

# A Little Attention

## Blurb

Jacob doesn't believe in fairies. His little sister is the one who's into all that junk. And when he's offered a wish, what he really wants is to get out of mandatory babysitting duties. But what he gets instead is a magic pacifier that seems to have a very strange effect on him. Just how long will these effects last; and will he be back to normal in time to play in the big game?

## 1. A Tree

Jacob was walking sulkily through the woods, kicking at every tree root that crossed the path as if they had personally offended him. After a few steps he glanced around and slumped with his back against one of the gnarled trunks. He didn't pull out his new iPhone and share stunningly realistic photos of the sylvan landscape, because he didn't think the strip of woodland along the edge of Baker Park was particularly picturesque, and because in his opinion there was little lamer than showing off photos of a boring day. He didn't use the same phone to order a pizza for collection on the way home because he was spending the day with his father and little sister, and there was little to no chance he could get away with picking up unauthorised treats.

Jacob didn't find a comfortable perch in the low branches of a tree while he checked out the latest rewards from the daily loot crate on Idle Football Champion 7 because he knew it would only be seconds before his father called to complain about him wandering out of sight; and he thought he could hear the sound of an irritable voice through the trees already. And he didn't open up the Clatter app to let everyone know just how awful Dad was being to him, for the same reason he *\_really\_* didn't do any of the things that had just crossed his mind.

Jacob was grounded, and after all the time he'd spent making friends among sympathetic rebels online, Dad had decided that coming along on this trip to the park was just one more required step along the tortuous path to getting his iPhone back.

"Jake!" Dad's voice came around the corner. Jacob took a step sideways, edging around the tree just a fraction to keep himself out of sight just a second longer. He didn't want to be here, but if there was no other option he could at least cause as much trouble as possible without stepping outside the rules that had been set down.

"Jake, are you here? Ah, there you are. Have you seen Leah's pacifier? She hasn't got it."

"Why would *\_I\_* have seen a pacifier?" he snapped back. "Seriously Dad, why do you even ask me?"

"You're supposed to be helping me to look after your sister. And you haven't been particularly helpful this far. I thought maybe you'd seen her drop it."

Jacob looked down at the little kid. She seemed to be all his dad cared about now, a baby sister he had never wanted. He didn't think that adding another child to the family was a good idea, not at his parents' age. But they hadn't even consulted him before deciding that they wanted a daughter, and over the last three years his life had gone from bad to worst. The baby was annoying, perpetually sticky, drooled on everything, and always seemed to be

irrationally optimistic no matter what happened to her. If he yelled at her for something, he would get an extra bunch of chores as punishment for upsetting the baby, while she would be right back to the same insufferable ball of sunshine inside of five minutes. To Jacob, Leah symbolised everything that was wrong with his family life.

"I didn't. Sorry Dad." He didn't say any of the things he was really feeling. He didn't voice his annoyance at having to be here, or his frustration about losing virtually a whole afternoon for a trip that held no value whatsoever for him. He just had to be quiet and compliant, and then he might be able to spend the next day with his friends. He needed to be there for them, the team needed him. No matter what had happened at the mall, he couldn't let down the people who mattered this weekend. Even if that meant not arguing with his Dad, and pretending he was eager to help with the little brat who was still shaking up the predictable routine at home.

"Okay, can you go look for it?" Dad moaned. He didn't sound particularly angry this time, and probably wasn't going to come up with any new punishments. But he was still tired, and wouldn't give his son a break. Jacob wondered again if this kind of thing was worth it for the old man. He seemed so tired after looking after Leah for a day that he didn't have time for anything else; not even watching the game on TV could lift his spirits. And yet he never complained. "It must be along the path we've come down. It's the bright blue one, I'll try to calm her down while you look. Unless you think you can—"

"I got it, Dad. I'll find it right away."

He didn't quite hear Dad's words as he turned back and walked away. At least he wasn't yelling today, or telling Jacob that he was a bad son because every aspect of his life didn't revolve around a baby sister he'd never asked for. He stomped away, eyes cast vaguely down to the ground, wondering how long he could be gone and still convince the old man that he'd been looking. He knew that a dropped pacifier would never be found. If it was in sight, he would have seen the baby drop it, and he didn't understand why Dad thought he would be able to find it now. It was a fool's errand, but he had to look like he was trying. So he marched slowly down the path, moving from side to side a little as he went, until there were enough trees in between to keep him out of sight.

He didn't know what else he could do with his time, but he didn't want to be going out of his way to help his little sister. She was the only thing Dad cared about now, and Jacob wasn't ready to fall into the same hole. Always tired, doing every little thing for a kid who wasn't even grateful? No thanks.

Before he got back to the main path, Jacob had wandered off the gravel track. He needed to find something to do or he was going to go out of his mind with boredom, but he still didn't have any ideas of what he could actually do. It was lame. He was sure now that he wasn't going to find the elusive pacifier, and he wasn't going to put any more effort in while he was being kept from his friends, from his team, just over a disagreement with some stupid mall cop with a stick up his ass.

He walked around a little more, muttering under his breath "Pacifier, pacifier." as if that would help him to find it. As if he actually cared about the chore he'd been set. He probably wouldn't pick it up even if he saw it right in front of him now. He stepped over a tree root, looking at the undergrowth under his feet and completely ignoring everything else around him as he tried to think of a way to make the day any less monotonous. He could think of a

dozen ways, but all of them would probably lead to him getting grounded even longer, and he knew that wasn't a price worth paying.

"What does he care so much," he muttered, and swung his boot against the trunk of the nearest tree. "Why try so hard if he's going to be too tired to toss a ball around on the weekend? He has to do everything for her. Wish he'd ever try so hard to make *\_me\_* happy."

"You wish?" a voice interrupted his muttered diatribe, and Jacob jerked his head around to see who was speaking. But there was nobody there; just an empty path and the bulky mass of the tree he was walking around. "You wisssssshhh?" This time the sound was more distinct. The words were as pure and clean as the ringing of a bell, but when the echo faded slowly away it was more like the sound of the breeze, or someone blowing over the top of a bottle. It was a beautiful sound, and he'd never heard anyone with a voice like that before. He must be imagining it, there was no way someone could have come so close without him seeing. And there was nobody in sight as he looked around now..

"You what?" he asked anyway. Just in case.

"You said you wish," the voice answered, much clearer this time. "You walked three times around the guardian tree, so you merit the granting of a wish, if it is within the powers of the dancers."

"Lady, what? You don't get prizes for walking round a tree, I mean what, is this like a prize for being the millionth visitor on some website? I can't see—"

There was a brilliant flash, and then he saw the person who'd spoken. He could see her clear as day, and he knew without a second thought that it was her voice he'd heard, but the merest fraction of a second after she'd left his sight, he had only the vaguest idea what this mysterious stranger had looked like. He remembered eyes that shimmered in every colour of the rainbow, reflecting all of the dappled sunlight. He remembered wings, spread wide like a butterfly, but shimmering and iridescent like a dragonfly's. He remembered that she was small, perhaps small enough to fit into the palm of his hand, or standing knee-high at the highest. And he knew in an instant that she didn't need any stagecraft or illusion to hover and bring her eyes level with his. And he could remember that she was beautiful, but with a kind of self-confidence that meant he wouldn't have wanted to see any more. There was something scary in those iridescent, multifaceted eyes.

