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AGAPÉD
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AGAPÉD
DEARER
WISHING STARS

BOOK I

HANNAH LINDSEY



The Agapéd Bearer: Wishing Stars

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*For those in need of someone who can save their weary heart,
in need of a celestial escape, or simply in need of a friend,
this book is for you.*



PART I



RANEMIR

“My dear Ariela, I have heard your call... and because of your loyalty to me, I will bestow to you a power to stop your Fallen Elysian brethren—a magic superior to everything you have known, for its origin is from me, and its light is of my light.

“Know this: the power that Darkness has over the Fallen is one that is now of Man. This magic I gift to stop their destruction is not for you, Ariela... it is for the human heart of *its* choosing; for though many hearts may be weak to Darkness, there are those who are even stronger with light. This magic—this light—will be unlike any other in the history of time. This magic... the Agapéd Magic... will choose a heart to home, one that is *good* and has the strength to face calamity.

“For as long as there is Darkness among Man, the Agapéd will be called. The heart of Man is stronger than you and your Guardians may know, so do not fret my dear Ariela, and know that I love you, for even a glow from the smallest star can be a guiding light in the deepest dark.”

For over 500 years, Ranemir’s gift of the Agapéd has saved our worlds from the Fallen, and now, it must do so again... lest calamity consumes all.



I

FALLEN STAR

Without a doubt, there were two things I knew to be one-hundred percent true: First, that middle school was the absolute worst, and second, that magic was real.

You could be new to the neighborhood, like me, already have a kid of your own, like Mom, or be as old as dirt, like Grandma, and agree that middle school—at any time period—was never the best experience. You looked forward to turning thirteen, finally discarding the title of “kid” and being able to watch PG-13 movies without hiding it from your mom, but then, you realized it was just a number. One foot onto the grimy floors of an educational building that could pass as a prison with poorly drawn artwork hanging on every brick wall, and you were still as pathetic as before. Someone was already older than you, mentally or physically or both. Judgment came from the teachers and the little sixth graders alike, making you feel even worse about your already low self-esteem. There was always someone prettier than you, no matter what class you were stuck in, and to top it off, there was no escape.

Maybe for some, middle school was a good experience. They must have had what I called “confidence.” I had never seen it when I looked in the mirror, and every time I tried to find some, fear squashed it like an ant and scraped it off on the curb outside of the school doors. The teachers would try and pull it out of me, but even after being in Keyport, New Jersey, for almost four years, none had succeeded.

It was partially my fault. I chose to be quiet in fear of being made fun of for

something as silly as playing video games daily, and I chose to listen more than talk when in group settings. In class, I would rather another student answer out loud even if it meant my participation grade dropped; saying the wrong answer and getting laughed at was not something my heart could handle. I didn't think my voice sounded funny, and I normally knew the answers, but I would rather not be labeled a Know-It-All either. I didn't want the whole class to think I was super smart—because I wasn't. I just studied the average amount, paid attention when the teacher's notes said "THIS IS IMPORTANT" written across the top, and wrote down the things I knew I would forget later—all to get that good grade. And *that* was all the confidence I needed. Plus, Mom loved seeing me do my best.

I truly believe, though, that even if I was confident, had the prettiest brown hair, wasn't covered in freckles, or didn't have glow sticks for legs... I would still be that unspecial, second-choice-of-a-girl. No matter what I did or what hobby I liked in any school I was in, everyone already seemed to have someone they would rather spend time with. I would try to be kind as Mom taught me, but kindness didn't have the same value as luck did in middle school. Some people were simply born to be talented and adored, and some happened to show up at the right place, at the right time, with the right people. The winning lottery ball for a life of uniqueness was never in my pot, and yet, I still tried to grab it every day.

But, I couldn't complain too much. I had a great mom to come home to and two *decent* friends who didn't mind me joining their duo.

"Aw, Mom packed me regular chips," Lily complained, dumping her pink lunch box's contents onto the cafeteria table, her blonde hair trailing off her shoulders. "Lisa, can you trade me for your Gushers?"

This was a weekly occurrence of Lily's personality, and normally, I wouldn't have minded trading... but I packed those Gushers this morning, *specifically* just for me. They were my favorite snack at the moment, and nothing was going to make me trade them.

Her face wasn't scary at all, but those pursed pink lips of hers sucked out all my confidence, and I couldn't handle the pressure. I caved. "Sure."

"You can't just keep taking Lisa's food, Lily," Jenny Kim exclaimed, half an Oreo cookie chewed inside her mouth, sitting across from Lily and me.

"Lisa doesn't care and could've said 'no,'" Lily interjected, eating my Gushers.

“I’d rather have the chips anyway. Mom never buys this kind.” I kind of lied, but it was true that Mom never buys Lays chips. Always Doritos. *Always.*

“What did you guys get on your English final?” Lily asked us.

“85,” Jenny Kim said, sounding like she didn’t really care but happy enough it was a B.

“I misspelled ‘Italian,’” I said, taking a bite of my ham and cheese sandwich, chuckling a bit.

Lily let out a laugh. “AH—Me too!” We both started guffawing at our stupidity.

“It was in the *prompt!*” Jenny Kim remarked. “You guys are *so dumb!*”

Jenny Kim and Lily were two of my closest friends at school... and kind of my only friends.

Lily was a teacher’s favorite, always answering questions and asking to help with everything. She was, however, pretty picky... about everything as well. She liked the nicest clothes, wanted to have fake nails on every day, and didn’t like it when her food touched. Her personality wasn’t one I would choose to be around, but Lily was the first one I met when I moved to New Jersey; therefore, I was thrown in with the cool and pretty girl group even though I didn’t feel like I fit in. Small body, no tan, one default hairstyle—the complete opposite of the word “popular.” Lily taught me a lot: how to do my makeup, what clothing was in style—even though I never noticed I was “out of style” before—and what TV shows were the best to watch. However, the most crucial thing Lily taught me was how to blend in and be liked. It just sucked that you couldn’t try something new without the fear of being judged and called “a freak.”

