept walking, but Daisy just stood there, captivated. It felt like it was just the two of them in a soundproof, glass room, right there in the middle of Waterloo Station.

The man carefully plucked out the pink stone from his walking stick, placed it inside an intricately delicate little cage on a silver necklace and held it out to her.

“This is especially for you, my dear. You’ve been helping lots of people, and this’ll let you help even more.”, he said.

Completely mesmerised, she reached out and took the necklace. The moment she held the gemstone in her hand, her eyes widened as it began to gently glow.

“It’s... beautiful”, she said softly.

“It is”, he replied.

“It’s a beautiful gift, for a beautiful girl, with a beautiful heart”.

It wasn’t just the gentle glow that captivated her, but the feeling... It was like she’d just been reunited with a long-lost soul mate.

“With this gift,”, he said gently, “you can know what folks are *really* thinking.”

“Use it wisely and it will always be your friend”.

She didn't notice him leave, or see where he went. She was too wrapped up with the gemstone. But as the noise and bustle returned, she could feel tears streaming down her cheeks. It felt as though she'd just been through some kind of super therapy session at a mountain retreat in Tibet.

As she realised she was still very much in central London on her 18th birthday night out, she pulled herself together, snapped out of it, put on the necklace and ran to catch up with her friends.

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London's West End on a summertime Saturday night is a noisy, bustling and busy place at the best of times, and that's probably why Daisy didn't really notice at first.

She was so busy chattering with one of her friends that she didn't pay much attention to the way that the conversation around her was a lot more random, unrelated and chaotic than usual. It was like people were talking to themselves and not really listening to each other.

In fact, it wasn't until she heard her friend Aimee losing it with her boyfriend Miles, that the penny finally started to drop. She turned towards them, expecting to see a row emerging but instead, Miles was bumbling along, *totally* oblivious to her yelling... and instead of a face full of

screaming rage, Aimee was just glaring at the pavement whilst they walked.

WHAT?!?!?

Her lips weren't even moving but she could hear it clear as day, and she knew for a *fact* that it was Aimee because it was definitely *not* the first time she'd heard her arguing with Miles.

“*What!!?*”, snapped Aimee, glaring at Daisy.

That was the moment Daisy realised she's been staring at Aimee's mouth... a little too closely for a little too long.

Awkward...

Daisy shook herself back into the real world with a startled jolt, but she couldn't stop staring at Aimee's mouth.

“I swear, Daisy, if it's the lipstick it's *your* fault for telling me it looked great!”, she heard Aimee snap.

Daisy heard the words, but Aimee's mouth didn't even flinch. Her mind was racing as her friends had all stopped to see what was going on, but whilst she could hear their befuddled, rambling, chattering words, it was like being in a convention of ventriloquists. Nobody's lips were moving.

One by one she stared in bewilderment at each of her friends until finally Miles' lips moved and actually matched his words.

“Daisy, are you ok?”

“Your lips... they’re moving.”, she muttered.

There was a quiet pause whilst Miles struggled to muster a polite response, but it didn’t really Matter because Daisy could hear every one of his unfiltered thoughts;

“She’s lost it. Did she take something on the train? I didn’t see her take anything but you never know, maybe it’s hidden in her lip gloss?”.

Daisy could hear the words, but couldn’t take her eye’s off his lips... They didn’t. move. a. muscle.

It was somewhere round about this awkward moment that Daisy remembered the words of the old homeless guy:

“With this gift, you can know what folks are *really* thinking.”

“Errr... Is that supposed to glow like that, or is it about to explode?”, asked Miles slowly, staring at Daisy’s necklace with a decidedly worried look on his face.

Daisy looked at her necklace, and sure enough, it was glowing like some kind of irradiated, pink kryptonite.

She couldn’t believe it. Was this really happening?

Was this *actually, genuinely, really* happening?!?

Realisation hit her like that moment on a roller coaster when you finally tip over the edge after the long, slow climb to the top of the first peak.

“I CAN HEAR ALL YOUR THOUGHTS!!”, she blurted out excitedly.

And that was it: just like the thrill-riding roller coaster, she was off!

Thoughts racing, mouth chattering, words tumbling, hands waving, and all mixed together with fast-flowing squeals of delight and screams of excitement.

And that’s how it went, all the way to the West End club where they’d reserved a party table for the night.

By the time she bounced through the door of the club, arm in arm with a couple of her girlfriends, she was about as excited as she’d been at any of her other seventeen birthday parties, but then... there was Jake.

Handsome, hunky, steady boyfriend Jake.

There wasn’t a birthday party scenario *in the whole world* that would be complete without Jake. And there he was. Ready, waiting, charming, grinning and gorgeous. Flowers in hand. Newly pressed, Bondesque tuxedo. Perfect!

Six months they’d been together now. SIX MONTHS! For Daisy this was the real deal, at least about as real as any teenage-school-crush-turned-boyfriend-relationship could be. He really did seem to be the whole package deal, but with one, critical element that all the other boys seemed to be missing... LOYALTY!

Daisy could overlook all kinds of personality disasters, but if she was going to throw her heart and soul into a relationship, the one thing that was absolutely non-negotiable, was loyalty. If she was going to give her all to a guy, she absolutely couldn't settle for anything less than exactly the same in return.

She didn't mind that she wasn't a royal princess, as long as she was *his* royal princess. She didn't mind not being the perfect girl, just as long as she was *his* perfect girl. For her, above all else, that's what made Jake perfect. He never had eyes for *anybody* but her.

She was his star prize, and she *knew* it.

As they settled into their table through the noise and bustle of the club, she scanned around the room testing the limits of her new gift. For the most part it was really intriguing, though she started to realise things got awkwardly personal very quickly. But for somebody who could only see half-full glasses and silver-lined clouds, the anticipation of the possibilities of this new gift were thrilling to say the least.

She was already having the time of her life playing with her new birthday gift, when one of her friends inadvertently took things to a whole new level.

Freya was the charity case of the group. Cute as a button and sweet as honey, but she was a train wreck when it

came to picking her guys. So when she was scanning the room and started to gush about the cute guy in the red shirt standing at the bar, the girls knew that meant she was already charging into trouble again.

“But he looks like a genuine nice guy”, she protested as her friends rolled their eyes, groaned and buried their faces in their hands.

But not Daisy. She was carefully watching the red shirt guy and concentrating really hard as her gemstone necklace gently glowed.

At the start of the evening, people’s thoughts were like chaotic noise to her, but she’d discovered that if she focused on just one person and tried to imagine it was just the two of them, alone in a room together, those thoughts became louder and clearer and the clearer one person’s thoughts became, other people’s thoughts faded away. This was waaay better than normal hearing where you can’t control the volume around you; this was quickly turning out to be far more precise... as long as she focused. And when she wanted to, focusing was something she was surprisingly good at.

The guy in the red shirt was starting to become a real person now. The first thoughts she encountered were the ones that were on the tip of his tongue, the things that he’d share with anybody that would listen, but the really juicy stuff was hidden away and required a little more digging.

It was like stepping into a person's home. The first things she came across were the things a person would be happy to share with anybody, but not the private stuff. The really interesting stuff was hidden in the small, corner closets and locked boxes in a person's brain. For Daisy, rooting around in a person's head was like wandering freely around somebody's home without them knowing, and having all the keys to all the locked closets and secret cupboards.

At first, she felt awkward and guilty about prying so deeply into a person's deepest, private thoughts, but she and her friends knew several painfully predictable things about their dear, lovely, sweet, disaster-prone Freya. First, when she decided she liked the look of a guy, that was it, she was all-in until the inevitable, painful end. Feet first, full-on, caution-is-for-losers. By the time Freya had mentioned a guy out loud, her friends knew it was too late, she'd already made her decision and she was planning the wedding.

The second thing they knew about Freya, is that she *always* picked disastrous guys, and when the inevitable end came, she'd share her heartache with everybody, along with all the dark, dirty secrets that she knew about him... and she always seemed to find the dirt. So Daisy decided that since she was bound to find out all about red-shirt's embarrassing secrets anyway, she'd just do Freya a favour and cut out all the usual painful bits.

After a few ugly minutes, she'd discovered enough. She rattled off a text message and sent it to Freya.

