

# Just One Wish

## CHAPTER ONE OF THE NOVEL BY JANETTE RALLISON

I would have expected to see this sort of line if, say, Elvis had returned from the dead to give a concert. Or if some eccentric yet ultra-cool billionaire was blessing the lives of deserving teens by handing out free sports cars. But I hadn't expected to see this many people lined up in the dark waiting for the Day-After-Thanksgiving sale at Toys "R" Us. Really, whatever happened to good old-fashioned procrastination? Apparently every resident of Henderson, Nevada, had come out, and it was still only 4:50 a.m. The store didn't even open for another ten minutes.

Madison zipped her jacket up higher as we climbed out of my minivan. "This is a prime example of commercialism run amok."

I didn't answer, because I was too busy rushing across the parking lot to the end of the line. Besides, Madison really shouldn't talk — every year she gets so many gifts you have to listen to her complain until New Year's about how she has to reorganize her room to fit them all in.

Madison is not only my best friend, but probably the only friend I could convince to get up this early to track down a Talking Teen Robin Hood action figure for my six-year-old brother. I myself wouldn't have woken up at four-thirty if it weren't so important.

Madison folded her arms around herself for warmth. We'd only worn light jackets because we hadn't expected to wait outside very long, but even the Nevada desert is cold at ten to five in the morning. Madison's usually tidy shoulder-length hair — she calls it strawberry blond, but it is way more strawberry than blond — looked as though she hadn't even combed it. I'd thrown on sweats and shoved my hair into a ponytail. Now I wished I'd thought to bring a hat.

Madison peered at the line in front of us. "You know, Annika, if you can't find a Teen Robin Hood, I'm sure Jeremy would be fine with a different gift. Maybe you could get him a real bow and arrow set like yours."

I thought about my compound bow, but I couldn't imagine Jeremy with something like that. It was nearly as big as he was, and he might not have the strength to pull it back all the way. The thought made my throat feel tight.

I shook my head. "It has to be Teen Robin Hood."

Jeremy had said he wanted the Teen Robin Hood action figure, and kept saying it every time he watched the TV show, so that was the toy I had to get him.

The husband and wife in front of us were busy planning their buying strategy. "I'll call you as soon as I have the PlayStation in my hands. You grab one of those bikes that's on sale. Throw yourself over it if you have to."

I pulled my sleeves over my hands to keep out the chill. Why did Jeremy have to love Robin Hood? Why couldn't he still want to be Hercules? I bet you no one was throwing themselves over the Hercules toys.

At five o'clock the doors opened, but it took us another twenty minutes to get in. By that time the aisles buzzed with people grabbing toys from shelves, and lines had already formed at the registers.

I told Madison, "Why don't you go stand in line while I look for action figures. It will take less time that way."

I didn't wait for her answer, just weaved my way down an aisle. I wanted to hurry past people but continually found myself trapped behind carts with mammoth toys that blocked the way.

I cut across the Barbie doll aisle and momentarily considered picking up a girlfriend for Teen Robin Hood, one who was a little more suitable for him than Maid Marion. I'm sorry, but the actress who plays her is a total flake. All she does is flutter, cry, and wait for rescue. She never would have made it two days in the real Middle Ages, which is why I started rooting for Robin Hood to dump her after the third episode. I bet even Barbie could have taken her on in a serious smack down.

Finally I found the action figure row. I walked up and down, scanning the shelves for the green boxes of the Nottingham characters. The four-inch set Jeremy already owned sat prominently on the shelf, but I didn't see the new, larger twelve-inch version, which was supposed to be available starting today.

Where were they?

The store couldn't be sold out on the first day at five-twenty-five in the morning, could they? Shouldn't they have a large shipment sitting around? I went to the next aisle. Nothing. And then I saw the endcap and the shelves of Nottingham green boxes.

A man with a dozen boxes in his shopping cart stood sifting through them. He wore a fake leather jacket that stretched over his stomach and an opal ring so large you could have used it as a serving tray.

I jogged over to the display, my eyes scanning the boxes for a Robin Hood. Maid Marion, Maid Marion, Little John, the Sheriff. . .

"Are there any Robin Hoods left?" I asked.

He didn't glance at me, just kept picking up boxes and checking them.

"I think I got them all."

"What? I need one for my little brother."

Now he glanced at me, his gaze sizing me up. "Then you're in luck. I'll sell you one for a hundred and fifty dollars."

"A hundred and fifty? They cost thirty-nine."

"Not once they go in my shopping cart. Then they're a hundred and fifty." He sent an oily smile in my direction. "That's the free market, kid."

I could see the boxes in his cart. They were so close.

I turned to the man, finally giving him my full attention. My mother claims I have a sixth sense about people. I know right after meeting someone what they're like, how perceptive they are, and what makes them tick.