Jenny Kim was the opposite of Lily, with only confidence and gorgeous hair in common. She was friends with Lily before I was, so they were a lot closer. She’s Korean but was born in New Jersey, which seems to have helped her popularity in our small-town school. Unlike Lily, she was high up in the socio-educational food chain, not because she had the prettiest clothes or a blemish-free face but because she was amazing at basketball. Her best quality, the one I admired most but one nobody seemed to care about, was that she never was afraid to voice her opinion or live in fear of what her peers thought of her. I looked up to Jenny Kim because I wanted to be as confident as she was.

Though Jenny Kim and Lily invited me to join their friendship circle, I

always could tell they didn't care for me as much as they cared for each other... but, then again, it could've just been my self-doubt talking.

"What are you doing over the summer?" Lily asked us. Before we could answer, she had already decided to voice her plans. "*I'm* going to the Camp of the Arts."

I was a little curious. "Isn't that super expensive?" I took another bite of my sandwich.

"Has to be," she responded, seemingly proud of the fact that it was. "It's where you spend your whole summer with professional designers, musicians, and painters. I told Mom I needed to go if I wanted to become a fashion designer one day, so she is paying for me to go the whole summer." She ended her declaration by taking another sip of her strawberry milk.

"You're gonna be gone for two months?" I said, shocked.

"It's in Philadelphia, so it's only, like, two hours away. I can come see you guys on the weekends unless the designers need me there to model their new clothes."

Jenny Kim rolled her eyes before making eye contact with me. "Lisa, what about you?"

Next to Lily's summer plans, mine seemed so lame to say out loud. I had about one second to think of a better way to say "nothing."

"My mom normally plans something fun for the two of us. I think she might take me to the beach or something." I lied again, sort of. I mean she *could* surprise me with a beach trip, but the possibility was quite low since she hates traveling and sand. I quickly turned the attention back to Jenny Kim. "Are you going to visit your dad's family this year?"

"Nope, Mom's." She popped a cocky grin before taking a bite from her PB&J like she wanted us to be impressed.

It worked. "*You're going to South Korea?*" I exclaimed.

"Uh-huh! It's going to be so freaking cool! We leave in mid-June and will stay for about a month."

I was about to say something when Lily took back the conversation. "You better get a picture of the main city because no one will believe you when you get back."

"Duh—we are going to visit Seoul, and all the celebrities live there, too!"

Mom even booked us a tour at one of the agencies where Korean pop stars work!”

“No one will know who they are, so it’s not really gonna matter if you show off pictures of seeing them,” Lily retorted.

Jenny Kim looked at me, then back at Lily, and then back at me again. We both started to snicker. Jenny Kim was not afraid to point out Lily’s jealousy, and laughing at it was the best way to do so.

Lily’s ears turned red, and she scrunched up her glossy lips. She stared at us holding in our laughs, pausing for a long time. “... *Stop it!*” Her smile broke free from her spiteful stare, and she immediately grabbed her trash and headed to the garbage can.

Jenny Kim and I lost our composure, and the laughs wouldn’t stop.

The lunch bell rang as Lily threw away her trash, and Jenny Kim ran after her as I tagged along. Her black hair swooshed in her ponytail as she jumped against the back of Lily and pushed on her shoulders before sticking her landing. “Just admit you’re jealous!” she said for all those around her to hear, though not many cared to notice.

“You’re the worst friend ever,” Lily remarked in her high-pitched voice.

I continued to follow behind them giggling when I perked up enough courage to attempt to join in. I was about to grab Lily’s arm and tell her I’d be her friend if Jenny wasn’t when all of a sudden, Jenny Kim nudged me to the side. It was by accident, seeing as she didn’t pay attention to me almost hitting the brick wall.

My chuckling became more discrete.

“*Jealous~*” Jenny Kim sang, not letting Lily get away with her envious attitude.

Lily pushed her shoulder against Jenny Kim, which caused her to almost knock me into John Peters—right into the lockers.

“Sorry, John!” I quickly said, feeling the embarrassment turning my face pink.

“You’re good,” he said, never looking in my direction.

Lily and Jenny Kim didn’t even notice the incident, continuing their happy stride down the hall—laughing and locking arms.

I hunched my shoulders, gripping the straps on my backpack. All the confidence I had to join in on the escorting down the hall was gone. I had hoped they’d notice, but like always, it seemed I was third-wheeling again to the next

class.

As far as friends went, it wasn't like they were the best, but they didn't call me ugly or tell me to leave when I was around. They were the only ones, too, who bothered to give me the time of day when no other students did.

Would I choose them in a line-up of thirteen-year-olds to be my friend if a complete new girl said, "Hey, you seem pretty cool"? No, but our school was small... and I was shy. They were the only friends I had.

I quietly trailed behind them like I always did, keeping thoughts of Summer Break swimming through my mind to bring my mood back up.



One by one, kids started jumping into their assigned vehicles, fleeing the school car rider line as fast as possible. I took out my MP3 player and placed my earbuds in my ears, so I didn't have to wait in silence for my mom to arrive. Lily and Jenny Kim's moms had already picked them up from school, and I was stranded to wait by myself for the rest of the duration of 3:00 p.m. This was normal for me, though.

Mom didn't get off work until 3:00, and it took her about 20 minutes to get from the office to the school. She was an underwriter, but to be honest, I had no clue what she did. Something to do with math and accounting, but it was a little over my head. She used to work from home, and I enjoyed that, and I'm pretty sure she did, too. She loved picking me up early, spoiling me when I was sick, and spending all the school holidays with me.

Almost four years ago was when she started working from the corporate office near Keyport. I remembered her asking me if it was okay to move, which was odd because I was just a kid. We were currently living in Lexington, Virginia, in a dinky two-bedroom apartment. I was coming out of fourth grade, still questioning if Santa Claus was even real or not, and she asked *me* if it was okay. She didn't sugarcoat anything—didn't even bother to cover up her distraught emotions.

She just said, "Lisa, work offered me a better job, but it is all the way in New Jersey. I don't know what to do, so I want *you* to decide for Mom, okay?"