The girls had been so busy discussing what potential disasters lay in store for Freya with this guy, that they entirely forgot about the new mind-reading, secrets-discovering powers of the birthday girl herself, and when they all realised what Daisy had just been doing with her glowing gemstone, they scurried to crowd around Freya to read the text on her phone. One by one, their hands flew up to their mouths in shock as they read Daisy's assessment. It was *not* pretty, but in fairness, entirely consistent with Freya's usual choice of guys.

“Ok, smartypants”, said Freya as she grumpily crossed her arms and slid back in her seat “who would *you* choose for me?” And that was it, game on! All eyes turned to Daisy as a cheeky grin crept across her face and she began to scan the room with her gemstone gently glowing into life.

First guy, no.

Second guy, eeewwww.

Third guy, yikes!

Fourth guy, what?!?!

Dani was checking out all the hottest guys in the club and starting to wonder how anybody found love if *these* were the options. Even little-miss-sunshine Daisy was on the

verge of getting discouraged until she decided to switch tactics... and close her eyes.

This time it was different. This time she stopped checking out the guys first and started to *feel* her way around the room. This time, she struck lucky.

She opened her eyes to check out her prize. Not the hottest guy in the room, a work in progress you might say, but definitely the right kind of guy where it Mattered most. She rattled off another text message to Freya, waited for her and the rest of the girls to read it, and then pointed to an awkward looking guy in a blue shirt.

“Him!?” , blurted Freya in disbelief.

“Him!” , replied Daisy confidently.

The text message read “Trainee Air Ambulance Pilot”.

Freya thought for a moment, looked at the text message, looked at the guy, looked at her friends with their faces brimming with anxious encouragement... and started to grin.

Two minutes later, Freya was twirling her hair and smiling away chatting to the shy and awkward-looking blue shirt guy.

“Success.” , thought Daisy to herself as she settled back into her seat and snuggled up to Jake.

By 10:00 pm she'd got her world-saving life with this new gift all worked out.

First, she was going to help her girlfriends find guys who weren't total freaks, and once she'd found boyfriends for all of them, she would help people fix their relationship problems. She figured if she could get inside couple's heads, she could help them really understand each other better so they could quit fighting.

And finally, she'd become an international diplomat and help to negotiate peace treaties between warring nations.

Yep. She was going to help save the world!

But none of that ever really got started, because this was the night that Daisy began to discover the bitter, relationship-killing truth... telepathy *sucks!*

That was the night that Daisy started to wonder if her telepathic *gift* was really a *curse*.

She was still grinning at the thought of bringing about world peace when Daisy looked up at Jake and snuggled into him a little tighter.

"This is the best birthday ever!", she thought as she gazed up at him bouncing his head to the music and looking around the club.

If she'd just left it there, the evening could possibly, maybe, perhaps still have ended happily, but once the

thought popped into her head, it was never going to go away.

It was an innocent enough question. The kind of question that millions of normal women ask their men all the time.

What was he thinking about?

Her gemstone necklace slowly began to glow, as she looked at Jake more intensely. She was grinning a cheeky little grin at first, but as her gemstone glowed brighter, her grin faded, and tears quickly filled her eyes.

It wasn't like she'd gone digging about in his private thoughts, the image was right there, sitting in the entrance hall of his brain. It wasn't even subtly hiding in a shady corner. It was like he was having a wild party with this particular thought and wanted all his friends to watch.

As clearly as if she was watching it on the front row of a widescreen, 3D movie, there was Jake, full-on kissing a hot, brunette girl that Daisy could see on the other side of the club. That was it, that was what he was thinking about; no, not thinking, full-on *fantasising*... and Daisy figured she'd only just caught the start of the show because this particular fantasy was getting wildly out of hand *fast*, and another two girls were already on their way to join in!

Daisy could barely see straight as she scrambled to get out of the club in floods of tears with a bewildered Jake struggling to keep up. But as she grappled her way

through the crowd, other girl's thoughts seemed to shout at her.

“Who wears flowers to a club?”, thought one.

“Seriously? Those shoes with *that* dress?!” , thought another.

“Ooh, a breakup! That means he's single.”, thought another girl as she stepped straight in front of Jake and stopped him in his tracks.

As Daisy tumbled and sobbed her way out of the club, she rattled off a text message:

“Mom, just broke up with BF. Coming home. Need a hug.”

Chapter 2 - Fightmares

Daisy was still sniffing as she got off the train, climbed into her her custom-pink mini and drove home. But as she pulled into the long, sweeping driveway of her parents gorgeous Surrey mansion, she was met with a dazzling display of blue flashing lights and a flurry of first responders.

A policeman flagged down Daisy's car and stepped towards her as she climbed out.

"This is my house. I live here. What's going on?"

"I think you should come with me, Miss.", the Police Officer solemnly said "I'm afraid we have some bad news regarding your parents".

Daisy stopped and stared at the officer, concentrating hard as her gemstone began to glow. After a few moments, a horrified realisation dawned on her, and she burst into tears as she ran towards the house.

"No!", she wailed as two stretchers, draped in cloth were carried out of her house and into a black van with PRIVATE AMBULANCE written on the side.

The Policeman ran and caught Daisy as she broke down into a sobbing pile on the floor. She was struggling to breath through the tears when Vivienne, a well-dressed

and impeccably well-spoken police detective stepped over and crouched beside them.

“I’ll take it from here officer”, she said, flashing a detective ID badge at the Policeman and taking Daisy gently in her arms.

“Yes Ma’am”, replied the officer as he stood and left.

Daisy had already picked the grisly details of her parent’s death from the thoughts of the police officer, but there was something missing.

“Who found them?”, asked Daisy though her sobbing.

Vivienne nodded towards Kevin, a man in his mid 30’s dressed in gardening clothes talking to a police officer.

“The gardener from next door saw the door wide open and thought it was suspicious.”, she explained. “He came over to check everything was OK and found your parents.”

“At least that’s what he says, but between you and me, I think there’s something he’s not telling us. I mean what’s a gardener doing here at this time of night?”

Daisy’s gemstone started to glow as she stood and began walking towards Kevin, staring intently. Vivienne noticing the glowing gemstone, started to smile knowingly. The harder Daisy focused, the more her gemstone glowed until a look of shock and outrage flooded over Daisy’s face as she started hurtling towards him.

“It was *him!* *He* did it!”, she screamed.

A police officer intercepted and restrained Daisy, but as she continued to glare furiously at Kevin, her gemstone glowed even brighter. By now Kevin was starting to look nervous and Daisy could hear his thoughts loud and clear.

“Oh no! She knows it was me, *it was me*, IT WAS ME!”

Kevin became increasingly frightened and desperate until he finally, involuntarily but uncontrollably, blurted out...

“IT WAS ME!”

As police officers grabbed and cuffed Kevin, Vivienne put her arm around Daisy and pulled out a gemstone necklace of her own.

“It would seem that you and I have something important in common.”, she said with a knowing grin.

Astonished, Daisy’s gemstone burst into life and she tried to stare into Vivienne’s thoughts... but nothing. She redoubled her concentration, but then noticed Vivienne’s own purple gemstone glowing too.

“I’m afraid it won’t work with me, dear. Protection powers. Can’t switch them off even if I wanted to. Absolutely necessary in my job.”, said Vivienne nonchalantly.

“But where did you...? How long...? Who gave you...?”, blurted Daisy.

“All in good time, dear”, replied Vivienne calmly “but right now, we need to get you away from here to somewhere you can think straight. And I have the perfect place.”

Forty five minutes later, Daisy was stepping into Vivienne’s small, modest apartment.

“It’s not much, but the spare room is all yours for as long as it takes to get a clearer head.”, said Vivienne. “Your parents’ house is going to be a crime scene for a few more days, I’m afraid.”

“You’re really kind. Thanks very much.”, replied Daisy solemnly.

“And whilst we’re waiting, maybe you can help me to catch some more villains along the way.”, chirped Vivienne.

“Sure, glad to help.”, replied Daisy, mustering a polite smile.

She walked into the bedroom, closed the door and collapsed onto the bed sobbing.