When I was little, I used to wish I had some sort of superpower. I wanted to fly like Superman or climb up buildings like Spider-Man. But when you come right down to it, there aren't a lot of practical applications for superpowers. Being able to read people, however, comes in handy. It helps me deal with teachers and navigate through high school. I pretty much know what I can get away with.

Looking at this man now, I flipped through the possibilities in my mind. He wasn't the type — even if I had been wearing makeup — that I could swish

my long blond hair around and he'd relent on his price because a pretty girl asked him. Money motivated him, and nothing but. I didn't detect even an ounce of sympathy circulating through his heart, but still I tried. I would tell him about Jeremy and hope for once I was wrong.

With my hands out pleading, I said, "Look, my brother is sick; he has cancer, and he really wants a Teen Robin Hood. Can't you let me have just one?"

"For a hundred and fifty dollars, I can."

I took out my wallet, and pulled out four twenties. "This is all I have, and I'm going to need forty dollars to buy it at the register."

He snorted and went back to the boxes. "Then maybe your parents can find one on eBay. Of course they might be more than a hundred and fifty there. Robin Hood is the hot toy this season."

I shoved my wallet back into my coat pocket and turned to the shelf. If he was still looking through the boxes, then so would I. There might be one left.

There had to be one left.

I flipped through King John, Friar Tuck, Maid Marion — even her plastic figurine looked like it was about to faint momentarily — the Sheriff, another Friar Tuck, and Robin Hood. Robin Hood! I gasped and grabbed the box.

Unfortunately the man reached for it at the same time and yanked it out of my hands.

"Hey!" I yelled. "That was mine."

"Sorry, kid. I was here first. Besides," he smiled as he grasped the box, "possession is nine tenths of the law."

I peered around the store to see if any employees stood nearby — anyone who had seen him tear the box from my hands and who could help me. But all I saw were other shoppers who were too busy to notice me. This is one more reason why real life is nothing like the Robin Hood series.

The man went back to sifting through the rest of the boxes, chuckling, but he kept one hand on his cart, protecting it.

Madison is a big believer in karma. She doesn't think she ever needs to take revenge because sooner or later bad deeds catch up with people. I have my doubts about the concept. If it were true, wouldn't guys like this get struck down by meteorites?

Anyway, I figured it was time to hurry karma along. I took a step toward him. "Have you ever played football?"

He glanced at me suspiciously. "Sure."

I let my gaze fall on his bulging stomach. “But I bet you haven’t played for a while.”

“What does that matter?”

“Because I can outrun and outdodge you, especially with that shopping cart.”

He caught my meaning as soon as I spoke. I faked to my right. He moved to block me. I spun left, grabbed a Robin Hood from his cart, and dashed away.

My older sister, Leah — who has never touched a football because it might break her fingernails — says I’ve wasted most of my adolescence playing sports, but this is obviously not true. Running through the store toward the checkout line was just like running for a touchdown, except the other shoppers didn’t try to tackle me. Only the man in the fake leather jacket barreled toward me, but he wouldn’t let go of his shopping cart, so he kept getting caught up behind other carts.

I lost him long before I found Madison. She stood in the checkout line, now within sight of the registers.

“Here, buy this.” I shoved the box and my wallet into her arms. “And don’t let some overweight, half-psychotic man in a black jacket take it away from you. Start screaming if he tries.”

Her eyes widened in panic, and she clutched the box to her chest. “Annika, what did you do?”

“Nothing.” I checked over my shoulder for any signs of him. “Well, nothing Robin Hood wouldn’t have done. I’ll wait outside.”

Then I ran to the exit before she could ask more questions.

I waited in my minivan with the doors locked. Not that I expected the man to come outside looking for me. I knew he wouldn’t leave the store without his stash of Robin Hoods, and there was no way he’d get through the checkout line before Madison.

Still, it always pays to be cautious.

I sat huddled in the driver’s seat, looking at the dark sky and wishing that clouds hadn’t covered up the stars. Clouds always made it seem more like winter and less like Nevada.

Madison came out twenty minutes later. I unlocked the door, and she slid into the front seat, then relocked her door. She handed me the shopping bag and sent me a long gaze. “So do you want to tell me why an angry man pushing Robin Hood boxes around the store kept yelling, ‘Come out and show yourself, you punk! You can’t hide forever!’”

“Not really.” I looked inside the bag, just long enough to make sure it held Robin Hood, then I started the van.

“You risked my life for a stupid toy, didn’t you?”

“No. He didn’t know I gave you the toy. Besides, he wouldn’t have hurt you with all of those witnesses around.”

Madison fastened her seat belt. “The veins were popping out of his neck. A couple of employees went over to talk to him, and he yelled about thieves in the store, then threatened to sue them for their lack of security.”

I pulled out of the parking lot, checking to make sure no headlights suddenly flicked on and followed me. Only a few cars moved through the street, and I pressed down on the gas, urging the van to go faster so I could zip around them. “Technically I didn’t steal from him. It’s like he told me when he ripped the box out of my hands first. Possession is nine tenths of the law.”