This was the first time I saw tears in her eyes. I thought only kids and actors in movies cried, so I knew it meant a lot to her.

I nodded my head, and she continued. "If we move to New Jersey, I will be

able to buy us a nicer house, and I'd be able to have the weekends off with you, but I won't be able to work at home. If we *stay*, I will have to take up some work on the weekends, but we will be here with all your friends, and I can work from home." She was sitting on the couch with both of her legs crossed like a toddler in kindergarten. My hands were grasped in hers as she waited for my answer.

Most kids would've said whatever their parents wanted to hear or would've made some type of deal where if they move, they will get more toys or the best room in the house. Kids would've merely picked the option that the parent convinced them to sound the best. Mom was right: I would still have her there and all my friends if we stayed.

I remember looking at Mom and telling her my answer. "I wanna move."

Little nine-year-old-me thought about the pros and cons and ignored them. I was a child, but that didn't mean I was inconsiderate. Mom clearly wanted more money for us and to be away from Grandma—starting a new life with just the two of us. Maybe she thought I wouldn't understand the true worth of money, or maybe she just wanted to have an excuse for why she shouldn't take it, but I could feel the worry coming through her words when she asked me. I was already happy where I was, not because of my friends. It was her. Choosing something to make Mom happy wasn't a hard choice at all—

"*Lisa!*" an all too familiar voice shouted, interrupting my thoughts outside of school.

I paused my music and put away my MP3 player as a white Corolla came to a stop right in front of me. Sounds of old 80s music were playing out of the rolled-down window. I walked a couple of steps and opened the door, slung my backpack to the car floor, and Mom started to drive off.

"Hey, sweetie! How was school?" Mom said cheerfully, turning down the music. She was wearing pastel green work pants with a white blouse and shoes to match. Her hair was clamped back with loose strands dangling next to her clay-made earrings. She only had a little mascara on, and her peachy lipstick had faded away since early that morning. She still looked as pretty as ever.

Mom was born with a type of coveted natural glamor, more so than most moms I knew. She didn't need makeup—never wore much, to begin with—and was skinnier and more toned compared to my friends' moms, but that also had to do with her age. She had me when she was only nineteen years old, and whenever

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we were out together, a lot of people would think she was my aunt or much older sister.

People say we looked extremely alike, but I didn't see it. She had thicker hair, tanned skin, and a narrower jaw while I was stuck with a baby face covered in freckles. We both did have the same eye color, but boring blue was nothing to brag about, and we both held the same destiny: never to reach above the height of five-foot-four without high heels.

"Good," I responded.

"Oh really? So your English final went well?"

Most parents would stop after their kid says "good." I thought most people assumed that "good" was code for "don't talk to me," but it wasn't. It was more like a test to see if you genuinely care about the person's day, or if you're just trying to break the silence. Mom always cared.

"Yeah, except I did such a stupid thing," I said.

"Oh, don't say stupid—did you spell your name wrong or something?"

"I misspelled Italian..."

"That's not so ba—"

"The prompt was 'Write a short narrative about an Italian chef.'"

Mom paused.

"Italian is in the title, Mom."

"Ah, and you—"

"*Misspelled it!*" I huffed.

Mom tried to hold in her giggles but couldn't help it. Her laugh seeped through her teeth, making her sound like an elephant with its nose tied, causing us both to laugh even more.

"I'm sorry, sweetie," she said, her laughter dying down, "but I'm glad you still did well. I'm making enchiladas tonight, is that alright with you?"

"Sounds perfect, actually."

The drive home beamed with serenity more than usual, making it perfect for daydreaming. All the clouds were plump and puffed, forming various shapes in the deep blue sky, a perfect near-summer day. The ports were packed with boats, most of which had just come in after a long day at sea, and many people walking their dogs flooded the sidewalks as we started to come to the heart of Keyport.

Our neighborhood was toward the end of the crowded area, right where

the trees began to pop up and the tall buildings began to dissipate. It was much nicer compared to our small apartment back in Virginia. Finally, we had a dining room and a garage instead of street parking. We now lived in the middle of the suburb—the house with the only light blue door—but it was surrounded by trees, providing us with just enough seclusion from the rest of our neighbors.

For it being only me and Mom, our little home was perfect, especially the laundry room—never thought I'd say that in my lifetime. This was where you'd find the prettiest view of the sky. The two skylights angled with the roof perfectly, and tonight—after enjoying the *best* enchiladas in the world—the moon was shining bright enough to paint the walls with a blue light.

I was taking out my clean clothes from the dryer, admiring the summer night sky. It was rather beautiful, so I glanced up for a while, not worrying about all the soon-to-be wrinkled clothes brushing against my bare feet. Thousands of stars were visible, forming various constellations, but I could only point out the Big Dipper.

When I threw my favorite light blue hoodie into my plastic hamper, a star twinkled—winked at me from the window.

Stars glimmer, but this one kept shining. Its glow grew bigger and bigger until it was the brightest one in the sky.

I didn't pay attention to the shirt I grabbed or if I even was holding a shirt. That star wasn't growing; it was *falling*.

As if it saw me gawping at its glow—a *purple* glow and not the usual yellow or white—that iridescent star *shot* out of the sky like a celestial bullet. Cosmic lightning of bright magentas and sunset oranges flared from the fiery orb, leaving a luminescent trail as it poked through Earth's atmosphere.

What the...

I thought it would do what shooting stars do, vanish as quickly as a blink. But then that pluming wisp of alien lights plummeted into the forest of my backyard. Crackles of thunder *boomed* when it landed, causing me to drop the clothing in my hand. The light fell about 100 yards away, but I swear I heard debris hit and bounce off the windowpane as the trees danced from the crash of the fallen light.

My eyes stayed widened. My stance was frozen. *Was that... Did I just see a shooting star? Things like that don't happen—things like that can't happen... right?*

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“Mom! Did you hear that?” I shouted through the house, my view cemented to the window. I knew she was still sitting in front of the TV, so she had to have heard the *boom*. I stayed paused but didn’t hear her respond.