As Daisy succumbed to sleep, her dreams were different somehow. It was subtle at first, but steadily built into a raging crescendo of screaming and shouting. In no time at all it was a chaotic montage of cruelty, aggression and crime. Sobbing children, weeping women, arguing couples, beatings, robberies and stabbings.

Daisy was shaking as she slept, and her pillow became soaked with her tears. The sounds of violence, aggression and cruelty became louder and faster until, suddenly, Daisy woke up, bolt upright in bed, sobbing and wailing in anguish.

Vivienne burst in through the bedroom door and cradled Daisy in her arms.

“Oh, my darling, it’s just a bad dream.”

“This is different, it’s more than a nightmare. It’s real!”, urged Daisy. “I think it’s something to do with my telepathy. It’s like somebody turned up the volume and I can see, hear and *feel* every real-life, horrible act of cruelty for miles around!”

“Oh, my sweet darling, this must have been triggered by the trauma. I’m sure it won’t last.”, said Vivienne comfortingly.

Daisy heard the words, and they seemed to help, but what she didn’t see was the menacing grin creeping across Vivienne’s face as she cradled the sobbing Daisy in her arms.

===== ONE YEAR LATER =====

Daisy, sharply dressed and now brunette, strode sternly but confidently out of the police interview room. Behind her a man loudly protested his innocence and shouted threats. She stepped towards Vivienne and handed her a notepad without looking at her.

“Number one ditched the body in the Thames under Chelsea Bridge;”, Daisy said without a flinch as she turned away from Vivienne and strode purposefully down the corridor with Vivienne trying to keep up.

“Number two sold the jewels to a dealer in Frankfurt, then chopped up the body and fed it to the dog. Number Three hid his external hard drive behind a loose tile in his bathroom under the sink, and Four hid the money in an offshore account in his ex-wife’s name. The details are on the notepad.”

It was a well-rehearsed routine for a well-worn pattern.

“It’s such a shame you can’t get them to confess like you did with your parents’ killer.”, said Vivienne politely.

Daisy stopped and turned to her abruptly “I told you, Viv, it only works when I’m emotionally involved, and with these guys I couldn’t care less what happens to them.”

“Somebody’s a little more touchy than usual today.”, said Vivienne, gingerly trying to lighten the mood.

“What difference does it make?”, Daisy demanded.

“My parent’s killer got away with just five years in prison because of a technicality, and the same thing will happen to each of those guys. In a few years they’ll all be out of prison doing more horrible things.”

Vivienne tried to quieten Daisy down a bit as they followed the corridor to the Police Station entrance and signed out of the visitors book.

“*Everybody* has nasty little secrets they’re trying to hide.”, growled Daisy. “Two of those Policemen are cheating on their partners and one of them is thinking of taking a bribe from the jewel thief in room number two!”

Overhearing their conversation, the police officer on duty at the front desk looked up suddenly at Daisy.

“Well let’s not shout too loud about that in here, shall we?”, whispered Vivienne in a mild panic as she hustled Daisy through the Police Station entrance and into the car park.

“It’s just that... it’s been a whole year now, and the nightmares are as bad as ever.”, lamented Daisy.

“Look, I’m *sure* it’s because justice was never truly done with your parents’ killer.”, Vivienne quietly urged.

“An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” and then with a deep breath, checking over her shoulders she whispered “a life for a life”.

She raised an eyebrow at Daisy and quietly said “When you restore the balance of justice, I’m *sure* you’ll sleep well at night again.”

“But there *must* be a better way than killing Kevin” protested Daisy. “I really don’t want to go to jail for murder; not even to get rid of these nightmares.”

It was an old and tired conversation, but it never seemed to go away.

“We’ll find a way together, dear. You just need to wait patiently until he’s out of prison, and then we can get rid of your nightmares once and for all.”, reassured Vivienne.

“But *four more years* though! And meanwhile, all of this feels like *such* a waste of time.”

“You know, since you mentioned it, there are *other* ways to restore justice in the world...”, said Vivienne quietly as she pulled Daisy closer, smiled deviously and looked at her battered, old car. “...and much more profitable too.”

Looking Daisy straight in the eyes and grinning smugly, she snapped off her Police ID badge and tossed it in a nearby dumpster without looking back as Daisy laughed in shocked disbelief.

Chapter 3 - The Popped Star

===== FOUR YEARS LATER =====

Ben was, by anybody's standards, a good looking kinda guy. Still in his twenties with a broad smile and optimistically energetic, his naturally cheerful charisma had always landed him in the middle of the best parties and made him a firm favourite with the ladies.

That alone would give him a huge life-advantage, but to top it off, he really did have the most amazing voice. Powerful, yet sensitive. Roaring at times, but buttery smooth at others. With a combination like that, it was no real surprise that he ended up winning the X Factor and going on to global fame and fortune. At least, until it all went wrong.

But diamonds are really just lumps of coal that have been crushed under enormous pressure, and the universe, it would seem, had even bigger plans for Ben than mere global super-stardom... he just didn't know it yet.

So as far as Ben was concerned, it was just another ordinary day as he went through his morning routine in his North London bedsit apartment.

The all-in-one-room apartment was tiny really, but at least he could pay the rent (just) and he kept it neat and tidy. He

reasoned that you don't have to be rich to be clean, and that mindset helped give him a little more self-respect on his road to recovery.

With very little space, there was very little furniture, but he did have a collection of framed photos that told the story of his life: from X Factor winner to drugged-up, arrogant pop star to washed out, alcoholic homeless guy and, finally, back on the road to recovery, finding purpose in life through helping other people.

So that morning like many others, Ben turned off the alarm clock, and with a grin, jumped out of bed and burst into life. He quickly loaded a backpack with two packed lunches in bags marked "Me" and "Ed", then a small box of gift chocolates taken from a well stocked shelf of identical gift chocolate boxes, a bag of coins, several small, children's toys, including a squeaky one, then several London tourist maps and, finally, he carefully strapped a bunch of daffodils to his bag.

He put the finishing touches on his work outfit, dressing smartly with a crisp, white shirt and plain, black tie.

It wasn't the pop star lifestyle he used to have, but he still clung to one thing: the music. You could take away the stardom, but you could never take away the music, and for Ben, he was never far away from singing, and as he went through his morning routine, he sang his morning song.

*A normal kid, from a normal place,
With an awesome voice and a handsome face,
I took a chance and I won the lot,
and the whole, wide world thought I was hot.
My days of stacking shelves had passed;
With a debut single selling fast;
As many girls as a guy can get,
Mansions, yachts and private jets,
TV, movie and concert deals,
Lots of cars with shiny wheels,
A golden plated loo roll holder
With my famous pop star smoulder.*

Ben's bathroom did indeed have a gold-coloured toilet roll holder with his 'smouldering' face engraved on the overlap lid.

*I was rude to everyone, but I didn't care
cause nobody argues when they get a share.
I really thought I had it all
but the bigger the ego, the bigger the fall.
Too much booze and little white powder,
voices shouting louder and louder.
All I ever did was moan.
Turned up so late, they'd all gone home!*

Ben left the apartment and made his way to work first on the London underground and then on foot, singing as he went.

*I was cocky, and I was mean
but I couldn't stand up straight when I met the Queen!
It went so fast, my head was spinning,
the cars, the money and all the women.
I screwed up big time, it went so bad,
I couldn't face my Mum and Dad.*

He paused at a shop doorway that he used to sleep in as he saw, in his mind's eye, his homeless memories come alive like ghosts.

*Alcoholic, bankrupt, homeless,
Sleeping rough. Totally hopeless.*

He then recalled a memory of Tony, the charity worker who reached down to the homeless Ben and helped him to his feet. His voice slowed and softened as he reflected:

*My greatest friend, he rescued me,
from booze and drugs and smelling like wee.
He picked me up and shook me down,
helped me turn my life around.
Taught me a lesson of solid gold,*

the thing to learn before I'm old:

With a surge of enthusiasm Ben re-energised himself as he carried on striding along Oxford Street to work.

Help, don't hurt. Give, don't take.

Helping others, a happy life will make.

The secret key to happiness

Is give lots more and take a little less.

Ben's confident bounce and tempo is interrupted again as he watches a beautiful girl climb into a sports car with a well-dressed, handsome man.