"You addressed me as 'Lady'," she said, with a little smirk that Jacob didn't quite understand. "You have shown respect, and you have fulfilled the criteria. So take this, it will give you what you wished for. Whenever you need it, whenever you want. And none will see that there has been any change, lest they have good sight. You are welcome, Jacob son of Man."

"What?" he gasped, still not able to believe his eyes. "I mean, what? Who are you, lady?"

"I am Lady Lazurellyn von Sidhe, Jacob. And you are blessed."

## **2. A Gift**

Jacob looked down at the box in his hands. He couldn't believe that this was happening, and part of him wanted to look around for someone hiding, ready to leap out and laugh at his confusion. Or, thinking about how the production values of this little stunt were likely way beyond the technical ability of a couple of high school jocks, he wondered if he should be

looking for a film crew instead. But there was nothing; no sounds but the rustle of leaves created by Dad and Leah in the distance.

He looked at the box again. It could have been a jewelry box, the kind of elaborate thing you expected a ring to come in, with complex gold tracery around the edge. But this was more complex than any he'd seen before, and if it was a ring in here the sheer volume of elaborate padding it would be packed with implied that it would be worth a lot more than anything he would even consider buying for the girl of his dreams.

"What is—" he said and looked up, only to see nobody in front of him. Well, that was no surprise. Whatever the trick was, it must have been hard to arrange, and if they kept it up too long he might have spotted the joins in the costume, or seen the strings that were supporting the weird girl. But he was impressed that she'd gotten out of sight without him even seeing movement.

"Right, very funny guys," he said, and shook his head as a more obvious show of disappointment. "I'm supposed to think there's something expensive in here, right? Then I open it and it's empty, or some lame joke. Tell me it's not a glitter bomb, will you?"

But even knowing it had to be some kind of prank, he had to know who was behind it. He couldn't just throw it away and miss out on the endgame. So he held the little jewelry box in both hands, and pushed the front of the lid up with his thumbs. The lid rose slowly, and beneath it a second lid seemed to be folding apart like a blooming flower, some elaborate mechanism that must have cost a small fortune to make. And there, right in the middle, there was the gleam of sunlight on... crystal?

No. It was clear plastic. He grabbed the ring and gave a gentle tug, and realised that nestling in the soft white padding was the last thing he had ever expected. It was a pacifier. A baby's pacifier, the thing he'd been sent to find. Except this wasn't one of the little things that Leah was forever leaving all over the house. This was brand new, gleaming, and seemed larger than he would have expected. On the back there was a decal that looked kind of like a smiling clock face, with little hands that were separate pieces, perhaps movable. There were no mold lines where it had been formed, and the yellow and orange splashes of colour on the thing weren't just coloured plastic or a simple print; they looked like they could have been added by hand. Looking close, he had to guess that this was some kind of artisanal, one-of-a-kind pacifier that could only be sold online. Because of course, no matter what kind of crap you're making, there's someone on the Internet willing to buy it.

"What the hell?" he asked the air, but there was still no response. "This is what I wished for then? A pacifier? I was just ..."

He stopped as soon as the words were out of his mouth. He'd muttered about looking for a pacifier just before the weird little fairy girl appeared. But that wasn't enough time for them to have set up something like this. Could it be a coincidence that the 'wish' was what he'd been looking for? Or was Dad somehow in on this? It would have made sense of him suddenly being dragged out of the house for no good reason, but he still couldn't believe it. It would be too much effort, surely? And what could the old man have to gain by pulling some silly stunt, when he was already running himself ragged trying to make a screeching little brat happy?

"What's the moral of the story, then?" he asked the air as he strode angrily back towards

where the remainder of his family had sent him away. "You think I'm being childish or something? At least I'm pulling my weight, looking after myself. I got a job. I got homework. I got matches with my friends. I got so much in my life, and you still want me to look after the baby. If you want to say something just say it, I don't like the stupid games."

He slammed the box shut, but was frustrated by the faintest click as the mechanism folded quickly and elegantly closed. He rammed it into the pocket of his jacket, growling under his breath, and realised that he was still holding the pacifier in his other hand.

He didn't want to put it in his pocket; it would get covered in lint, or scratched by any loose change that was in there. Even if it was a babyish little thing, he didn't want to damage something that someone had clearly taken such care to make. And taking the box out again would only have made him more frustrated in his current state of mind. It was the kind of mood where he couldn't bear to take a step back. And then, with the kind of logic that suggests that one more drink wouldn't be such a bad idea, he made a decision.

"Fine, you're calling me a baby? I'm a baby then. Come and laugh." Jacob indignantly put the pacifier into his mouth. It was a decision that would come to change his life soon enough.

### **3. Enchantment**

Jacob stumbled, but luckily there was a tree close by. He grabbed at it with both hands, and only just managed to stop falling. That was lucky, he'd almost got his knees muddy, and he might get in trouble for that.

When he found his feet again, he tried to remember which way he had been running. He knew there was something exciting in the forest, there always was. But he couldn't remember what it had been today, and he wasn't sure if he'd been running off between the trees to play, or running back to Daddy. He stumbled forward, trying to see something worth running to or from through all the branches. He could see where the path was, a little way away, and he knew that Daddy would be there if he just went that way. But there were other paths too, all the spaces between the trees. They were smaller and there weren't signs, so he thought they might be where all the smugglers and highway men went, when they wanted to get back to their secret hideouts. They were secret, so they couldn't use the main paths. That much was obvious.

That was too exciting to ignore. Jacob picked a direction that looked like it might have smugglers at the end of it, or even pirates, and started to run forward. But right away the leaves slipped out from under his feet, and he fell down on the ground. His knees hurt, and his jeans were all slimy and gross now from the mud. He tried his best to wipe off the mud with his hands but it was all icky and sticky, and all that happened was he had muddy hands too. That wasn't right at all. He tried to wipe himself clean again, and stand up so he could go adventuring again, but he couldn't even lift himself up without putting his hands on the floor, where it was all gross and there might be worms or anything.

With no other choices, Jacob started to cry.

There were no words in his wail, just the distress of a lost little girl. He tried to stop it so that he could show how brave he was, but nothing was going right and he didn't know what to do. The tears came bubbling out of his eyes in a mad stream, and they made everything blurred as well. But when he tried to wipe the water away, that just put mud all over his face, and he

started screaming even louder. He didn't want to need help, but he couldn't even think about that now. The emotions hit him so hard, feelings of shame and helplessness, and he had no idea what else he could do.

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Jacob blinked, confused. He wasn't sure what was happening, or why he was lying on his back in the mud. He'd fallen down in the park before, sure. But there were enough things to grab onto here, and even if he'd faceplanted in the thick mud, he knew well enough how to clean himself off and go on walking. But somehow it hadn't happened. His head had been full of fanciful images, dreams that couldn't possibly be real, and he'd been too distracted by them to look after himself. He would have died of shame if anyone from the team saw him lying in the mud like this, bawling like a little kid.

He pushed himself up and tried to get to his feet again. But as he got up on his elbows, he saw the pacifier lying on the ground beside him. He should never have put that thing in his mouth, it must be cursed or something. Or coated with some kind of drugs. He'd heard that peyote might make you do crazy things and forget who you were, but to kick in so quick he was sure this must be something else. Something pretty risky for a practical joke, there was no way his dad could be in on that. Could he?

He picked up the pacifier anyway, and stuffed it back in his coat pocket. It had landed on a dock leaf, almost miraculously avoiding the mud that his frantic attempts to keep his footing had churned up. But there was no way he was putting that thing in his mouth again.

