Nicole had never been much of a fan of carnivals.

Maybe it was the City Girl TM inside of her, but ever since she was little, she’d always found county fairs and crap like that just miserable. Visiting her relatives in the boonies, always just before their respective semesters started at school, had usually coincided with eager cries from her less cosmopolitan cousins about how they wanted to go on the Ferris Wheel, how the wanted to ride the Gravitron, or how they wanted to eat funnel cakes until they barfed.

It wasn’t that she *hated* them, it was just that she would have never gone to one if she hadn’t been invited. And, unfortunately for her, Graham thought that they were the peak of early Autumnal entertainment.

They had been dating for a few months now, and she was absolutely head over heels for the guy. Tall, dark hair, trim build, with a good head on his shoulders and a cute face to boot, he had this undeniable charm to him that had captured her attention from the very first time they’d locked eyes. It was literally as close to love at first sight as she had ever gotten—Graham could have said that he thought walking through hot coals was the absolute *perfect* way to spend a Sunday afternoon, and Nicole doubted that she would have been able to disagree with him.

They’d met their Sophomore year in college and had hit it off like nobody else’s business—their budding romance had been going strong for the two seasons since, and had taken them to all sorts of places in the name of Young Love and Adventure.

It had, unfortunately, also taken them here—to the Anderson County Fair.

“What’s wrong, babe?” he asked, slinking his arms low around her shoulders, “You not havin’ fun?”

“Having a blast.” She lied with a big lovestruck smile on her face, “Anywhere I go with you is a great time.”

“Oh yeah, you havin’ a grat tim?”

“Makup all over my fas.”

The two of them were sickening sweethearts, nuzzling into one another, even as they neared a year into their relationship. November would be their anniversary—a mere three months away—and this would be their last chance to enjoy themselves before heading back to school. Visiting his parents had been fun, and seeing his home town had been great, but Nicole wouldn’t have been hard pressed to admit that the fair was her least favorite stop on the love boat tour so far.

Somehow it seemed even *more* Podunk than when she would go with her cousins in Rockland.

The booths were shabby and the rides creaked rather ominously when in operation. Fatty southern food filled the air, as did the distinctive smell of overworked fryers around every corner. The smell was enough to make poor Nicole a little nauseous. But she’d been putting it off ever since they arrived in North Carolina—and this was the last day that the fair was going to be in town.

“Check it out, babe!” he eyed the game booths eagerly, like a child might look at a new toy, across the courtyard and beside the haunted house, “Want me to win you a stuffed animal?”

“You go for it, babe.” Nicole stood up on her tippy-toes and gave her sweetheart a kiss, “I’m gonna go find the little girls’ room.”

“Okay, see you soon!”

He hugged her briefly, lifting her tiny frame off of the ground, and set her back down before hurrying in the direction of a giant stuffed bunny rabbit that he’d set his sights on. It was nice to see him so happy, literally bounding away with childlike energy, even if it *was* over a dumb thing like a county fair. Nicole didn’t think that she could ever bring herself to understand it, but the important part was that he was having a good time on his last few days home.

After exiting the bathroom, abysmally dirty just like everything else at this place, Nicole found herself at a loss for just where exactly she’d come from. All of these booths tended to bleed together, and with all of the noise coming from every and all directions at once, it was a little difficult for her to get a grip on where she was in relation to the booth that she’d seen Graham run off to. Not the least bit made any easier due to the fact that she hadn’t exactly been paying attention to where she was going—

“Ugh, this is how people get snatched up.”

She grumbled to herself as she peered up and down the wide grassy walkways cut out by the various rides, games, and vendors. Being as short as she was, just a scant two inches over five feet, meant that she had even *less* chance to see what and where was around her than she would have if Graham were here. That tall, lovable freak.

It wasn’t like it was a terribly big place to get lost in. The fair lot was relatively small. But being alone in a new state where she didn’t know anybody other than her boyfriend and the parents that they had been crashing with for the better part of a week now still put that thought into her head. The same thought that goes through every girls’ head in a dark alley or a parking lot at night.