Sometimes I stop and wonder where I'd be today.

If I'd made different choices all along the way

But not one to let his day start on a downer, Ben smiled, pulled himself together and continued to stride purposefully doing kind things along the way involving the things he put his his backpack.

But don't look back, I've done all that,

Now helping folks is where I'm at!

Chocolates, flowers, parking meters,

Tourist maps and children's squeakers!

He stopped for a little dance break because, well, what's a chirpy song without a little dance break?

*Every day's an awesome day,
just helping people on the way.
It's not the money, and that's what's funny,
You're far more wealthy with a heart that's healthy.*

Ben paused to cheerfully give the lunch bag marked "Ed" to a homeless man sitting next to a department store side entrance.

"Morning Ed!" said Ben with a wave.

A few steps later he walked through a side door marked "Staff Entrance", still singing away.

*It's always, ALWAYS, a really good day
If you've helped somebody along the way.*

Ben emerged from the "Staff Only" door onto the ground floor of the large department store where he worked, fastening the top, brass button on his uniform jacket and putting on a peaked cap that said "Store Security" in shiny gold letters.

*It's always, ALWAYS a really good day
If you've Helped somebody along the way*

His singing came to a sudden halt as he stopped in his tracks to gaze dreamily at a stunningly beautiful, blonde girl working at the cosmetics counter.

“Danielle.”, he whispered softly.

Without warning, a hand slapped Ben across the face.

“Wake up, dreamer, you’ve got shoplifters to catch!”

Ben shook his face and smiled cheerfully at the woman.

“Hi, Angela! I can’t help it: Danielle stops me in my tracks every day.”

Angela, a heavily overweight woman with a strong Northern accent, looked at Danielle and sighed.

“I’d give *anything* to have a figure like hers.”, she lamented.

They both gazed at Danielle as Angela popped a chocolate into her mouth.

“I saw that.”, said Ben with a playful, sly grin.

“It’s just a little something to keep me going until my next break.”, she protested.

“Next break? Looks to me like you’re still on your last one.”, came a stern voice from behind them.

Startled, Angela swallowed her food, stood up straight, turned around and then let out a sigh of relief when she saw it was only Rob, the store cleaner. Far from being the tall, commanding, muscular figure of a man that he wished he was, he was a short, skinny, plain-looking guy with a

pasty-white skin tone that looked like he hadn't seen the sun all year.

“Ooh, Rob! I thought you were one of the managers.”, said Angela as she playfully smacked his head and walked away.

“Morning, Rob!”, chirped Ben, “How was last night's blind date?”

“Another no show! Waited two hours!”, replied Rob in a depressing tone.

“Was this number Twenty Six?”, asked Ben.

“Twenty Seven!” he replied staring at his sweeping brush.

“I don't think I'm *ever* going to get a girlfriend. But, hey, I've another date tonight!”, he said, already starting to brighten up.

Ben started walking towards the cosmetics department and called back cheerfully.

“Well, you know what they say: 28th time lucky!”

Danielle stopped arranging her cosmetics counter as she saw Ben approach and smiled her perfectly girly, flirty smile.

“Hey, you! Have I told you how weak and tingly I go around men in uniform?”, she said as she stepped toward Ben,

needlessly straightening his tie and brushing non-existent dust off his jacket.

You'd think after years of being popular with the ladies, and then the regular attention of screaming girls as an international pop-superstar, that this kind of girly attention wouldn't phase Ben, but no. Danielle had an affect on him that was bewitching, bedazzling and really hard for him to know what to do about. So all he did was stand there with his eyes widening nervously.

Danielle, on the other hand, seemed well within her comfort zone as she stood just a little bit too close for ordinary colleague relations and quietly said,

“So... *big* news! I've just been promoted to department supervisor!”

All Ben could muster was a quiet and nervous “Yay!”

“But it also means I have to be here for overnight deliveries sometimes which will be really lonely and a little scary unless somebody big and strong can keep me company here late at night.”, said Danielle, still stroking Ben's jacket lapel and looking up at with a coy smile, biting her bottom lip.

Ben's eyes widened further as he stumbled to get his words out.

“Err, yeah, sure, of course!”

Danielle leaned even closer to whisper in his ear as she slipped a piece of paper into his hand.

“This is my number so you can text me yours too.”

Slipping the paper into his palm, she slowly ran her fingers down his hand and softly caressed his finger tips leaving Ben speechless, like butter melting at her touch. He tried to compose himself as a customer stopped at the cosmetics counter and tried to get Danielle’s attention.

“Excuse me, Miss?”, she clipped in an extremely well-spoken accent.

Danielle let go of Ben’s fingers, twirled around and stepped cheerfully towards the counter as she called back.

“Work time! Later, hun!”

Dazed but grinning, Ben stepped and stumbled backwards into a mannequin, knocking it over and entangling himself with it on the floor.

Angela rushed to help Ben to his feet.

“She really does blow you away.”

Ben was dazed but grinning like he’d just taken a happy pill.

“She touched my hand.” He said, almost giggling.

Angela dropped Ben on the floor again and rolled her eyes.

“Good grief! Pull yourself together!”, she said impatiently.

“Her hands are so soft!”, he bubbled, as though a second wave of the happy pills had just kicked in.

Chapter 4 - Russian Touch-ette

It was the end of a long day as Ben hurtled out of the "Staff Entrance" with his backpack over his shoulder, looking at his watch. He pulled coins from his pocket as he ran and quickly added them up.

“Just enough!”, he said as he eyed up his destination: a nearby pizza takeaway joint. A poster hung tantalisingly in the window advertising half-price, small "Meaty Monster" Pizzas before 7:00pm.

Ben prepared to cross the street as a homeless man approached him with a big toothless grin and his hand outstretched. Ben paused with an awkward and embarrassed look on his face.

“Look, I’m really sorry but... tomorrow?”, he said, squirming with the moral agony of choosing between his own dinner and the homeless guy.

He ran across the road still looking back awkwardly at the sad-faced, elderly man as he narrowly avoided a cyclist. Ben swerved, dodged the cyclist and dropped one of his coins. It settled in the middle of the road. Ben panicked as he looked at his watch and then looked up to see the poster being unclipped from the takeaway window. He raced into the road, dodging traffic to retrieve his coin before scrambling to the takeaway and leaping through the doorway.

Ten minutes later, he emerged from the takeaway holding a small pizza box with a look of relief and blissful anticipation. He paused, opened the box lid in front of his face and took a deep, satisfying, mouth-watering breath.

“Ahh, a little sniff of heaven.”, he thought to himself.

He was about to lift the first slice out of the box when he heard a voice behind him.

“Excuse me, sir.”

Ben turned around to see Barnaby, looking every bit the eccentric with a straw top-hat, brown tweed dinner jacket and bow tie. Not quite the homeless image Ben was used to, but this was London, and it wasn't the first time he'd seen something that broke the mould.

“I don't suppose you could spare some of that there food for a homeless and hungry gentleman?” Barnaby asked in his thick, west country farmer's accent.

Ben was still trying to figure out why a homeless man with an old, well-worn shepherd's crook would have coloured gemstones embedded around the bottom two inches. It was like a stage prop that had seen better days because the rest of the crook was pitted with small, empty recesses all the way to the handle as though they'd either gone missing or been stolen over the years.

“Errr...” said Ben slowly, still trying to figure out the guy’s backstory.

“It’s just that I haven’t had a proper meal in a while now and your pizza smells divine.”

Whatever his unconventional backstory was, Ben knew from personal experience that by the time somebody is asking strangers for their food, they’re already down to their last option, and for Ben, that was reason enough to try to help, so after a pause, he held out the pizza tray to Barnaby.

“Sure, take your pick.” he said with a kind smile.

Barnaby reached towards toward the box, paused and looked up at Ben.

“Since you’re being so kind, I don’t suppose you could... spare the whole thing.”

Being a man with a social conscience that seemed to grow louder every day, Ben was already prone to say yes and go hungry, but then to really top it off, the guilt-ridden recollection of him declining to help the homeless man from just fifteen minutes earlier came springing onto the centre stage of his mind, so he paused for a moment, dug deep, took a deep breath and mustered up a polite but kind smile.