"Jace!" Dad burst into the clearing while Jacob was still sitting on the ground. "Are you alright? I was worried about you."

"Sorry, I just slipped," Jacob's mind was racing. He couldn't admit to what had just happened. Even under the influence of whatever those drugs were, he had to deny the scream. Had Dad heard it? He must have done, and now he was going to be mad at Jacob for making a fuss. With no other options, he started bluffing frantically: "Did you hear a yell? I turned towards it, must have lost my footing. I mean, it sounded like—"

"It's okay, dear. You don't need to worry anymore, I'm here. Look at you, you're all muddy. Let Daddy get you cleaned up. Leah, can you stay there while I look after your sister? Yes? Stay. Stay there." He was speaking softly but firmly, and Jacob suspected that the words were way too complex for the baby to understand. But when he pointed with one finger, Leah seemed to be following the gesture, and she sat down awkwardly on a stump at the side of the path. Maybe for once she was going to stay put and not make a fuss.

"Dad, what's wrong with you?" he asked, a second later when the rest of the words filtered through his consciousness. "Sister? What the hell? I mean, yeah I didn't find her pacifier, right. But there's no need to take the piss."

"Oh, you didn't find it? That's a shame, but I'm sure we've got another. Have you still got yours? Yes, we can..." his hands darted down to check Jacob's pockets faster than the youth could respond, and a second later Dad was holding the strange pacifier. He had wiped it in his hand from somewhere, and a second later he had buffed it a little so that it looked completely new, and the tiny flecks of mud on the back were gone. And he wasn't

complaining that it was strange for an almost-adult boy to have a pacifier in his pocket. Nor was he angry with Jacob for failing to find what he'd been sent for, or telling him he was a disappointment to the family. Something was really off kilter here, and Jacob didn't know how he was expected to respond. It was clear that his Dad was in on this practical joke, whatever was supposed to happen. But did he really think that calling him a girl and acting like he was a baby would make him see the error of his ways and stop being popular at school?

"Dad, just stop it. This is the dumbest shit you ever pulled. Even crazier than my—"

"Now," Dad interrupted calmly, without any trace of anger as he pushed the pacifier back into Jacob's mouth.

#### **4. Wonder**

The move was so sudden that there was no time to fight it. It just came out of nowhere, and suddenly Jace had a pacifier in her mouth. There was nothing she could do but lay there and listen to what Daddy was telling her.

"Someone's been letting you hear naughty words, haven't they?" he said, and she started to feel guilty even without a clear idea what he was talking about. "You know those words are bad, and you only say them if you're really upset. I won't tell you to forget them, but if you're ever going to be a grown-up you need to know that there are things that are only saved for situations which really call for them. Now, are you really upset now?"

Jace shook her head, a little confused. The world seemed to be spinning, and he didn't know how he could tell Daddy what had happened. It was all weird, he'd fallen down and she didn't know why. There were too many things she didn't understand, everything was confusing. But there was one thing she still remembered.

"Daddy, there was a fairy!" she squealed, and then giggled at the sound of her own voice. It sounded wrong somehow, but she couldn't stop talking about the pretty fairy lady. That was something special, she'd never seen a fairy before in all the times they'd come to the woods, and she needed to talk about it. The words spilled out of her lips without any pause for thought, too many ideas bursting out one after another, until her lips tripped over all the words and she could only manage a babble of overexcited gasps.

"Wow, that's really special!" Daddy said, and Jace felt she'd never been so proud in her life before. Daddy was impressed with her, like she'd done good finding the fairy, and it made her feel so good. She really wanted to be a good girl, and it sounded like she'd done it right now. Something still felt wrong, but Daddy said everything was alright, so it was nothing to worry about.

Daddy was cleaning up her face too, using baby wipes to get most of the mud off and then bundling them up in a little bag to throw in the trash later. Daddy was always so careful, he never dropped litter, and that made Jace feel really proud too. Like her Daddy was the best person in the world, and she wanted to be wonderful and careful just like him.

"There we go, princess. All clean now. So how about you two go explore the forest, okay? But don't get too muddy, and don't talk to the witches. And if you find any more pixies you just bring them back here for me to see."

"Yeeeeeah!" Leah cheered and jumped up and down, and Jaycie felt a burst of the same

excitement. They were on a wide path now, but there were all kinds of little tunnels through the greenery, places where witches or goblins could be hiding, or even monsters. She wanted to explore the whole forest, and then she might get a medal, or get to ride on the racing cars at the play area.

“Okay, but you two be careful. And don’t hurt your little sister, okay? It’s up to you to make sure she’s fine. Can you do that for me, like a big girl?”

“Yeah!” Leah beamed even wider, and giggled. “Imma good!”

Jaycie didn’t say anything, just kept on smiling at the thought of hunting fairies in the wood. Maybe they could even get some fairy dust, that might let them fly or something. That would be the most amazing day at the park ever. They didn’t even say go, but both girls started off running into the trees at the same time, following one of the littler paths with so many dark green shadows that there could have been monsters in. Before long they were racing down a green tunnel, making train and horse noises as they went, and then they were explorers diving into a shipwreck in the middle of the jungle, where they might find an ancient treasure. It was so exciting that there was no time to stop and think, and Jaycie never had to worry at all because she was so sure Leah and Daddy were looking out for her.

They ran off into the woods, following one of the smaller paths that not everybody noticed. The ground under their feet wasn’t gravel here, just rough dirt with less plants on it. There were footprints in the mud to let you know that people came this way, but there weren’t so many of them. And most of the footprints were smaller than Jaycie’s.

Maybe that meant that grown-ups were too big to fit down this path. That would be exciting. And it meant there was more chance of finding fairies, because fairies were super small. Jaycie felt extra proud when she realised that, because it meant she was thinking properly instead of just grabbing for answers like a baby with a new toy. She was a big girl now, and she knew that she was going to be the first to find a fairy.

The two toddlers poked around in the undergrowth, looking at the pretty flowers and trying to guess where they might find a fairy. They didn’t really know, but it was still a lot of fun looking everywhere that one might be. They kept on looking until Leah slipped on some wet leaves and landed on her bum. She opened her mouth and Jaycie just knew she was going to start wailing. So she grabbed her sisters hand and helped her up, and then gave her a tight hug that got her clothes all muddy again. Leah wasn’t going to cry now, she could feel better so quickly if there was somebody to help her. But she still wasn’t so stable, and as soon as she tried to move again they both ended up lying in the dirt. Hitting the ground knocked the breath out of Jaycie, and Leah landing on her tummy made her gasp again, but she was still smiling and her little sister just seemed to be giggling. She laughed along for a second, glad that she wasn’t going to get in trouble for hurting the baby this time. Even if their clothes were both filthy, he was sure that Dad would accept this was Leah’s fault, and there would be no yelling for once.

“Faiwy!” Leah yelled, pointing up at what turned out to be a butterfly, fluttering its wings and drifting slowly closer to a flower. “Faiwy!” The little creature flapped away as she made a clumsy grab for it, and a second later Jacob couldn’t see which way it had gone. It moved too fast to follow, and the tiny speck of blue and gold was lost against a background of greens.



"Silly," he answered, "that's a butterfly. Do you know that word? Butterfly. Butt-ter-fly."