My leg hit the plastic hamper as I rushed out of the laundry room and through the kitchen, turning right to go toward our living room. Mom was lounging on the couch on her cell phone. By the tone and sounds of irritation coming from her voice, I knew it had to be Grandma, which meant she probably wouldn’t mind if I interrupted.

“Mom,” I started again, “did you not hear that?”

“Hear what?” she asked, turning her attention to me.

“The huge *boom* that just happened in our backyard.” My voice was growing louder. I walked past her to go toward the window near where she was sitting and peered through the blinds, thinking maybe some neighbors would be outside to investigate. “Something fell from the sky and hit our backyard. There was a huge purple light and everything—”

I stopped my sentence when I turned back toward Mom. The side window, directly behind our couch, had purple light glowing through it. It wasn’t the best view, but the light was still shining just enough to prove to Mom I wasn’t seeing things.

“Something *did* fall!” I started running back to the laundry room, gesturing for her to follow. “Mom, come on! It’s in the trees behind our house! You can get a better view from the laundry room!”

I heard Mom close up her flip phone, but she didn’t follow. She instead went out the back door and stood on our small concrete patio that faced the forest of trees. After I noticed, I ran out to join her. Right amid our forest, the purple light was fading in and out like a candle’s flame. *I can’t believe this is happening!* My smile was so big. *I have to be the luckiest girl in the world right now—I cannot wait to tell Jenny Kim and Lily about this!* Finally, *something exciting happened to me for once!* When I glanced back at Mom to see her reaction, she did not seem impressed. She rubbed her eyes and furrowed her brows.

“I don’t see anything.”



2

THE DREAM

The relationship between Mom and I had always been pretty great. We liked mornings, binge-watching movies, eating pineapple on pizza, and most of all, we *always* saw eye-to-eye on everything—except on mushrooms (Mom thought they tasted gross, and I didn’t understand why at all). If I thought a new movie was lame, Mom did, too. If I thought the cashier at the grocery store was intentionally rude to Mom for trying to find the exact change at the bottom of her purse, Mom thought the same.

The biggest thing—and, quite frankly, the most important thing—was that I would *never* put on an elaborate show to play a joke on Mom, and she was the same. Pranks were something our family didn’t do. We enjoyed watching others pull pranks on TV, laughing until we cried, but that was all. Personally, it was not in my nature to be the center of attention or risk being yelled at by planning out some crazy lie just to say “I’m kidding” at the end. I would only fib a little to cover up my staying up late or procrastinating my homework, but that was *it*.

So, Mom not believing me about the *giant purple beacon in the middle of the forest* did not compute in my mind.

“What do you *mean* you don’t see anything?” I shouted, baffled. “Mom, there is a giant glowing purple light out in the middle of our backyard!”

Mom rubbed her eyes again, middle fingers squishing near her tear ducts, and traded stares from the forest back to our neighbors’ houses. “I don’t see what you’re talking about, sweetie, and what were you saying about before—about

that loud noise?”

I was starting to lose it. “Something *literally* fell from the sky, Mom. It landed and made a huge booming sound—” I started adding hand motions to prove my point.

All the while, Mom just kept staring at me with her arms crossed.

I gestured toward the laundry room window to finish my argument: “—debris even *hit* the window!”

Mom’s cell phone started ringing in her pocket, distracting her from my evidence, but my focus was back on the window. Outside the laundry room, Mom had this gnome, a kitsch form of art if there ever was one. It came with the house, and we never bothered to get rid of it when we moved, so it was now a staple of our garden. The gnome stood right next to these blue flowers, and it was the *most* unstable thing ever made. A bird could knock it over if it even just perched atop the gnome’s hat, but at that very moment, it was standing perfectly straight, proudly watching over the garden. The mulch around the gnome even looked properly placed.

This should’ve fallen over from the wind alone. I could’ve sworn that rocks and dirt hit the window. I was now starting to question if I was going crazy or not. Turning around, I also noticed everything was really quiet. *Where are the neighbors?* The only things I could hear were Mom answering her phone and an owl cooing in the distance. *Shouldn’t the Chambers’ dog be barking by now? Why does it seem like I’m the only person who saw anything?*

“Hey, Ma, can I call you back? Give me one minute,” Mom quickly concluded, closing her phone before walking back over to me.

I was now standing in the grass, barefoot with my long hair tangled at the curled ends, looking pretty stupid, glancing back and forth from the gnome to the window to the neighboring houses.

“Lisa—” she started, but I couldn’t stop talking about the phenomenon.

“Look, Mom, I *swear* something crashed to Earth! It’s out there—look it’s *still* glowing—and I promise you I heard a loud noise, too. Are you *sure* you don’t see a purple light out there?”

Mom looked once more, but I could tell she had already given up after she saw nothing the first time.

“I think all those late nights playing video games have gone to your head,

Lisa. Grandma just called, and I better call her back before she gets upset, and *you* still have school in the morning. Let's just go inside and call it a day." She had already left the back porch before I could even respond.

I waited a couple more seconds to see if something would happen. I thought about running out there, grabbing whatever it was, and bringing it back to prove I wasn't lying, but that idea was interrupted by her yelling, "Lisa, come on!" through the screened door. I walked back inside like she said to avoid getting into trouble. My mind was just not ignoring it though.

The purple light still glistened from behind the trees as though it were reaching out to me—taunting me with its mysterious aura—but I slowly shut the door.

I waited patiently on my bed, squeezing my plushie stuffed cat, listening for all the cues Mom gave off to signal she was about to go to sleep. I heard the five creaks from the stairs that led up to the second floor of the house, trailing toward the bathroom. After about ten minutes, I saw the bathroom light go off; she had just finished her nightly routine and brushed her teeth. Her door then shut, and the white noise machine turned on, which meant I had about ten more minutes of being in silence before I could make my way to the back door.