“Of course. Your need is greater than mine.”, he replied as he held out the pizza box.

So far, so predictable, but without realising it, Ben had just had the last moment of “normal” he would have for the rest of his life. It was at this point that Ben’s world took the first steps into surreal as Barnaby ignored his pizza entirely, got all excited and started to dance.

“I knew it! I knew you were the right one!”, declared Barnaby enthusiastically before stopping, putting his hands on Ben’s shoulders and staring into his eyes intently.

“I’ve got a *very* special gift for you, my friend!”, he said

“That’s great. You’re very kind but there’s really no need.”, he replied as he took a step back to regain his personal space and turned to leave.

“WAIT! You don’t know how important you are! You’ve got a *super* hero heart, and a *super* hero needs his *super* power.”

Barnaby stepped in front of Ben and held out his crook, then plucked a small, blue gemstone from the lower side of his shepherd’s crook and held it out to Ben.

“This, my friend, is for *you!*”

Ben smiled politely and took the stone which immediately began to gently glow.

“Huh! That was cool!”, said Ben as it caught his attention and he paused to take a closer look.

“It’s more than just *cool*, my friend: that little gemstone gives you the power to grant people’s deepest immediate wishes with a single touch!”, said Barnaby excitedly.

Ben was unconvinced but smiled politely anyway.

“Oooo Kayyy, I’ll remember that. Hey, maybe I can rustle up another pizza for myself!”, quipped Ben

“Oh no, you can’t use it on yourself. It only works on other people, and only if they don’t know you’re doing it. It don’t work *if they tell you what they’re wishing for!*”, said Barnaby earnestly.

“and you can’t ask them either!”

Ben stopped grinning and put on a fake, serious face.

“Oh yes, of course. Right!”, he said, trying not to smirk.

“You *must* take this seriously!”, urged Barnaby. “I’ve just given you a very powerful and gift. You can help a lot of people if you learn to use it properly.”

“Right, OK. Well, I’ll make sure I remember that.”, said Ben with fake determination, trying his very best to suppress a giggle as he turned and walked away grinning to himself, shaking his head.

“Remember, one touch is all it takes,”, called Barnaby “and whatever they’re wishing for at that precise moment, will turn into reality.”

Barnaby watched him leave and a smile crept across his face.

“He don’t believe a word of it, does he?”, he whispered to himself. “They never do, but that’s alright, he’ll be back.”

=====

The tube station was busier than usual that evening as Ben joined the end of a queue waiting to get through the ticket barrier.

The man in front of him was impatiently surveying the queue ahead, clearly in a hurry to get through the ticket machine and scramble for the next tube train.

Behind Ben, two women walked past chattering away as one of them was stroking her short dark hair and pointing to it as they talked. She brushed past Ben and accidentally jostled him into the man in front. Instantly, the woman’s hair became long and blonde, and the man in front of Ben teleported to the front of the ticket barrier queue. Ben watched in bewilderment as the man, seemingly unaware of his sudden shift to the front of the queue, dashed towards the escalators.

Behind Ben, the blonde woman's friend and several nearby passengers reacted with some surprise to her changing hair but Ben didn't notice, still puzzling over the man in the queue.

As Ben finally got through the queue and stepped onto the subway escalator, another man hurried past Ben and briefly brushed their jacket sleeves together. Instantly, the man blurred into a super-speed to the bottom of the escalator. This time Ben was getting a little weirded-out and started to wonder if it was just him seeing things. He turned to the guy behind him wearing sunglasses and a *very* cool set of headphones who was gently bouncing his head along to his music.

"Did you see that?", he asked without spotting that the guy had his eyes closed. Realising the man couldn't hear him, Ben reached out to touch him and get his attention.

"Excuse me mate, did you see..."

This time, as Ben touched the guy, he immediately evaporated and was replaced by a small, hazy, window vision that appeared to Ben. He watched in astonishment as he could see the guy appeared live on stage, performing the song he was just listening to.

As the window slowly faded and evaporated into thin air, Ben was dumbstruck. He slowly pulled the blue gemstone

from his pocket and stared at it as he finally started to remember Barnaby's explanation ringing in his ears.

“That little gemstone gives you the power to grant people's deepest immediate wishes with a single touch!”

By now, Ben was considering his options, and *freaking out* was definitely near the top of the list. But curiosity mixed with disbelief helped him hold it together as he stepped off the escalator and noticed a small child in a pram who was reaching desperately for a balloon that was tied to the handle. Ben looked carefully at the gemstone as he slowly, cautiously, reached down and touched the child's arm. The gemstone glowed into life and the balloon instantly appeared in the child's hand.

“Woahhh!!!”, he whispered quietly, trying not to surrender to the *freaking out* option.

A small child ran excitedly past him towards the platform with his mother in frantic pursuit.

“No Harry! Come back!”, she shouted desperately.

In her hurry, the woman brushed Ben's arm as she rushed past him. Instantly, she teleported to the child and caught him just in time to stop him running off the platform and falling onto the tracks.

Ben looked at the gemstone in astonishment as the glow gently faded.

“I don’t believe it! That crazy guy was for real!”, he muttered to himself, wide eyed and excited.

“So, little gemstone, what else can you do?”, he thought to himself, his mind already racing.

This was the point that it finally dawned on him. This was the point, like Daisy before him, and a hundred other unwitting people before her, that Ben took his first, blissfully naive steps into his brave new world of dysfunctional, supernatural abilities.

As he stepped onto the tube station platform, he paused for a moment to survey the scene of commuters around him.

A young woman was gazing longingly at an outfit in the magazine she was reading. Ben discretely touched her shoulder and, instantly, she was wearing the outfit she was just looking at.

“This is SOOO cool!”, thought Ben excitedly.

Another girl looked longingly at a social media picture of a woman with amazing hair and makeup. Ben gently touched her arm and, instantly, her makeup was identical to the woman in the picture.

Excited and encouraged, Ben touched a pair of confused looking Japanese tourists holding a tube map upside down, who instantly teleported to Tower Bridge.

Next was a man who was looking longingly at a beach poster on the tube station wall. Ben touched his shoulder and he immediately vanished, reappearing in another fast-fading window vision, standing on the beach, still wearing his suit.

A tube train arrived at the platform, and as the doors opened, an anxious looking woman hurried past Ben and brushed his arm. Instantly, she vanished and reappeared at home sitting on her toilet.

The window vision politely faded from view to preserve the woman's dignity as Ben started to laugh with giddy excitement as he looked at his gemstone.

“This is *amazing!* I *could* be a super hero with this much power!”, he thought to himself.

Ben boarded the tube and stood next to a young man with his arm around his girlfriend, who looked at her lovingly as she was enthusiastically describing her dream home.

“My *dream* house would be stunning!”, she gushed. “It would be a beautiful white house with a balcony, next to a gorgeous beach.”

Ben confidently leaned closer, discreetly brushed his shoulder against hers, and waited for the magic to happen. But this time, nothing. Not a flash, not a teleportation, not a window-vision, nothing. He looked at his gemstone and that wasn't glowing either.

“Ok, now I’m confused”, he thought. But then Barnaby’s babbling instructions came back to him:

“It doesn’t work *if they tell you what they’re wishing for!*”

That’s when it dawned on him. This thing only worked when he wasn’t told directly what somebody was thinking about.

“That’s a pain”, thought Ben. “How can I control this thing if people can’t tell me what they’re wishing for?”

“And a four-poster bed with soft, white curtains...”, the girl continued.

Not one to be outsmarted by a technicality, Ben paused thoughtfully for a moment, and then noticed her smiling boyfriend, gazing intently at her.

“The boyfriend”, thought Ben, “He looks like he’d really like the house too”.

A huge grin spread across his face as he leaned carefully towards the smiling boyfriend and gently elbowed his arm. Instantly, the young man was teleported back home to his own sofa, playing video games. The surprised girlfriend looked around for her missing boyfriend.

“What the...!? Kyle? KYLE!!!”, she blurted.

Ben’s look of enthusiasm turned to confusion as another realisation hit him. It was a realisation of something that

dozen's of women in Ben's life had previously complained to him about, but it had never really sunk in.