"Buffy faiwy?" Leah mumbled past her pacifier, leaving Jacob in just as much doubt if she'd actually understood a word. But she was still smiling, pointing up from her place on the ground. As she sensed him looking, she kicked her feet and flailed her arms around, almost like she was trying to make snow angels on the muddy path. It didn't work, and her clothes were getting dirtier by the second. Jacob pulled himself up off the ground, and hoped that he wasn't quite as dirty. But the earlier fall had left his clothes liberally coated in muck, and this time couldn't have made much difference in any case. He reached out to pick up his baby sister again, and then froze in shock. He was so confused now that he couldn't stop the words spilling out of his open mouth:

"Who's Jaycie?"

## 5. A Riddle

"Jessie!" Leah squealed, and then her grin spread wide. She'd said something right, she thought, and she expected a reward. Typical of a baby, Jacob thought, and he couldn't give her anything because he didn't even have any candy on him. But he gave her a pat on the head, and did his best to wipe a little of the mud off her face while he tried to process the current situation.

"Jacie," he corrected. "Wait, no. Jacob. Like Jay-cub. I don't know who Jacie is."

But even as he said it, he knew that wasn't completely true. He was Jacie, or he had been. For a couple of minutes, he'd been thinking of himself as Jacie. He couldn't think why. But then he thought about ways to stop a young child yelling the odd name over and over as she ran in circles. And those thoughts went to her pacifier, which was currently missing, and that thought reminded Jacob of his own pacifier, hanging on the end of a length of braided ribbon that was clipped to his jacket.

"I'm not a baby," he said, as much to reassure himself as anyone else. "I don't need a pacifier."

But then he stared down at it, and he knew that something was strange. He'd guessed drugs at first, but he didn't know of any drugs that could work like that. It had made him see himself as a baby, this Jacie, and he'd even thought of Leah as his big sister for a moment. It had started the instant he put the pacifier in his mouth. That was crazy, he was sure. There were plenty of drugs that could cause hallucination, but although he'd never tried them Jacob was sure it would take time for any substance to get from his mouth to his brain. Like twenty seconds or something, because he was pretty sure the blood would need to go back to the heart in between visiting different organs within his body.

Drugs didn't explain his father's behaviour, either. Dad had treated him like a little kid, and told Leah to look after him. That was just crazy, and would mean that the old man cared about him as more than a source of cheap labour. It had to be some kind of trick. But what was the endgame here? There was no way that his dad would go so far to call him childish, or whatever the point was supposed to be. There was no way a drug could kick in instantly. And it didn't seem likely that he'd hallucinate almost the same thing twice. And yet both times he'd allowed this pacifier near his mouth, he'd been as excited as his sister. The woods had seemed like a giant arena to explore, a jungle filled with mysteries and secrets,

rather than a ragged, overgrown strip down the back of the park. It was the same illusion, and that didn't make any kind of sense.

He thought back to what Aaron might have said, if they'd been discussing this as a hypothetical. His first words would have been calling Jacob a freak, or saying that couldn't happen. But he already knew that. So what else might the guy have said? He was probably the smartest of Jacob's friends, so if anyone could come up with an answer it would be him. He would have suggested coming up with a theory, Jacob was sure. And then trying again to see if what he expected happened. It was the scientific method, and Aaron Burke practically worshipped science.

"So I suck the pacifier, I start acting like a baby. Weird, but I did it twice, and it happened both times. So it's weird. And Dad didn't think it's weird, so he must have planned it. But why? And how?"

He stared at the pacifier again. There were faint swirls in the clear plastic, subtle enough that even staring right at them, he couldn't be sure there was anything there. But it looked like there was a spiral pattern, that he'd initially missed. What did that mean?

"No, it doesn't matter," he answered aloud, and tried to pull his thoughts back onto the right track. "Important thing is where did Dad get this. He wouldn't know where to find drugs would he? But what else..."

The image in his mind now was a girl in a shimmering dress, tiny, floating on her own wings in front of him. Saying something he hadn't quite caught about making a wish. It couldn't be true, could it? Some kind of special effects magic, a good actress, some lies from his father, and drugs that behaved like he'd never imagined they could. It was hard to believe all of that. But if the alternative was, what? Magic?

Jacob didn't want to believe anything like that, but what option did he really have? It was the least crazy option out of everything could think of. He tried hard to think of some other option, but there wasn't time to think too hard before Dad was pushing his way through the undergrowth again. Jacob was sure he would be in hot water for letting the baby get so muddy, and turned to help her up from the ground before Dad got here. He could be seen as trying to help, and maybe that would be the end of this strange game,

"Oh, Leah!" Dad gasped, apparently surprised by the state she'd managed to get herself into. She was practically caked in mud despite Jacob's attempts to clean her up with a tissue. she wasn't going to get rid of all that mud without a proper bath, it was clear enough. And even getting her home was likely to involve significant effort to keep mud off the car seats. "What have you done with yourself?"

"Sorry Dad," Jacob shrugged. "I couldn't stop her, she was—"

"Don't worry, Jacie. I think you both need to clean up. You don't mind going home do you? Your sister's all muddy, and you're not much better. Can you walk by yourself if I carry her? You need to be a big girl for me, just for a few minutes. Do you think you can do that?"

"Dad," Jacob growled, angry to still be treated that way. Maybe it was better than being blamed for whatever the baby felt like doing, but he didn't think he could take much more of this condescension. "This isn't funny anymore. Can you just say whatever you want to say? I

can't take any more of this, it's just too weird."

"It's okay, honey. We'll get you all cleaned up when we get you home. I know I said we could have fun in the park, but you're already dirty. Your clothes are all sticky, and you'll be feeling clammy from the mud soon enough. Are you okay with going home now? I promise, we'll find something fun to do when you get there."

"Like giving my phone back?" Jacob asked sarcastically.

"Of course, honey. If you can have a bath without making too much fuss, you can have a little treat."

Jacob didn't know what to say to that. It would have been so easy to let the sarcasm take over and say something really snarky, but Dad had come so close to saying he wasn't grounded now. He didn't want to risk another day of looking after the baby, so right now he was happy to take the win. He stayed quiet until they got back to the car, and held onto Leah's hand while Dad unfolded a picnic blanket over the back seats. It was only ten minutes home from the park, so there was no real temptation to test his parent's sudden attack of kindness.

## **6. A Decision**

When they got back to the house, there was no further mention of Jacie, and Dad didn't seem inclined to treat Jacob like a kid any longer. He hoped that everything would be back to normal now, even if he had no idea what the whole experience had been about. If he was supposed to have learned a lesson, he had no idea what it could have been.

"Jacob, can you fix the laundry while I give your sister a quick bath?" Dad called down from the bathroom. "Are you okay if I deal with her first?"

"Sure, Dad." It would have been a perfect time to kick up a fuss about how the kid always seemed to be more important. But Jacob wasn't so bothered by the mud; he'd been practically caked in clay after a rained-off game against Claremont High last summer, and waiting awhile for a hot bath was still better than the locker room showers at most of the schools his team had competed against. And almost certainly better than a screaming toddler when she realised just how dirty she was.