A constant plethora of questions ran through my mind in those bitterly slow minutes. *Why couldn't Mom see the light? Can only certain people see it? Maybe this is a good thing—maybe it is a star! I fiddled with the toes of my stuffed cat. Wouldn't it have made a bigger crash? Can it be an alien, like in the movies?* I eventually got up and paced the diameter of my purple rug, going back and forth from wall to wall, and every couple of seconds, I would check my window to see if the light was still glowing amid the trees.

It was still there, providing a dim, jeering light to my bedroom.

As the last minute of my countdown began, I threw on my oversized sky-blue hoodie and some white socks. *20 seconds left.* I grabbed my black sneakers, but instead of putting them on just yet, I held them close to my chest to subdue as much noise from the floorboards as possible. *8 seconds left.* I sat on the edge of my bed.

3... 2... 1...

The ten-minute mark had now passed. It was time.

Quietly, I opened my bedroom door and started to head downstairs. I knew

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exactly how to step onto the stairs without creating any noise (due to the many midnight Oreos runs to the pantry), leaning toward the wall and skipping the fourth one down. Once downstairs, I had a little more freedom to move around swiftly since I knew Mom wouldn't be able to hear me too well with her white noise humming. So, I laced up my sneakers and went straight to our garage in search of our flashlights. Found them and picked up the biggest one, testing it to make sure it worked by flashing it once along the wall. It worked as it should. Slowly, I opened the back door, giving myself just enough room to slide by. Beyond the trees, the purple flickered bright, making the shadows of the lush branches softly dance in the breeze. *It's still there.*

I ran, not very fast... but fast enough to avoid being seen by any night-owl neighbors. The yellow beam from the flashlight began to grow steadier as I inched closer and closer to the trees.

The cool magenta hues beamed softly through every tree branch, teasing, calling out to me.

How can Mom not see this? There wasn't a definite entrance to the midst of the trees, but to my right seemed more worn down than the rest. I took a deep breath and stepped forward, following the amethyst glow.

My heart started to race. Normally, I would be hesitant to run straight toward the woods—too many spiders and unknown animals waiting to crawl on me without my consent—but not this time. Over and over, ideas ran through my mind of what the light could be. *It's gotta be a star! But wouldn't it be bigger? Is it a part of a satellite—could it explode? Why didn't it burn through the trees?* I picked up the pace, getting snagged by branches and tripping over more tree roots. *How many more steps? Ten? Twenty? I want to see it! I have to!*

I reached the middle—a small, treeless circle of the forest with patches of grass growing at random in the dirt—and there it was. The purple glow came from a... floating light not but three feet off the ground, wafting, beaming, no bigger than a basketball. I couldn't tell if it was a star, but the center of the light glowed a soft white, fading from orange to magenta, and then to a neon purple. Warming energy plumed off the flame like fire, but after stepping closer, it was more like warm-blanket heat: comforting. It moved delicately like loose ink in water, dancing up and down with its light flares, the prettiest thing I had ever seen in my life.

“Wow,” I said softly. I couldn’t take my eyes off of the light and slowly started to pace around it. I circled the glowing flame two times, then three, then four, checking to see if it was an illusion or something real. *It’s real, alright.* I didn’t see any weird space debris, so it being an alien or a part of some satellite seemed unlikely. My next guess was that it had to be a fallen star. *Is this what shooting stars really look like up close? Aren’t they supposed to... shoot away and not float in slow motion?* I waited a bit longer to see if it would move, make noise, or do something weird, but it just kept floating in the same spot. Kept taunting me—*begging* me to inch closer.

So, I did.

Still, the hovering orb of quiet flames didn’t budge, and the only sounds to be heard were from the crickets hidden in the grass and my heartbeat blaring in my ears.

I didn’t see anything threatening about it, and honestly, it was quite soothing to admire. *Kind of looks like the glowing jelly in a lava lamp this close... Wonder... Would it burn me? Wait—no, it didn’t burn the trees or singe a single leaf..* I then moved even closer, extending my arm slowly. “What happens if I touch—”

The moment my index finger made contact with the light, something pushed me back onto the grass—stronger than a mere gust of wind—and I saw the light coming straight toward me. It all happened so suddenly that I was unable to react, dropping my flashlight and falling on my back hard. Twigs snapped beneath me, and my spine ached from the tree root I thundered upon. When I recollected myself, I stood up quickly.

The light was gone.

“Where did it—”

At that moment, I remembered what had just happened. I didn’t even dust off the dirt from my thighs or get the mess of leaves out of my hair. My eyes grew wide, and I started patting myself down as if I was going to somehow find the light pocketed in the seams of my hoodie. My frantic search soon became a frantic realization. The light... it was what zoomed toward me. It was what pushed me down and had now vanished. *What if... it’s in me—inside my chest right now!*

I wanted to shake off that assumption, seeing as I wasn’t glowing and felt completely normal, but I knew what I saw.

Though, what followed was nothing but woodland stillness, as if a free-

floating flame didn't just smack me to the ground. The trees were quiet, and the crickets continued chirping. Just like before, it seemed I was the only one who saw or heard anything. *I'm not crazy, right? That just happened. No wind pushed me—there isn't even a gust of breeze hitting the trees. I clearly saw a light fly into my body... So why does everything look and feel so normal?*

With the night continuing its midnight humming, I picked up my flashlight I dropped when I fell and started walking home. I followed the path I formed in the weeds of the forest floor to make it to the back door, but my mind was not resting. *Did I really see something? I had to have! What if something happens to me? I can't tell Mom. She'll think I'm crazy. Plus, she won't believe me anyway. She will just think I'm lying and get on to me about going out past 11 p.m.*

Just like before, I took off my shoes before going up the stairs—skipping the fourth one down and hugging the wall—and headed to my room. I went straight for my full-length mirror to see if I looked any different. Besides my ankles and knees being dusted with dirt and scratches from the trees, I still looked like a normal, though slightly over-freckled girl. I saw the time reflected in the mirror. 12:01 a.m.