His world-changing, mind-blowing realisation was this:

Sometimes... occasionally... guys don't pay attention to their women.

Ben felt very pleased with himself, like he'd just become a wiser man. He felt as though he'd just discovered a huge, global secret and felt like shouting it to the entire world. But that would have to wait, because right now, Ben had more urgent Matters to deal with. The tube train was pulling into the next station and passengers were starting to brush past Ben, exiting the train. In the surge, he was jostled off the train along with the rest of the crowd, and instantly, each person's immediate thoughts were becoming real; and it was quickly getting out of hand.

One woman found herself instantly back on the train kissing a man who'd been sat opposite her, upsetting his girlfriend and starting a fight. Another woman teleported back to her office where she threw a fist at her boss and sent him through the office window as if hit by a freight train.

A shove from another passenger sent people telekinetically flying left and right, clearing a straight path in front of him as he ran towards the exit.

Total chaos and a huge fight broke out as Ben was jostled from one angrily-reacting passenger to another, each one having their immediate, angry thoughts and wishes turned into reality. Fists became huge. People were punched with enough force to throw them across the platform. One man turned into a Wolverine type character and threw himself into the fight whilst others were either teleported away to safe places or suddenly armed with machine guns and bazookas. It was mayhem and carnage.

Ben finally managed to break away from the crowd as a policeman and a female paramedic brushed past him rushing to the scene. In an instant, the police officer was joined by dozens of reinforcements in riot gear, and the paramedic immediately duplicated into a dozen identical copies of herself, who went straight to work tending to the wounded.

Panicked and confused, Ben stepped back and watched the scene for a moment, then spotting a tube train leaving the adjacent platform, he scrambled to jump on board, carefully dodging and avoiding other passengers along the way.

Confused, frightened and upset, Ben carefully made his way to the almost-empty front carriage, avoiding passengers as he did so. He flopped into a seat and slumped his face into his hands. After a few moments, he pulled out the gemstone and looked at it in despair.

“This is chaos!”, he muttered to himself. “How can I make the world a better place like this?!”

As he grappled to make sense of the past fifteen minutes, he noticed a man sitting opposite him. He was sitting alone and quietly sobbing. In his hand, he clutched a wedding ring and small wedding photo.

No Matter how wrecked Ben’s life was, he’d spent several years now trying to attune himself to the needs of others, so it didn’t take much to draw Ben back to his default position of wanting to do something to help a stranger in distress.

“OK super-wishing-powers,”, he resolutely thought to himself, “lets give this one last chance. I’m guessing his marriage is in trouble and he’s wishing he was back together with his wife.”

Ben stepped over to the man, sat next to him and gently touched his arm.

“Mate, are you ok?” he asked sympathetically.

The man looked up at Ben with red, tear-stained eyes, and as he slowly dissolved from view, this time Ben heard the guy’s thoughts.

“I wish I was dead!”

Ben watched in horror as the guy slowly evaporated and a window vision opened of approaching headlights growing larger and brighter until...

THUD!

The train jolted slightly, brakes screeched and blood slowly ran horizontally along the outside of the window opposite Ben's seat. Trapped between the outside wall and the window, he could see the lifeless arm of the man still clutching his wedding photo.

As the train screeched to a halt and pulled into a station, the doors opened and a traumatised Ben leaped out and bolted for the exit.

=====

Desperate and frightened, Ben emerged from the Embankment tube station, scrambled across the road and thumped to a stop at the wall next to the River Thames. He buried his face in his hands and started to sob as he saw rapid fire flashbacks of the chaotic and devastating experiences of the past half-hour.

After about fifteen minutes he was finally starting to catch his breath and regain some composure as he slowly looked up and saw a young couple strolling arm in arm, then another guy with his arm around his girlfriend, then finally another couple standing nearby, kissing as they held each other's hands.

Ben slowly looked at his own hands as a bitter realisation set in.

“I’ll never be able to touch another person without risking catastrophe.” He thought. “Not a hug, not a kiss, not even the softest caress.”

In his mind’s eye, he saw Danielle’s face smiling at him and then the soft, gentle, teasingly sensual caress of her hand.

The vision of her hand softly holding his gently faded away and he was left staring at his empty hands.

Determination spread across Ben’s face as he pulled the gemstone from his pocket, glared at it for a moment and then hurled it into the Thames.

He paused for a moment, panting for breath and clinging to the wall, but his face slowly turned to confusion and then awkward discomfort as he wriggled and shook his right foot.

He pulled off his shoe and looked inside to discover the gemstone. Furious, he hurled it into the river again, but immediately, he cocked his head uncomfortably. Reaching into his shirt collar, he pulled out the gemstone. Once again he hurled it ferociously into the Thames, and once again, the gemstone reappeared, this time wedged under his armpit.

He repeated this desperate dance, discovering the gemstone in a different place each time he tried to throw it away; in his pocket, in his ear, up his nose, and finally, after an almighty, desperate throw, he stood, panting, and then started to sob in desperation. As he wriggled his hips awkwardly and shook his leg, the gemstone fell out of his trouser leg and stuck to his shoe.

“Nooooo!” He sobbed

Behind him, a nonchalant voice piped up out of nowhere.

“There’s no use throwing it away. That gift is yours to keep.”

It was Barnaby, strolling towards him like nothing had happened.

“This thing isn’t a gift, it’s a *curse!*”, Ben blurted furiously.

“Now, now, there’s no need to be ungrateful, you just need to learn how to use it properly.”, replied Barnaby calmly.

“Learn how to use it?! If I don’t know what people are thinking, this *gift* is uncontrollable! Did you know I just *killed* a man?!”, said Ben desperately.

“Oh, he was going to kill himself whether you were there or not; you just happened to speed things along a bit, that’s all.”, replied Barnaby.

“How is *that* supposed to make the world a better place!?” said Ben, trying extremely hard to resist the impolite urge

to throw Barnaby into the Thames and see if he reappeared as well. “I’m a danger to society like this! I’ll never be able to touch another human soul for the rest of my life without risking destroying the planet!!!”

“Alright, alright, calm down a bit, it’s not as bad as all that.”, said Barnaby reassuringly, “You know you *can* undo the wishes. All you have to do is wiggle the person’s nose and it’ll be as if it never happened.”

As if the evening hadn’t been weird enough, now it was going up a notch.

“What?! That’s ridiculous!”, declared Ben in solid disbelief.

“No more ridiculous than a gemstone that sticks to your belly button if you try to throw it away. Go on, give it a try next time.”, he said.

“There’s not going to *be* a next time!” yelled Ben “I quit!”

Barnaby remained totally unfazed by Ben’s desperation, and he could tell this was going more or less precisely as Barnaby had expected. On one hand, Ben found this strangely reassuring, but on the other hand, he still wanted to throttle the old nutcase.

“You can’t quit, this is who you are, it’s who you’re meant to be!”, explained Barnaby with calm resolve “I chose you very carefully, you know.”

Barnaby stepped closer and lowered his voice.

“Look, you’re not seeing the bigger picture here. When you learn how to control this gift, you can literally solve the world’s problems. World hunger: *solved*, world peace: *solved*, natural disasters: *solved*. If you use it right, this gift has the power to help the whole world!”

Ben wasn’t sure if he was being reassured or ripped-off, but either way, Barnaby was saying all the right words to get Ben’s head back in the game.

“But how can I know what people are wishing for if I’m not allowed to ask them?”, he asked quietly as he started to calm down.

Barnaby put his hand on Ben’s shoulders and looked him in the eye.

“You just need to get to know people better before you touch them. Think about your closest friends: you must have an idea of what they would dearly wish for.”

It didn’t take long for Ben to think of people with yearning needs. Everybody knew how much Angela yearned to have a gorgeous, slender figure. But everybody also knew about her overwhelming love for chocolate, crisps, cake, fizzy drinks, fast food, junk food, *all* food. There was even an urban myth around the department store that she was once spotted heating up a freshly opened packet of cat food in the microwave just to see if it would mix well with

ketchup... but despite everybody believing it and talking about it, Ben had never found anybody who was actually there to see it, so he wasn't too sure about that one. But either way, the thought of gifting Angela the figure of her dreams gave Ben goosebumps and tingles of excitement.