The next problem was that he wasn't quite sure what he needed to do with the laundry. This was usually Dad's job. Still, he was almost an adult now, and Jacob was sure he should be able to work it out for himself. The machine had buttons to press to select programmed, and an LCD display that seemed to have way more choices than anyone could ever need. But one of them turned out to be 'heavy soiling', which he guessed was appropriate for the thick mud from the park. Would mud block the drain? He had no idea, but decided it was best not to risk it. So he took the blanket from the car, Leah's clothes from the hamper outside the bathroom, and after a little thought his own sweater top and jeans. He threw them out on the deck at the back and sprayed them all with the hose to shift the largest chunks of dirt, before taking them back inside to throw in the machine. Perhaps there was still some mistake he'd missed, but dad couldn't say he hadn't tried. For once he was sure the old man would be proud of him.

He wondered for a second how Dad found time to do all this. It wasn't the most

time-consuming chore in the world, but it was still one of many jobs that Dad always found time to do, and Jacob hadn't realised before how much time it could take.

When Jacob got back to his room he could still hear Dad fussing over Leah in the bathroom. But as promised, his phone was waiting for him on the bed. He could catch up with his friends, and try not to think about the logistics of looking after a baby or how much time Dad actually needed to spend on her.

Twenty minutes later Jacob had caught up on all the latest gossip from his friends, as well as everyone moaning about how he'd let them down by missing practice. But they didn't seem too upset, just bellyaching because they could, and he knew his friends would be sympathetic when they knew his phone had been taken away. It wouldn't be a big deal.

"Bathroom's free, Jacob," Dad called through, and he grunted a response. The bathroom, as it turned out, had puddles of water splashed all over the floor and still smelled of cherry and fancy floral soap, but that was no big deal by now. Jacob thought that after today he deserved some relaxation, so he turned on the warm water and tidied the room a little while he waited for the bathtub to fill. At other times he might have complained about the chore, but it wasn't like Dad had ordered him to do it. It was clear the old man had cleaned up what he could, but the baby always liked to splash when she was in the bath, and water had gotten into places that weren't so easy to reach. It took no time at all for Jacob to mop up the spills, and he had nothing better to do right this minute in any case. Dad probably thought he'd be impatient to get clean, so had cleared out of the room as quickly as possible.

Jacob told himself he didn't care about that. He was a jock, he was used to being dirty and he never minded a cold shower if that was the only option. But once he'd thought about what must have gone through Dad's mind, there was no way he could be annoyed by the room being a little messy. Jacob was aware that it was probably worse after he'd been in here every day, and he'd never stopped to think about the minutes he was taking out of Dad's schedule. So for once, he promised himself, he could stay out of trouble and do the right thing.

## **7. A Realisation**

By the time Jacob could sink into a nice warm bath, steam rising all around him, he was feeling just a little proud of how quickly he'd managed to tidy the bathroom. Not only were there no more puddles on the floor, but all the bottles of foam bath and 'No Tears Ever™' shampoo were neatly arranged on the shelf with the full bottles positioned behind a dizzying variety of empty ones. He stared at those again, wondering why little kids needed to choose from so many different colours and scents. They surely couldn't be that different, and he doubted that Leah even knew the names of more than two or three pink fruits.

Jacob didn't need anything like that, he was a real man. The only thing he needed to get himself clean was a bottle bearing the name 'Big Green' in a font that wouldn't have looked out of place on an action movie poster. It was the Godzilla of toiletries, promising to be extra tough on dirt and somehow still good for strengthening aching muscles. There was nothing subtle like perfume either, it just smelled strongly of soap and promised it would leave you completely clean. The small print on the bottle might have mentioned black mint, soapberry, and white pine, but they were good honest ingredients that might have been used by primitive man to get themselves feeling fresh before the discovery of modern chemicals.

Nothing like the perfume and fruits that seemed to be all the rage among babies.

And if Jacob was surrounded by a mound of cherry-scented bubbles today, that didn't make his bathing routine any less manly. He'd just been curious as he moved the different bottles around, and wanted to know how much of the product's claims were pure advertising BS. It was supposed to help you feel calm and reinvigorate tired little bodies, it said. Was that possible? Was it any different from a muscle rub? He was just curious, that was all.

As the foam rose up around him, Jacob could admit that he felt more relaxed now. His body was aching as if I'd put too much effort into running around the park. Which was crazy, as he'd barely moved enough to stop Dad yelling at him. Still, it felt good to unwind after a long day, knowing that tomorrow he could go right back to doing useful things with his life. Hanging around in the mall, training with his team, and helping to keep Morris out of trouble with whatever harebrained scheme he came up with next. No babies in sight, just the way Jacob liked his days.

And with that thought out of the way, he found himself dwelling on the events of the day again. He'd run around the woods like a little kid, chasing after monsters that don't even exist like it was the most important thing in the world. He couldn't understand how it had happened, and not knowing freaked him out more than anything else. It was crazy, but the only answer he could think of was that there was somehow a real fairy living in the woods around Baker Park, and the whole thing was magic. That was crazy, it was impossible. Or at least really, really improbable. If there was magic in the world, why would they choose a tiny town like this one to manifest? But there were no impossible answers to eliminate, and no matter what angle he tried to approach it from, this was the only thing that made any kind of sense.

"Okay," he said to himself, and gave a little chuckle at the sound of his own voice. A bath full of water and all the tiles around him made his voice echo just a little, giving him an air of authority that he didn't really feel. Perhaps that was why so many losers chose the bathroom as a place to sing; but right now it meant that Jacob didn't have to take his own words seriously, and that made it so much easier to think them. "Okay, a fairy appeared and gave me a magic pacifier. Magic, right. Or some kind of drugs or something, but how the hell is that going to work? I sucked on it and I was looking at the place like a little kid. The woods was a massive forest that I don't know all the paths around. There were monsters hiding in the shadows, and I could imagine smugglers and bandits used those paths to get to their weird daydream land. Crazy, but it felt so real. And I was a little kid like Leah."

He stopped to think then, dunking his head under the water to clear any residual mud out of his hair, as well as possibly washing away the idiocy that had taken up roost between his ears. He'd heard the words that he was saying, he knew just how they sounded, but they were still the best guess he could come up with.

"Okay, so what did she say? It's supposed to be granting my wish, but I didn't wish for anything. Maybe I didn't want to look after the baby or something. And... well, I got that. If I'm a baby I can't look after her. But then... she wasn't treating me like an adult. She wasn't begging for attention and trying to get me to give her things, she was just running with me. And Dad, he was talking to us like we were the same. Telling her to look after me. If it's some kind of joke... what would that even mean? Confuse the baby, that's for sure. I just can't see

it.”

He finished washing himself, and then allowed a little time to relax. He'd earned it, he was sure, and the hot water was still comfortable. He could lie back and let his shoulders float on the surface, every muscle relaxing. After a few stressful days he was sure he was owed a break. Time to think, maybe, if he could come up with any thoughts that didn't sound completely stupid.

“I went back to normal,” that was the next thought that seemed important. “After I dropped the... the thing. I was thinking like myself again, I knew it was weird, but it took a minute or two to get back to normal. I was still all excited about the monsters in the woods when I knew they weren't real. And Dad was still treating me like a little kid, expecting the brat to watch out for me. If it's real that could be useful for getting out of trouble.”

Slow breathing. Muscles soaking, body relaxed. No more thoughts for a minute or two, just letting himself take a break from all the worries in his life. He thought he should do this more often, instead of just rushing a shower. It could be good to take a break.

“He asked me to do laundry when I got home. He wasn't treating me like a kid then. But... he asked if I could do it. He apologised for making me wait. Like he cared about what I thought, not just what I can do for the baby or what I've done wrong. So it wears off slowly, right? Or it takes him a while to notice that...”