I thought going to sleep would stop the worry, so I quickly wrapped myself in my blanket and shut my eyes, faking sleep until I drifted off. *Just sleep it off until tomorrow. Everything is fine.*

The worrying couldn't wait until tomorrow. I could *not* fall asleep. Perhaps, it was fear or some form of excitement, but my heart and mind were working together to make me continuously relive what just happened. *What if that light is just swishing around in my bloodstream right now—what if the government does experiments on me? Would they know—what if they know right now—*

I grabbed my stuffed cat to see if it could offer some form of comfort.

Nothing. Its too-cute face stared lifeless into my conflicted soul, making my worrying even worse than before.

Just go to SLEEP!

I made a cocoon out of my blanket with me inside, ignoring the smell of grass still in my hair as best as I could, but forcing myself to sleep had never been this difficult before, even on Christmas Eve. *You're fine, you're fine! Stop thinking about it for now!* I was not sure when my mind stopped chasing the unknown answers, but I soon tired myself from worrying enough to fall into a deep sleep.

An eternity of nebulas and stars surrounded me—vast outer space—as I stood on an island made of black sand. Planted on a barren land floating freely amongst the galaxy.

Where am I?

I turned around on the dune of onyx pebbles to see Earth behind me, so close I could practically touch the planet and ripple the oceans with my finger. Cosmic colors of the universe hummed music in my ears. Peaceful melodies, resembling a theremin's waves moving in slow, deep rhythms, played, mixed in with delicate violin strum patterns.

A force—my heart—yanked my attention away from the star's view of Earth, forcing me to face the center of the onyx-colored island.

The flame of purples, magentas, and sunset oranges was there—what I saw in my backyard—and it was being held in the palm of a figure's hand. The silhouette wasn't dark or shadowy; it was bright. It resembled a human but the intensity of the light covered all sense of detail encased on its body.

I ran toward the bright figure, and upon reaching their presence, they held out the warm light to me, like a gift.

"What's this for?"

They didn't answer but nudged the purple floating orb they held closer to me.

I extended my hand, and the ground shattered like glass beneath my feet. I free-fell into darkness—nothing but the glow of purple falling with me—and the man of light vanished. I didn't scream but focused on grabbing the glowing light.

I grasped the flame and pulled myself toward it, cradling it as a toddler does with her favorite toy. As my hand held the flames, I stopped falling. I was now floating—flying.

And the light started pulling my hand in the direction in front of us.

"Where are you taking me?"

It didn't respond or change speed. The darkness started to reveal objects again, bits and pieces of shadows forming in the distance. A dark blue night sky came into view, followed by clouds, then houses, and soon...

"My backyard? But why?"

I flew to the edge of the forest, and the orb, shining with gradients of a sunrise,

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went into the midst of the trees like before. I took one step forward in hopes to catch it again—

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

The sound of my alarm clock pierced my ears, jolting me awake from sleep. I hadn't felt that tired in a while, rubbing my eyes and giving a good stretch to my arms as I slammed on the "off" button. I lay on my back, looking up at the ceiling as memories of last night resurfaced. Memories of the dream that was so bizarre it truly felt as if I were in space, following after the orb of light into my backyard forest.

I rarely dream at night, and when I do, it's always something simple and usually makes sense. This was by far the craziest dream I ever had, and the only explanation was because of what happened last night.

My palms rubbed deep into my eyes as I sat upright in my bed, the sun beginning to peek through my window. *Dreams don't mean anything. Just gonna go to school today, make it through the weekend, finish school Monday, and enjoy the summer—just Mom and me.* I jumped out of bed and decided to just spend the day like a normal Friday.



Mom came around 3:30 p.m., and our ride home was a pretty normal one for a Friday night. We grabbed some fast food, made it home, reheated the food, and watched TV as we ate. When all the to-do list items were checked off for the day, my mind remembered the dream I told myself to forget.

Mom had been sitting in our tiny dining room since finishing dinner, working on budgets and card payments on her work laptop. I was fidgeting with the idea of telling her about the dream. She didn't believe me about the light. No *way* would she even consider my dream to mean anything significant either.

After a couple of minutes, I came up with a solution. I got up off our couch and slowly made my way to the kitchen to dispose of my trash and wash my dishes.

"Hey, Mom?" I asked quietly, still walking toward the kitchen. "Do you ever have dreams that seem... real?"

She didn't break her stare from her computer—the glow enhancing the sapphire hues around her pupils. "Yeah, of course. Everyone does at some point."

So far my brilliant strategy was working.

“Well, what if you had a dream about something that happened recently?” I threw my trash away and casually walked to the sink. “Like, if you went to the store and saw something suspicious, and then, that night, you dreamt about that same moment again... would that mean something?”

“Did you have a weird dream about that glowing light you were talking about last night?”

My heart had never leaped so fast in my life. *Did she somehow know?* I just acted calm about it while I started rewashing all the forks in the sink again.

“Oh, that was just the neighbor’s car,” I lied. “I—I just had a dream about school and my classes and stuff. It just seemed really real, like I relived it all over again.”

Mom must have been pretty distracted because that had to be the worst lie I’ve ever told. My face was directed toward the sink, and I could only hear the slow sounds of typing coming from the keyboard. For about five seconds, that and the running sink water were the only noises filling our house. I was starting to think she didn’t hear me.

“So, Mom,” I continued, “what do you think?”

“Oh—sorry, sweetie!” Mom responded. She sat back in her chair and picked a spot in the room to ponder over my question. “Well... I think when you dream about something you experienced before, it just means you are conflicted about something during that time. It could also mean that something about that day was important to you, and your mind just replayed it. Then again, it could *also* just be that it was the last thing on your mind before bed—all of this is subjective and just my opinion. I wouldn’t read too much into it if you only dreamed about it once.”

Hearing Mom tell me not to worry about it did give me some sense of relief, and that was all I was hoping for. I accepted her advice with a smile and an “Ah, that makes sense” reply, and we continued with our night.

The last time I checked the clock, it said 11:45 p.m. I had spent my night gaming—forgetting about the freak experience in my backyard and the dream—but soon, my eyes started becoming lazy, and I couldn’t focus on what my character was doing anymore. I shut off the console and quickly crawled into my unmade bed before my drowsiness wore off.