And then there was Rob. Poor old Rob. The guy was as scrawny and scruffy-looking as Ben was when he was sleeping rough. His teeth needed some serious attention, his wardrobe was a non-starter and his conversation would turn to nonsense when face to face with an actual woman, but his heart seemed to be in the right place, and the poor guy was clearly, desperately lonely. Yep, if he could help Rob find a soulmate, *that* would be a quest worth embarking on.

"Ok, I have a couple of friends who could use some help.", said Ben with a satisfied smile "But that's not the only problem. I mean I'd love to save the world and everything, but I don't want to spend the rest of my life alone.

I want to fall in love, and maybe get married and have a family one day. Right now, I can't even hold hands without risking disaster."

"Don't you worry.", replied Barnaby reassuringly "When you learn to use your gift properly, that won't be a problem at all. Trust me!"

Ben wasn't really convinced, but he desperately *wanted* to be, and in any case, just the idea of Angela and Rob

having their dreams come true was enough to seal the deal and get Ben back with the program.

“OK, I’m in!”, declared Ben resolutely “I’ll give this another go. World peace, huh?”

“World hunger too!”, replied Barnaby confidently “And remember, if it goes wrong, just give their noses a little wiggle and it’ll be like it never happened.”

=====

Ben already knew Rob’s cleaning route around the department store, so the next day he waited until he knew he’d find Rob in the womenswear department sweeping the floor. Right on schedule, there was Rob, and sure enough, he was distracted, gazing wistfully at a beautiful girl as she was stepping into a fitting room to try on clothes.

“OK, Rob, one girlfriend coming up.”, he thought to himself as he crept up behind Rob and carefully touched his shoulder.

Rob *instantly* disappeared. In fairness, Ben realised later he hadn’t really thought this one through, and the idea of Rob disappearing hadn’t really featured in the two or three girlfriend-wish-granting scenarios that Ben *had* actually considered on his way to work that morning.

But Ben's confusion didn't last long, because within moments, there was a scream from the ladies' fitting room, and Ben watched in horror as the same beautiful girl pushed Rob out of the fitting room. He was wearing nothing but his boxer shorts, and the poor girl was covering herself with the curtain and screaming for security.

Rob looked pretty freaked-out himself to be fair, and he turned out to be quite the sprinter when he was running scared. Ben leaped into pursuit following the sounds of screaming customers as he chased Rob through the store and eventually knocked him to the ground in the toy department by hurling a football at his head.

Ben grabbed Rob by the nose, gave it a yank and with a flash, reversed the wish, leaving him and Rob standing exactly where they were a few moments earlier.

"Rob, you horny goat! Maybe there's a *reason* you're still single.", growled Ben under his breath as he carefully backed away from Rob.

=====

The store was quiet as Angela stood at her cashier's desk counting the minutes until her next break. Ben approached with a bag of Chinese Fortune Cookies and sidled up next to her.

"OK, *this* time I'll get it right!", he thought confidently

“Care for a fortune cookie?”, he said innocently as he held the bag out to her.

“Ooh, don’t mind if I do.”, she said as her eyes lit up.

She broke open a cookie, took out the slip of paper and popped the cookie in her mouth.

“Your fondest wish will come true”, she said theatrically as she read her fortune aloud.

”Well let’s give it a try then. What *shall* I wish for?”, she said with fake enthusiasm “Ooh, I know!”

Angela looked over at Danielle and concentrated as she flicked the piece of paper. Standing beside her, Ben took a deep breath, touched her arm and waited excitedly... but nothing. Angela was still very much Angela, still staring at Danielle, but with look of shock that was quickly turning to horror.

Ben looked over at Danielle, and matched Angela’s horror with some of his own. Danielle was still Danielle, but she was now transformed into an heavily obese woman with extremely messy hair and ridiculously OTT makeup.

That was the point that they both freaked out.

“Ooh, ooh, ooh! I didn’t mean to do that, I was just joking! I think she’s lovely really.”, blurted Angela as she burst into tears and then ran off in the direction of the ladies restrooms.

Ben stared at Danielle, mortified, then realising he needed to act fast, ran after Angela.

He bursts into the ladies' restrooms just in time to see Angela disappearing into a cubicle, wailing in anguish.

Ben scrambled over the top of the cubicle with his legs in the air as he reached down towards Angela.

“Hey! What are you doing?”, protested Angela after a brief scuffle.

Then, a burst of light and Ben was back, standing next to Angela, flicking her fortune paper and staring at the thin & beautiful Danielle. Ben nervously stepped away from Angela and scurried away.

Chapter 5 - Telepathica

It was the end of a long shift when a demoralised looking Ben stepped out of the Staff Entrance with his backpack over his shoulder. Out of nowhere, Barnaby appeared and bounced enthusiastically towards him.

“Well? How did it go?”, he chirped. “A little more successful today I’ll bet!”

“NIGHTMARE!”, snapped Ben as he hurled his backpack furiously to the floor. “I’m a danger to society with this power if I don’t know what they’re thinking!”

“Alright, alright, lets just calm down a minute and plan our next move.”, replied Barnaby.

“There’s not going to be a *next move* unless you can give me the power to read minds too!”, Ben flustered.

“Oh no, I can’t do that; I’ve already given that one out.”, said Barnaby.

Ben stopped and glared at him.

“What did you say?”, he demanded.

“I said I can’t give you the gift of telepathy because I already gave it to someone else.” he said, starting to get nervous.

“This is PERFECT! Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?”, asked Ben with renewed enthusiasm. “All we have to do is team up together and we could be a superhero duo!”

Ben gazed wistfully into the distance with a faraway look in his eye.

“She could be called Telepathica and I could be Wishterious... or Wishman... or Captain...”

At this point Barnaby felt the need to interrupt.

“Alright, alright, come back down to earth Captain... Wishy Bloke. There’s a problem!”

“What?”, said Ben, mildly aggravated at his fantasy world being interrupted.

“Well, when I gave her telepathic abilities, she was all sunshine and buttercups. An endless helper, like you.”, explained Barnaby “But then... well, she changed. These days, she’s not what you’d call the helping type.”

Ben was on a roll now, and decided this was no time for negativity and excuses.

“The WORLD is at stake here! I’ll find a way to get her on board!”, he said resolutely.

“Alright, look, I can tell you where to find her, but *be very careful!* If you touch her there’s a fair chance it won’t end well.”, warned Barnaby.

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London has many exclusive, trendy wine bars, but even by those standards this one was a cut above the rest. It was a particularly secluded spot because most of its customers were the kind of people who simply wouldn't brag about being there on social media. Frankly, it was beneath their dignity to do such a thing.

A wealthy looking, middle aged businessman sat alone at the bar, and Daisy, stunningly dressed and brunette, sat nearby watching him carefully as her gemstone gently glowed.

Vivienne watched discretely at a nearby table. Both women had hidden radio earpieces.

“Got one!”, said Daisy quietly.

“I see him.”, replied Vivienne. “Same drill as usual: you hook him and soften him up, then I'll step in for the kill.”

Daisy started to rise elegantly from her seat, but out of nowhere a guy stepped in front of her with a confident grin on his face.

“Hi gorgeous, leaving so soon?”, he said as he leaned across her and put down his drink.

“The name's Antonio”, he said confidently with his hand outstretched towards her.

Daisy rolled her eyes, put down her glass and looked him in the face as her gemstone started to glow.

“Antonio huh? Funny, ’cause to me you look like more of a Craig Percival Edwards.”

This threw him straight off his game.

“Errr...”, he stumbled as he tried to get back on track. He wasn’t about to give up so easily, but he needed to get the upper hand again quickly or he’d never reach his prized goal of a night of passion with this beautiful girl. But like so many other men, he was about to desperately underestimate Daisy.

“You were about to tell me you’re an investment banker,” she said, confidently stepping into his bubble and getting nose to nose “but really you’re a postman.” she whispered.

Now the grin really dropped from his face.

“Do... we know each other?”, he asked, urgently trying to figure out if she was friends with one of his exes.

“Thankfully, *no*”, she replied dismissively, “what I’ve discovered about you in just a few seconds makes me nauseous, if I get to know you any more I’ll need to get my stomach pumped!”