He stopped talking, and forced himself to think about that again. Dad had decided to treat him like a child after he got the magic item. That much made sense. And he hadn't been able to keep it up for long, quickly going back to normal. So there might be an easy way to test if this was all some elaborate joke.

“If I suck the... thing... without making a fuss, how would he know? If he keeps treating me like an adult this time, I know he's in on this. Whatever kind of trick it is. If he's back to calling me a baby and trying to do everything for me, he must have some way to know. But would that even make sense? I mean, how could he find out...”

He knew it was a crazy idea, a crazy thing even to be thinking about. But he had to find something in this situation that followed the usual rules of logic. There had to be some question he could ask that would help him to understand what was going on, and this was the closest he'd come to any kind of test. He'd suck the pacifier, just for a second or two, and then see if Dad was any nicer to him when he came out of the bathroom. Perfect, an experiment with predictable results. He knew what it would mean if nothing changed: That the whole thing was some kind of practical joke, even if he couldn't understand the mechanism. And if Dad suddenly started treating him like a baby again, that was a result as well. Even if he couldn't believe it, that would mean that magic was real. Or there was some fancy way to tell if the pacifier was still in its box.

“No time like the present,” he chuckled. The pacifier box was right there, he'd brought it into the bathroom out of some irrational desire to keep it where nobody else could see it. In case they'd steal some practical joke? He didn't know why, but it was right where he needed it now.

He opened the box and slipped out the tiny pacifier. He dunked it in the suds, wiped it down,

and then rinsed it under the tap to make sure any taste of soap was gone. And then before he could have second thoughts about this, he slipped it between his lips.

## 8. Discovery

Jacie sucked on the pacifier for a couple of seconds, and waited to feel different. It was like waiting for a surprise, hoping that something was going to change any minute. She couldn't keep on waiting more than a few seconds, there were too many fun things to do. And as soon as she stopped just waiting, she could see how many other things there were to do. Like splashing at the mounds of bubbles that were piled up around her. Seconds later there were bubbles in her hair and on her face, and they tickled a little bit as they started to pop. That was all the reason she needed to laugh.

There were toys on the shelf as well, where she couldn't reach them. All the little duckies should be in the bath so she could clean them, and it was so much more fun. She reached out with both hands, but they were too far away no matter how much she waved. After a few minutes of trying the big smile on her face turned sad. She couldn't reach the toys, she needed longer arms. She knew that she wasn't thinking so good either, because she should have known that right away. She needed to walk over and get them. So she stood up, and then she was laughing again as all the bubbles slipped off her and made a big pile in the middle of the bath. Some of the foam went on the floor too, and she didn't think it was supposed to go there. So she reached down and tried to grab it but it just went through her fingers and spilled down on the towels and the tiles.

"Awww..." Jacie pouted, and scrabbled against the side of the bath, trying to catch all the falling bubbles. There was a little splash, and she looked down in wonder. She didn't know what it was, but as soon as she tried moving forward the water round her legs pulled her back, and then there was a big splash when Jacie landed back in the bath again.

"Oooops." It didn't hurt, but she was lying back in the bath again, laughing at how hard it was to move around. She probably shouldn't have tried to walk, she just forgot for a moment and she hoped she wouldn't get into any trouble. It was harder than it looked, walking around, and she knew that...

Something was wrong. She was thinking things that didn't make any sense. She felt silly, like she hadn't thought before trying to walk, and now there was water splashed everywhere and lots of bubbles in her hair. And she'd dropped her paci when she tried talking, even though there was nobody in here to talk to. *That's* what the little splash had been. It made so much sense now, and she knew she should have realised—

"Jacob," she said, and the sound of her voice surprised him for a second. "*He*. I'm a guy, dammit."

He paused, and took a long, deep breath. He was sure this couldn't be any kind of drug now. He'd taken care to wash the pacifier, not knowing if there was some unseen trace of muck left from the time it had spent on the ground. With soapy water and then rinsed in hot water, he was sure there was nothing on the surface. And then as soon as it was in his mouth, he'd forgotten the plan and decided to play. That was really weird. And he'd been thinking of himself as a baby like his little sister. Jacie, the name Dad had used before. And worse, he'd been thinking of himself as a girl, looking down at his body and apparently not noticing his junk poking out through the shroud of bubbles.

But... it was weird. That wasn't any kind of hallucination, he was sure. He'd never heard of people having experiences like that, no matter what they'd taken. But he could distinctly remember being a little girl. He could remember wanting his/her toys from the other side of the room, and walking over to get them seeming so logical. And he could remember standing in the bath, and how hard it had been to step forward with the water around his knees.

That was the weirdest thing. Not that he'd apparently hallucinated, or that he'd tried to walk normally rather than wading. But that the water had seemed so much deeper, like he really was that small. Could it be that he'd actually been smaller for a couple of minutes? That didn't make any kind of sense, there was no way it could be possible. But then, none of this was possible. Drugs didn't work like that, and magic... did he even know how magic was supposed to work? Or course not, because magic didn't exist. But there was no other explanation.

"Right," he muttered, hoping that somehow it would sound less crazy out loud. "It's magic. Fairy magic. So how do I find out the rules for magic?" It didn't sound any better. It sounded like he'd lost his mind, and gone over to join the inane babble of Chris Lutzner and his crowd of losers. There were a bunch of them at school, the hippies that even the other nerds wouldn't hang out with. If he was heading towards fitting in with losers in that low group, Jacob was sure he didn't want to—

The door handle rattled. Jacob froze, and all the thoughts fled from his mind. Why would there be anyone trying the door? Dad knew he was in the bath, and even before he'd been allowed a lock on his bedroom door, bathtime had been his opportunity for a little privacy.

"Jacie honey, are you okay?"

Jacob cursed under his breath. Of course Dad wouldn't give Jacie any privacy. Just like he wouldn't leave Leah in the bath on her own. But he wasn't a baby, so he would have hoped that Dad would give him some space now.

"I'm fine Dad, and my name's Jacob. You picked it for me, you know? You'd think after all those years you could get it right."

"The door's locked, Jacie. The catch must have slipped on. Do you think you can open it for me, then we can get you all clean?"

"Christ, Dad, how old do you think I am? I can get clean by myself, just leave me alone."

"You're two honey, and I know you think you're a big girl, but you don't—"

"I'm not any kind of girl," Jacob snapped. An inner voice told him that letting his anger off the leash might not be the best response, but he couldn't take it anymore. The world had gone crazy, he didn't know what he could do about it, and there wasn't anyone to blame. He wanted to march back to Baker Park and yell at the fairy until she explained things, but yelling at fairies would have made him even crazier than he already felt. So the only people he could be mad at were his Dad or the baby. That made no sense either, it wasn't their fault, and knowing that only made him angrier.

"Honey, let me in," Dad carried on trying to persuade Jacob to let him in. He switched



between begging and bargaining, but oddly he didn't seem to get angry at all. Jacob climbed out of the bath and rushed through getting himself dry, hoping that his father would realise he was an adult and stop making such a fuss before he actually had to open the door. But it didn't seem to be happening; Dad seemed desperate, like he was really worried. And as much as he wanted to be angry at the insanity of the situation, Jacob could see where he was coming from. This performance was convincing enough; Dad actually thought he was a baby. He sounded terrified of something happening to his little girl, and if Jacob had been a real baby that would have made perfect sense. He couldn't blame Dad for that, and it hadn't been Dad who'd decided to play with a magic pacifier.