My eyes shot open in view of my dark bedroom. My back was all sweaty. My heart was pounding hard and quickly. *Thud, thud, thud*—thumping loudly in my ears. I had the same dream *again*, only this time the orb hit me with a cannonball of light when we landed in my backyard, jolting my eyes awake and out of the dream world.

My clock beamed 2:20 a.m., the only light visible besides the faint glow of the moon through my window.

I rubbed my face with both hands. *Why am I dreaming this? Why does it feel so real?* I was getting frustrated with everything that was happening, and I didn't know what to do. I tried to ignore it—tried to act like I wasn't going crazy, but this... this happening *twice* is no mere coincidence. I had to accept the fact that something *did* happen to me the night before, a glowing ball of light *did* fly into my body, and my dreams *did* have something to do with it.

I sat up in bed with my feet hanging off the side, hair tangled and damp from sweat. I remembered what Mom said about dreams, that they could be showing me I'm conflicted about something. *Duh, Lisa, but why the forest?* I glanced outside my window.

The forest looked completely normal.

Then—call me crazy—I thought my dream was telling me to go back out there.

It was the middle of the night, and I was about to run out to the dark woods alone because my dream told me to. Everything about the situation screamed, “main character of a horror movie,” and there was *nothing* rational about it. But, I just had a gut feeling that something out there was waiting for me.

The heart-compelling forest glared at me through the window.

Lisa, you are officially insane.

With a deep breath and a head full of questions, I headed back downstairs.

I grabbed my flashlight, put on my shoes—not bothering to tighten the laces—and rushed out the back door in my pajamas. Summer dew seeped through my sneakers as I started running to the trees again. I was regretting not putting on socks, but that feeling was overshadowed by thoughts of the strange fallen star and my otherworldly dreams. Reaching the forest's edge didn't slow

my pace, and I sprinted down the same path as before, avoiding the roots I tripped over the first time. Before, I had a glowing light to follow, but this time, I was running blind. I figured I would skim past something—anything that would help answer my questions as to why this all was happening.

I made it to the flat clearing, the small perimeter that grew no trees. The moon was shining brightly above, making it easy to see everything around me without much use of the flashlight.

There was nothing: just dirt, rocks, and the sounds of the wind hitting the trees. I paced back and forth a bit, waiting to see if something would happen. Crickets chirped, owls cooed, and my shoes crunched on the dirt. Nothing otherworldly or sounds of mysterious creatures to be heard.

Darkness shadowed me, and the comfort of the moon diminished the more my eyes surveyed the space beyond the trees. *Come on, light—dream—weird fallen star thing—show me something, please?* The sense of being alone in the woods was starting to creep up on me, sending rivers of chills down my arms and legs as the summer breeze blew in. I began to hear twigs breaking in the distance, shooting my head left and right. My body wanted to leave, but my heart said stay—*stay just a little bit longer.*

After a couple of minutes of walking in circles with nothing but the woods turning eerier by the second, I dropped my flashlight to the ground and squatted down on my feet with knees and hips bent, covering my face with my hands. I didn't cry but sunk into a sense of defeat—a sense of pure agitation.

“Can someone, *please*, just tell me what I am supposed to do?” I exhorted softly, feeling my frustration begin to take over in the form of tears.

A fluorescent blue glow started to peer through the space between my knees and drooping hair. I uncovered my distressed face from my hands to see flowing rivers of aquamarine light forming about ten feet in front of me. The glowing ribbons were drops of liquid crystals, flowing and dancing like saturated dye through clear water, but with a sense of direction—all gravitating toward a set axis point that was in a random spot in the air, three feet above the ground.

I stood up, bewildered at the phenomenon.

The glowing azure aura grew to the height of an average adult in just a matter of seconds. Blue ribbons transformed into sheets of light. As the last strand of blue met the axis point, they all combined and beamed a bright glow. An unusual

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soft chiming sound was made when the light glowed brightest, but before the realm of blue vanished, an ethereal figure came walking out of it.

She was the most beautiful lady I had ever seen. Her stature was tall with perfect posture, and her long, blush blonde hair was styled in a thick braid that rested along her left shoulder, swimming down past her waist. The moonlight glistened off of her layered garment, which consisted of a thick, cyan leotard underneath multiple sheer fabrics. She embellished her forearms, ears, and ankles with dainty bands of rose gold, almost matching the color of her hair. Her waist was girded with an intricate belt, but the moonlight's radiance wasn't strong enough to show all that was attached to it.

I stood stationary as I watched her appear in front of me. I was not about to be the first one to speak—I was too scared and intimidated to even think of something profound to say.

Luckily, she broke the second of silence. “Oh, I hope I didn't frighten you,” she said, giving a slight bow as she spoke. Her voice was soft, sincere, and celestial.

Quickly, I shook my head before saying, “No, I'm fine.” My voice was pathetic compared to hers.

I guess that was all she needed to grow more comfortable with me because she just started walking toward me, exclaiming, “That's so good to hear. I am Inna, a Keeper of Stars. I was not told we would be meeting out here, and I was worried you might run away after seeing someone appear out of nowhere. I am glad, though, it has worked out for the best.”

When she spoke, she was very articulate and took the time to say each word perfectly, ending her speech with a glossy grin.

The angelic lady was now standing about six feet in front of me. Any normal person would have been conscientious about this whole situation—a glowing ball showing up, a stranger walking out of it asking if you're okay—but I was not normal. I had one question I'd been wanting to be answered, and if anybody could do that, it would be *her*.

“Do you know why that star fell from the sky, and why it flew into my chest?” I asked. I sounded silly—a toddler telling her daydreams—but the lady dressed in the colors of the ocean smiled and knelt in front of me, making me just barely taller than her. Her face was glossy and wrinkle-free, and her eyes—the color blue never looked more enchanting until I saw the hues underneath her long

eyelashes—complemented her tan, glowing skin.

She stared at me and made a smile, the kind of smile that was half-happy and half-sympathetic. “I do.”