Madison folded her arms, her disapproval clearly etched on her face. “You don’t need to turn shopping into some sort of extreme sport, Annika. It’s not supposed to be a duel to the death.”

“Jeremy wants the Talking Teen Robin.”

“He also wants to live on Sesame Street, you can’t just —” Her expression softened. In the space of one breath, her voice changed from berating to reassuring. “Jeremy is going to be okay. Lots of people with cancer recover completely. He probably has better odds than, say, anyone who rides in a car with you.”

I took my foot off the gas and let the van slow down but didn’t answer her. People kept telling me that Jeremy would be okay. He had top-notch doctors. Cancer treatments improved all the time. He was young and resilient. My parents were unfailingly optimistic in front of me — which was perhaps why I had my doubts. I knew they were faking it. Jeremy’s situation was more serious than they let on.

They were especially worried about his upcoming surgery next Friday to remove the tumor from his brain. Mom could hardly speak about it without tensing up. This is the downside of being able to read people. Sometimes it’s better not to know when your parents are lying to you.

Madison glanced at me, her voice a mixture of frustration and sympathy. “Look, Annika, no matter what you get Jeremy for Christmas, he’ll still know you love him.”

I shifted in my seat, looking determinedly out at the traffic. I didn't want to talk about Jeremy or his cancer anymore. I didn't want to think about the fear that daily found its way into his eyes, or the way he automatically panicked when you mentioned doctors. A month and a half of chemo treatments had made him hate hospitals. Last night he told my mom he didn't want to go to bed, because if he did, it would mean surgery was one day closer.

Out of the blue, he said things like, "Do people get to fly after they die, or only the angels?" Other times he swayed back and forth with worry and told us he didn't want to get buried in the ground. He knew it would be cold and dark there. I don't even know where he learned about cemeteries. None of us talked about that sort of thing. But now he refused to turn off the light when he slept.

"Besides," Madison went on, "he probably won't care about that toy two days after he opens it. If you want to do something nice, then spend a few hours playing with him. That would mean more to him than anything you could buy at a store."

She made me sound like one of those neglectful parents who ignores their children and then tries to buy their affection.

"Just drop it," I said. "You don't understand about this."

"What's not to understand? It's a textbook case of trying to shop away your feelings. People do it all the time, and I'm just saying —"

Right. I refused to believe someone could flip through a book and come to the chapter on how I felt. "Stop it," I said. "Until your little brother has cancer, don't tell me how I feel."

Neither of us spoke for a few seconds. Madison looked out the window with her lips drawn into a tight line. "Sorry," she said in a clipped tone. "I was trying to help."

I knew I had overreacted. It seemed like I'd done nothing but overreact since we'd gotten the news in mid-October. I snapped at people who reassured me. I argued with people who offered me comfort.

I knew I should apologize to Madison, but I couldn't do it. We drove through the streets of Henderson watching the darkness fade away, pierced by the rising sun. We still didn't speak. Madison turned on the radio, but the music didn't chase away the silence between us. I pulled up in front of her house.

"Thanks for coming with me," I said.

She reached for the door handle. "No problem. It was fun. Especially the part where I had to shield your action figure with my body so Mr. Gargoyle wouldn't see it as he stormed around the store."

I let out a sigh. "Just because the guy was unbalanced doesn't mean he would have killed you."

"Of course not." She flung the door open. "Besides, I think it's a good thing to face death every once in a while. It makes you appreciate life all the more." She paused halfway out of the van and looked back at me, her face ashen. "I'm sorry, Annika. I didn't mean that."

I hadn't even connected the two subjects in my mind, and my heart squeezed painfully in my chest. "Stop apologizing. Jeremy's not going to die."

"I know. That's what I keep telling you."

"I'll talk to you later," I said. I just wanted to leave.

"Right. We'll get together and do something."

"Right."

She shut the door. I pulled away from her house too fast, which was usual, and gripped the steering wheel white-knuckled, which wasn't. As I drove home, I took deep breaths and glanced at the shopping bag on the seat next to me. This would work. I'd read dozens of stories about how positive thinking had saved people's lives. I'd read studies saying the same thing. *Cancer Research* magazine said that reducing stress could slow the spread of some cancers.

And even researchers who doubted the link between positive thinking and healing couldn't deny the placebo effect. When doctors give participants of drug tests placebos, there are always a certain percentage of people who get better simply because they think they're taking medicine. Their belief heals them.

If a sugar pill can make an adult get better, then Jeremy could get better if he really believed it. All I had to do was to convince him he'd come through surgery with flying colors, and he would.

If the surgery was successful next Friday — if they were able to take out the entire tumor — then everything would be fine. But if they couldn't remove it all, or something went wrong — I didn't even want to think about the fact that sometimes people died on the operating table. I had to think positively too. ■

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