And that had been why Jacob decided to try it in the first place, he realised as he pulled on a clean pair of boxers and his bathrobe. He'd wanted to know if Dad would act any differently, and he had his proof. This wasn't some kind of crazy drug reaction. Dad had started thinking of him as a baby without even seeing him suck the pacifier. It was still just as nuts, but now magic was the only explanation left.

While he tried to work out what he could do about this, Jacob paced around the bathroom, tidying up as best he could. The place was perhaps even messier now than it had been when he went in. There was water splashed everywhere, and mounds of suds on the floor. There was even water on the shelves around all the toiletries. After the day he'd just had, Jacob wasn't in any mood for being yelled at. So he took everything off the shelves and dried them down, then put everything back in its place. He wasn't paying attention to what Dad was saying now, he just tuned out the noise. Nothing he could say in response would make sense anyway. He'd already gathered that Dad would simply refuse to accept any claims of not being a baby, and perhaps would ignore anything that conflicted with what the magic had told him was true.

Hadn't the fairy said something about this? Jacob wasn't sure, he hadn't been giving it his full attention at the time, more interested in looking for his friends hiding in the bushes or some kind of secret camera to catch his reactions.

"Open the damn door, Jake!" Dad pounded again, starting to raise his voice now. He sounded about two minutes from snapping, and now probably wasn't the right time to push him. "Are you even listening to me?" Jacob took a deep breath, and slipped the bolt on the bathroom door open.

"Finally! Do you know how worried I've been about you? Why do you always do stuff like this? If you're not out with those so-called friends you're causing trouble here, and you never even stop to think about the impact your actions can have on this family. When are you going to grow up a little?"

"Oh, you want me to grow up? How about treating me like an adult, then? Like giving me some privacy when I'm trying to have a bath!" Jacob regretted the words right away. Dad had been angry, but Jacob was the first to really start yelling, and now Dad just looked shocked, lost for words. And *\_then\_* Jacob realised what was different. Dad had gotten his name right, not calling him Jacie, and he was getting angry rather than protective.

"I understand you want privacy," Dad just about managed to avoid yelling in return. "But do you even think how worried I would be? What if you'd fallen?"

"Have I ever fallen in the bath before? Do you leave the door open in case you slip and injure yourself? Seriously Dad," he paused, took a breath, and tried to continue without raising his voice so far: "Seriously. How old am I, Dad? Am I young enough to need somebody keeping an eye on me in the bath? I've got myself clean and tidied up in here too, but I don't get any thanks. Stop and think. If I was that young, wouldn't the bathroom look like a bomb's hit it? Like after you've been washing the baby?"

Dad paused, and looked around the room. After what felt like forever, he turned back to Jacob.

"Okay, I got to admit you did good. I'm so used to having to clean up after you I didn't notice for a second. But you did good. It's nice to see the place presentable for once, and I should have recognised that. But you've got to understand, I was just worried about you. You locked the door, so I couldn't get in no matter what happened. If you'd fallen in the bath, or if you needed some help, there's nothing I can do from out there. Do you understand that?"

"I understand you were worried, but look at it rationally. How old am I, Dad?"

"Seventeen, just about."

"Exactly. I'm not Leah. So can you stop treating me like a little girl? I've not needed help with bathing myself for ten years now. So, why were you getting so upset? You have to be able to see that something isn't right here."

"Yeah, I guess. Well, you've done well today. And it's a long time since you fallen or anything, so maybe I don't need to have that at the front of my mind. Guess being out there with your sportsball club—"

"Dad," Jacob growled, resigned after having to make the same comment on an almost daily basis. His father just ignored him and pressed on.

"—It might have improved your coordination in the last few years. Like, all your injuries have been on the field. So outside of that I shouldn't worry."

"So you know there's no reason to check on me in the bath," Jacob pressed forward, hoping that if Dad could at least see that he'd been acting crazy, he might be able to contribute something to understanding what was going on.

"I guess you're right. I'm sorry about that, Jake. You're almost a grown man now, and I need to stop thinking of you as my baby girl. Hell, you're older than your sister now, and that has to mean something. So if you insist—"

"Do you know how weird that sounds?"

"If you insist," Dad repeated. "While you've done so well, putting the laundry on and cleaning up after Leah today, I'm going to say you're allowed to lock the door now. I don't need to check on you anymore, and I can trust you to look after yourself. But please, don't make me regret it."

"Thanks, Dad?" Jacob answered, searching the old man's expression for any sign of a joke. But it was true, he thought he was making a point. He'd talked about Jacob going from a baby girl to a grown man. He'd recognised that Jacob was older than Leah, but talked like

this was a recent thing. He could clearly see things as they really were, but Jacob got the feeling that no matter what happened, he wouldn't be able to see the incongruity in his own actions.

Whether this would become a way to stay out of trouble, or the start of a new nightmare, remained to be seen.

## **9. A Mistake**

Back in his own room, Jacob picked up his phone and his first thought was to check in with his friends. He wanted to talk to everyone, and to find out what news he had missed over the weekend. But they would be sure to ask if anything interesting had happened to him, and it wouldn't be quite so easy to vent about his Dad complaining the whole time. They'd had just as many arguments as usual, and Dad had made the usual series of unreasonable requests, but after everything had turned around so suddenly none of that seemed too important. His friends would know his heart wasn't in it, and then they'd want to ask what was different today.

A question Jacob didn't have the answers for just yet. That was the big deal. He wanted to catch up with his friends, but he needed to learn more about fairy magic. He needed to understand the rules, and to work out if there was anything he could do to make it work for him. He ended up sprawled out on the bed, holding the phone over his head and searching the internet for any kind of clues. Of course, there was no end to the pages written by hippies about how fairies were supposed to give you exactly what you need, and how good luck was all because of pleasing these invisible spirits. And a different kind of hippies said that fairies were inherently evil, and we only associated them with wish granting because the story had been corrupted through cultural appropriation.

Jacob didn't really know what that meant, and he didn't want to know. It was just one of those words that got bandied around by a certain kind of keyboard warrior when they didn't have an argument, and they wanted to make out that anyone who opposed them was some kind of racist regardless of the issue they were arguing about. He tapped the back button and tried searching for something else. After a while he had to think that he didn't know the right words to search for. Or there was just too much crap out there, posted by every crazy on the internet. They all seemed to believe in fairies, but every one of them had a different idea about what they were and how their magic might work. And they were all the same kind of dreamers, people Jacob would never trust to give him an answer even if he was asking about their specialist subject. They were just too wooly, people who couldn't tell fact from fiction.

Maybe that was the problem, he concluded after a while. They were all crazy, they had to be. Because they believed in fairies. And if they started saying that magic came from little flying people who liked to grant wishes, you clearly couldn't trust anything they said. He needed something written by someone with their feet on the ground, someone who knew what they were talking about. He needed to find a guide to dealing with fairies written by someone who didn't believe in such crazy things; and that obviously wasn't going to happen. He'd keep on dismissing every person who thought they had an answer to his questions, because he couldn't bring himself to trust someone who believed in magic even after he'd seen proof that it was real.

Jacob put the phone down again, and tried to think. He had a magic pacifier. He had to believe that, because he'd seen and felt what it could do to him. He didn't want to believe it, and he didn't trust the opinions of anyone else who did, but that much was clearly real. And as long as he had it, there was a chance he'd need to know how it worked, or at least how to stop it working.