My heart and mind were finally released from their burden of uncertainty. I didn’t have to guess whether I was just seeing things or if something was wrong with me. That internal worry I felt for two days was transformed into excitement, taking my mind on a ride of all the possibilities of what a fallen star could mean.

“So it *was* a star!” I said, smiling at the newfound answer.

Inna replied, “In a form, yes. A Wishing Star fell, not to be confused with a normal star.”

“But I didn’t make any wishes the night it fell—do they do that often, fall from the sky like that? Are you from a star, too?”

She quietly giggled at my questions, staring at my freckled enthusiastic face, making the sweetest laugh. “You said it ‘flew’ to you, correct?”

“Yes! Flew right into my chest.” I pointed to my heart.

Inna held out her left hand, palm facing up, her knees still bent. “Lend me your hand.”

I did as she asked, placing my palm upwards as well. She took her free right hand and started moving her fingers in an “S” shape above my palm. A glow trickled from her fingers, bringing forth a blue ball of light. It was similar to the purple and orange one I saw in the forest and in my dreams, but hers floated in the shape of a teardrop. It glistened like the ocean, radiating a gloss of seafoam green and turquoise blue.

And she just formed it out of thin air.

“What you saw, was it something like this?” she asked.

“Yes! But it was more like a purple and orange flame,” I uttered, mesmerized by the sparkling wonder floating above our palms.

“What you saw that night was magic. It does take the form of stars in the night sky, but once that magic has fully formed, it will burst and find the first vessel it has a magical connection with. All magic looks different, and this is just the essence of mine—what it looks like in a physically projected form. Normally, when a Wishing Star releases its magic, it does not show a physical form like this; it will be unseen and can only be felt in the heart and mind of the person who possesses it. The magic that came to *you* is much more enigmatic and

unpredictable.”

She softly smiled, letting me glimpse at her perfectly white teeth beneath her pink lips. “It *chooses* its vessel, whereas all other magic is drawn to a specific person based on their magical connection and lineage.” The lady paused for a moment and took a deep breath. “I came here because this magic, the Agapéd Magic, finally chose its heart to fill, and it just happened to be *you*—a curious, young girl from Earth. I suppose that makes you quite exceptional, does it not?”

I never thought I was born to be something extraordinary. I grew up hearing adults and celebrities always pounding on the idea that you can be whatever you want to be with just enough hard work, and I believed that for the most part. You can work hard to live a happier life—relatively speaking—but hard work doesn’t determine the correct timing, and you simply can’t be something great without being in the right place at the right time. I lived in a small family in a middle-class neighborhood, full of average people, *all* of whom resided in an averagely middle-class small town called Keyport, New Jersey. Nothing remarkable had ever happened in this town, so the chances of me being born in the time period when something *did* happen would be one in a billion. I could be the smartest kid in school and rank varsity on all the coveted sports teams and *still* never be known as “The Great Lisa Robbic,” all because the timing wasn’t perfect.

And yet, here I was being told—right in my backyard of all places—that my heart was chosen, out of every living person on Earth, to home magic.

“Magic... but why me?” I asked, speaking slowly while admiring the blue light floating on top of my palm.

Inna let go of my hand and grasped both in hers, making the ball of light disappear. “Where there is goodness in one’s soul, there lies one’s unwavering strength, and a heart is no different. What is your name, I should have asked earlier?”

“Lisa, ma’am.”

“Lisa, it chose you because your heart is strong and good. You may not see that yet, but in time, you will. I promise.” She smiled at me again, making me feel important and wanted. I had never felt that feeling with anyone besides my mom. It was a lot to take in, but this lady made it seem so real, and I was nothing but overjoyed about it.

“Wow...” I accidentally said out loud. I smiled back at her.

“Now then,” Inna continued. She shot back up to stand in her perfect posture again. “Back to the reason I came here—we have to get going. I’m not usually the one they ask to bring the Agapéd Bearer, so I don’t want to keep them waiting any longer than intended.”

“Wait—we are going somewhere?” I uttered. She started walking away from me to the middle of the clearing, right where she appeared.

“To Haim Gana,” she declared. She held out her hand as if she wanted me to hold it.

I hesitated, glancing back and forth between her elegant hand and eyes, wiping my sweaty palms on my track shorts. I turned my head and looked in the direction of my house. Sure, this lady gave me her name, but I truly didn’t know who she was, and *what was Haim Gana?* I wasn’t dressed for anything but sleep, and I wasn’t allowed to leave my house without Mom or another adult—an adult that wasn’t a *stranger*. Mom would have a fit if she didn’t find me the next morning... but this... something in my heart told me this was right.

“Will we be back before morning?” I inquired timidly, fidgeting with my fingernails. “I just don’t want my mom to think I’m missing.”

Inna thought about my question for maybe a second before responding in her serene, positive voice again. “I’ll make sure you return before Earth’s sunrise, okay? No need to worry.”

With her affirmation and a smidge of trepidation, I took her hand in mine. “Okay.”

“Alright!” she said in a perky voice. “Since you have never evanesced before, be sure to hold on tight to my hand and stay close.”

My answer was my grip around her left wrist, tightening, and my heart pounding against my ribcage.

Inna looked down at me, her voice squeaked. “Not that tight,” she said, and I instantly loosened my grip. She smiled, helping my embarrassed heart not feel guilty for almost squeezing her wrist off. “Just do not let go, okay?”

I nodded, pressing my lips together to form a thin line.

She lifted her right arm, forming a fist. Blue lights—ribbons of liquid *magic*—radiated between her fingers and knuckles. She then gripped tighter and *punched* the air. Light encased the surrounding area—encased all the space my eyes could behold—and a rush of wind zoomed around us, causing me to shut

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my eyes tight. The sound of nocturnal creatures in the trees was replaced with chimes and claps of thunderous booms.

My feet were weightless as if gravity did not have any effect on me. I wanted to open my eyes, but the rays of magic prevented even the smallest peep. When the light took over the atmosphere, I could tell the scenery around me had completely changed. The teleportation only lasted a matter of seconds, and when I felt solid ground again, I opened my eyes—in view of an ethereal planetary kingdom.