“Errr... I’m not sure who...”, Craig muttered

“Listen Craigy-poops,”, Daisy interrupted “let me make this really easy... I’m not the girl for you, and I’m definitely not

the kinda girl who goes for threesomes with Loretta, the fun 'n' bouncy rubber playmate you keep in the attic.”

“I... I’ve got somewhere I need to be.” he flustered as he started to leave.

“Good call junior,” she said with a confident wink “Oh, and next time you head to a cash machine you might wanna change your pin number... 1234 is weyyyy too obvious.”

As he scurried away, Daisy stood to compose herself and make sure Craig hadn’t messed up her hair, makeup or outfit. That would have been a *real* nuisance. This wasn’t just a vanity thing, for her, the power-dressing was about much more than wanting to look good, it was about protection, and on evenings like this, she needed it.

For all the amazing things Daisy had learned to do with her telepathy, it didn’t make her bullet-proof. In reality, she didn’t have super-powers at all. It’s true that Vivienne’s protection powers extended to her as long as they were together and Vivienne was paying attention, but she hated to depend on Vivienne for her safety, and Vivienne couldn’t always be around.

When it came to the crunch, Daisy was extremely vulnerable... and she knew it.

So the power-dressing was all about theatrics. It helped to create the illusion of power, control and confidence. As long as she appeared to be confident, strong and

intimidating, nasty people would leave her alone, and in the five years they'd worked together, Daisy and Vivienne had upset some *very* nasty people. For Daisy, the elegance, sophistication and glamour was like a suit of armour and a weapon all rolled into one.

So after a careful check in her makeup mirror, she confidently walked over to her original target, the middle-aged businessman. She seductively took a seat next to him, looked him straight in the eye, slowly ran her perfectly manicured finger around the rim of his glass, smiled and said, "Why don't we find a quiet corner to talk."

She picked up his drink and elegantly slinked her way to an empty table in a distant corner of the room, whilst the businessman followed her excitedly.

As she took her seat, the man sat opposite her with a confident grin on his face.

"Now listen, sweetheart, before we get started, let's discuss the ground rules. First, there is no way I...", he said confidently.

But before he could start listing the conditions of their encounter, Daisy put her finger up to his lips "I think you need to let me do the talking.", she said quietly.

"I know all about the oil pipe deal with the Russians, and how you double-crossed them with the Syrians. I know about the deal with the Chinese that the Syrians don't

know about. I know exactly where you keep the documents, and I even know the combination number of your safe.”

The grin dropped from the man’s face and his look turned to thunder.

“What do you want?” he quietly growled.

Daisy gently slid a piece of paper across the table to him.

“The top number is the amount and the bottom number is the account to transfer the money to.”, she said quietly.

“You have three minutes. If you need six, then double the money!”

“I don’t know who you think you are or how you’re doing this, but you’ll never get away with it!”, he barked angrily.

“I already do... *sweetheart*... I go through men like you three times a week, and I’ve been doing it for a very long time.”, she replied calmly as she sat back in her seat.

“I’ll have you hunted down and...”, he threatened

But before he could describe all the ways he’d have her dismembered and fed to the various species of creature at his disposal, Ben suddenly appeared and plopped himself cheerfully into the seat between them.

“Hello!”, said Ben with a huge, friendly smile.

They both glared at him as Ben turned to the businessman.

“Don’t you wish you’d never stepped foot in this bar?”, he said, putting his hand on the man’s shoulder. Ben’s gemstone glowed and the man immediately evaporated and then reappeared back in his hotel room looking bewildered.

“Whoahh! What do you know, it worked!”, blurted Ben enthusiastically.

“*What* did you do with him?”, demanded Daisy impatiently as Ben slid into the opposite seat left vacant by the man.

“Oh, he’s safely tucked away.”, he replied cheerfully.

Back in her seat, Vivienne had seen this unfold and was watching carefully. In her hidden earpiece, Daisy could hear her warning:

“Daisy, this joker has some kind of power; I can see his gemstone. He could ruin everything if we’re not careful. Just watch your step and signal if you need me.”

Daisy was *not* impressed. “Do you have any idea how much money I’ve just lost?”, she demanded.

Ben picked up the piece of paper, still laying on the table.

“Wow, that **WAS** a lot of money!”, he laughed as he looked at the numbers.

But Daisy wasn't amused. She was glaring at him as her gemstone glowed brightly.

"Allow me to introduce myself.", said Ben cheerfully

"Oh, for goodness sake!", groaned Daisy

"Your name is Ben... gemstone power... secret wishes... touching people... don't know what they're thinking... all going wrong... can't read minds... need my help... make the world a better place, *blah, blah, blah, blah*, BIG FAT HAIRY BOO HOO!", she said, slamming her hand on the table.

"TAKE A HIKE, LITTLE BOY! You're sniffing around the wrong flower bed!", she snarled.

"Errr, right.", said Ben nervously. "But look, here's the thing: I can't even do my job any more. I mean, I can't be a security guard if I can't touch shoplifters?"

As aggravated as she was, that sentence was like click-bait to Daisy, and she just couldn't resist the urge to take a look. So she sat back and stared at Ben as her gemstone gently glowed into life.

It turned out to be solid gold entertainment as she watched Ben blundering through a string of supernaturally-charged security guard fails.

First, there was Ben chasing and grabbing a shoplifter who teleported straight onto his speeding motorbike as soon as Ben touched him.

Next came a guy that Ben grabbed after a short chase, but then lost him as the guy started running so fast he became a blur.

And to top it off, there was the final shoplifter of the day who, whilst hurtling down the street with Ben in hot pursuit, would normally have been caught and nailed, but today was his lucky day, because as soon as Ben got close enough to touch him, Ben was teleported, still running, straight back to the department store where he immediately ran into the entrance glass door.

Daisy loved it. “I can see your problem! Nice twist, that’s a *really* slick getaway trick.”, she laughed

“This isn’t funny!”, protested Ben “I’ve had to take unpaid leave until I can find a way to control myself!”, he said, rubbing his nose, still sore from the collision just a couple of hours ago.

“Free advice, sweetie.”, said Daisy as she softened up and leaned towards him. “I used to be just like you, all happy, smiley and full of beans. Helping people, save the world, give, give, give, give, give... It’s a *total* waste of time! The world isn’t worth saving! So if I were you, I’d spend your

time finding ways to make your shiny, new superpower work for *you* instead of other people.”

“Look, you don’t understand.”, urged Ben “I need you! I’m stuck with this power, and unless I learn to use it, I could end up destroying the world!”

He leaned closer to Daisy and lowered his voice “I accidentally killed a man already, and without your help it could happen again.”

“Killed a man?”, thought Daisy as she sat up in her seat and strained to read Ben’s mind. With her gemstone glowing, she watched as the man on the train was killed because he was wishing he were dead.

“You really *did* kill a guy...”, said Daisy softly. “...And it was untraceable... No way to prove it was you...”

“What!?”, blurted Ben. “That’s not the point! It doesn’t Matter if it can’t be proven: *I still know it was me!*”

Across the room Vivienne was trying to suppress her excitement.

“THIS IS IT! This is the way to end your nightmares!” she urged. “Play along Daisy, reel him in! *Win his trust!*”

Daisy looked up at Ben thoughtfully as she twirled her necklace around her finger.

“*Please*, just help me until I learn how to control this power, and then you never have to see me again.” Ben pleaded.

“Just ’til you learn to use it, huh?” she said thoughtfully.

“I *need* your help so that I *don’t kill anybody* with these powers.” He begged softly.

Daisy slowly sat back in her seat and covered her mouth to try hide her smirk, as Vivienne’s voice chirped in her hidden earpiece.

“Well, that is a shame dear boy, because we need *your* help to do *exactly* that!

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END OF ACT 1

AUTHORS NOTE

Hi! If you’re reading this note (and you didn’t just skip to the end to see what happens at the end of act 1) then you’re one of my favourite people in the world right now. Thank you for reading this far. It means (hopefully) that you found the first Act (the first 25% of the book) entertaining enough to keep reading and that’s really exciting for me.

If you'd like to see what happens next, just get in touch and you can be part of the exclusive little club of early readers for the next part of the book.

Many thanks,

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