"Maybe I don't try anything?" he mused. Those words at least sounded sane. He kept on talking, knowing that it would be easier to spot the things that sounded crazy that way. "I've got it, but I don't have to use it. I don't need to answer every question. I don't need to learn how to use it safely if I don't use it. I mean, I could put the damn thing back in its box, stick it in a drawer, and that's the end of that. I can pretend it never happened. Today was just a walk in the park, getting muddy because the baby wouldn't stop playing around in the dirt."

It sounded sensible. It sounded real. He could tell his friends about everything except the fairy, and he was still a little pissed that Dad had insisted on the whole family going to the park and not even giving him a chance to toss a ball around. Same problems as always; getting in trouble for being unsociable, but then Dad wouldn't even talk to him except to yell. It really hadn't been all that different. And now he wasn't grounded any longer, he could go back to training with the team, take part in the big championship, have fun with his friends, and everything that normally filled his life. He would never have to say a word about fairies, and he promised himself that he never would. He didn't want anyone else to think he was one of those hippy weirdos, after all.

With that decision made, the only thing left to do was call Jack and Daily, let them know he was free again. And the other big reason he was so glad to have his phone back, he needed to check all the loot crates and daily bonuses on a couple of different games.

The pacifier's box, looking so much like an ornate jewelry box, went in the back of the underwear drawer of his dresser. And he knew he would never need to think about that crazy stuff again.

## **10. School**

Jacob wasn't a baby. That was something there could be absolutely no mistake about. Babies couldn't drive a car, for one thing. And Jacob could certainly drive, having passed his test almost a month before. He even had his own car, a combination of a birthday present from his Uncle Alan and his share of some award that the team had received. It was the envy of all his friends, even if it was a budget-model MZR from a few years before, and the time he put into polishing it each weekend couldn't quite mask the tacky appearance of the plastic bodywork.

Still, it was a sports car. Even if it was a little old, a little short on luxury features, a little shorter than most of the models it might otherwise be comparable to, and looked a lot faster than it actually was. Jacob was the kind of young man who thought appearances really mattered, and he was kind of aware that a lot of the cool factor of this particular ride, seen through the eyes of his classmates and teammates, was because of the effort he put into making the car look good, rather than the vehicle himself.

"Jacob," Chuck nodded as he arrived at the school gates. Chuck was walking in as usual. It wasn't that he couldn't afford a car of his own, but Chuck was the kind of guy who saw playing sports as a goal in its own right, a way to improve and test his body, rather than a

way to win fame for the school and popularity among the student body. Chuck Tenniger, the guy who'd get up early and run five miles to school every morning, all in the name of keeping in shape. Someone might have said that he could have maintained the same physique by driving into school and not having donuts for breakfast every day. But that was missing the point entirely. For Chuck, the running and the donuts were what he wanted, and the girls drooling over him were a side effect that he never seemed to notice. Whereas to Jacob, training was both an excuse to hang out with his friends, and a chore that he had to go through in order to be the champion. They couldn't be more different in their motivations, but once they were out on the field they were like brothers, a perfect team.

"Chuck," he answered. "Hope you've not worn yourself out already."

He didn't see the gesture in response; it would be the same answer he got as he drove off every day. He knew his friends well enough now that he could be sure how they'd react in just about any situation, which meant that he was always comfortable saying what was on his mind. It was good to have people he knew would have his back, and he was as proud of gathering a group of good people around him as he was any of his other achievements.

The school day went just like he might have expected. It was a day like any other, even when he cut short the traditional vent about being grounded without any kind of warning. The others shared their commiserations; Walrus had been confined to his home over the long weekend as well, for much the same reasons. Now the team was back together, everything could get back to normal. They were all looking forward to practice that evening, and there were a lot of jibes insinuating that Jacob might have lost some of his skill after missing a single session. He couldn't wait to prove them wrong. The rest of the day was just background noise, nothing worth thinking about as he waited for the hour that really mattered.

That could have been why he wasn't giving his full attention at lunch time, when he started hunting through his bag for a drink. He had a burger in front of him, like most of the students in the cafeteria. The burgers on tuesdays were legendary, and the envy of other schools. Not to mention being exactly the right mix of protein and carbs for an athlete looking to bulk up, according to Aaron. A long time ago, Walrus had taken that as justification to have two burgers every week, and by now the rest of the team had joined him in the habit. But Jacob just had to go one step further, and would turn down the standard milkshake or soda, bringing a vitamin-enriched protein shake instead.

Unfortunately, he must have been a little less careful when packing his bag today, as pulling out the drink bottle sent a torrent of paper and books spilling across the floor. The people around him were divided evenly between trying to help him gather everything up, and just walking over the stuff he had dropped. Typical enough, he would probably have done the same for anyone who wasn't a friend. It was his own fault for spacing out, but that didn't make it any easier to pull his stuff back from under moving feet. A minute later, he still wasn't sure if he had managed to lose some vital piece of homework, but he returned to his seat anyway because he didn't care that much. What he cared about was a pair of thick, juicy burgers starting to get cold on his tray.

"Thanks, man," he mumbled, and got just a nod in response from Walrus, while Aaron somehow managed to produce one more dropped note from the floor without appearing to

leave his seat.

"No worries. You got a lot of stuff today."

"Homework," he answered with an uninterested shrug, and bit into the first of his burgers. To anyone who understood the sacred ritual of lunchtime, it was a sign that he was unlikely to answer unless something really important came up.

"Oh hey, Prollix is coming this way." Chuck spoke out of the corner of his mouth, and Aaron and Welch both half turned in an attempt to see without making it obvious that they were watching. Hanna Prollix was one student who didn't properly fit into any of the cliques. She didn't hang around with the jocks, the nerds, the musicians, or any of the other groups in the cafeteria. She didn't do group activities that anyone was aware of, she was never seen watching inter-school sports, and the only person she ever seemed to talk to was the equally cool-and-mysterious Cassandra Flint. There were all kinds of rumours about what the two had in common, but nobody would ever have a reason to ask. And nobody who was anyone at this school would be so crass as to let their interest in the weird girls show.

"Hey, Jacob?" Her voice was soft with just a faintest trace of an Irish accent. Jacob didn't think he'd ever heard her say more than a dozen words before, and he was as surprised as anyone to hear his name on her lips. Right away, his mind was working through a thousand possibilities about what she could be asking, while he effected his usual nonchalant shrug in reply.

"Hanna. What's up?"

"You dropped your pacifier," she answered, and put it down on the table, right next to the plate with his second burger.

"Thanks," Jacob started, staring at the little niece of sparkly plastic as if it had somehow offended him. He was frozen in shock for a moment, not sure how he should respond. Did he make out like it was some kind of joke, play along? Did he accept it like it was nothing out of the ordinary, which would surely make her think she was missing out on the big joke? His attempts to think of the least embarrassing response were somewhat impaired because more than half of his brain was occupied wondering why the damn thing was even here. Had Dad somehow got in touch with her to stage a practical joke? Had Dad put it in his bag, or had he dropped it in without thinking? Did magic fairy artifacts have some enchantment to stop you just leaving them locked away in a drawer? It would have been great if there was anyone he could ask those questions of, but he couldn't think of a single thing to say when all his friends had just seen his most embarrassing secret, laid open to the world. He couldn't even grab it and shove it in his pocket before they saw, because he was holding a burger in both hands and there was no point grabbing the evidence after that'd already seen it.