It wouldn’t have been the first time she punched somebody with her keys between her fingers, but she somehow doubted that anyone would try anything before the sun went down. It was still a golden afternoon orange topside, with the clouds just barely turning purple. The fair lights flickered to life just as soon as the turned past the old timey ring toss game—a low electric hum seemed to fill the entire fair ground.

“…okay, maybe this is *kind* *of* pretty.” Nicole admitted begrudgingly.

Maybe it was the country atmosphere? Something about the sound of cicadas chirping in against the backdrop of the carnival music and the whine of the rides made the night seem more alive than she remembered it being when she used to go to the fair with her cousins. The smell of the sweet grass mixing with the odor of the batter and friend food made it somehow seem… not as heinous as before? It was like there was a little magic that happened as soon as the afternoon hit and the lights came on, and now she was beginning to see what the fair was supposed to be like this whole time…

Suddenly, she wasn’t just walking down the aisles in hopes of finding her boyfriend. She had become enchanted with a sort of wonder that had eluded her when she was a child. Her eyes lit up at the sight of the Ferris Wheel towering high in the sky above her, and the flickering neon lights powering up on every other booth and popping against the darkening sky gave her this funny feeling in the pit of her stomach. It was like something out of a movie—like one of those cheesy romance flicks that she liked to watch. In its own… *rustic* kind of way, this whole county fair thing was really cute!

“Maybe I should try to win Graham something?” she said to herself, “I think he might really like that…”

And, as fell to the spell set out by the magical Autumn night carnival, Nicole found herself going from trying to *find* Graham to trying to find something *for* Graham. Doubling at every sight, now suddenly interesting to her, Nicole was inspired and mystified by the strange filter that had brought her around to finding the carnival not just palatable, but entertaining!

“No, he doesn’t want a big teddy bear…”

“He *probably* doesn’t want a giant inflatable Scooby-Doo…”

“And he for sure doesn’t want a Min—wait, *Munion*? What’s a Munion?”

No matter where she turned to look, nothing seemed to be right up her alley. Rather, Graham’s alley. She was new to this whole “throw a ball and win a prize” thing—how was she supposed to know what her boyfriend would like? How was she supposed to know which one of these games were even winnable? Weren’t carnival people notorious cheaters? She wasn’t exactly rolling in enough money to risk camping out at a rigged game…

As she felt the familiar frustration and distaste for the county fair build back up, Nicole had almost given up hope when she finally saw a booth that caught her eye. All alone, tucked into the corner of the fairgrounds, was this little booth painted purple and pink. Gold lettering glimmered in the afternoon sunlight, a pretty font that was curly-cue to the point of almost illegibility:

*The Wonderous Wilma’s Wishing Booth*

It hadn’t been the kind of booth that she was looking for, for sure. But something about the gravitas that the little attraction held itself to was rather charming. Dark shawls hung overhead and down the side, with a roomy interior manned by a lone fat woman with a tiny red bob. She was dressed like an old-timey gypsy, as if she’d crawled right out of the Twilight Zone’s costuming department. Presumably, she was the Wilma that the booth had been named for.

“Do you have a wish that you’d like to make, my dear?” the fat woman said, her hands folded gently in front of her, “I guarantee your heart’s desire, for the price of one measly five-dollar bill.”

“Five bucks?” Nicole scoffed, “I can buy like thirty tickets for that.”

“Alright then—thirty tickets.” The woman smiled, “Does your heart not have a yearning that eludes you? Something that you wish above all others? For five measly dollars (or I suppose, thirty tickets), I can at least nudge you in the right direction...”

Normally, Nicole would have simply ignored the proposition and walked way. But, intrigued by the offer, the city slicker couldn’t help but wonder if there really *was* something in her life that was worth wasting five bucks to wish on. For the first time, literally the first time in her life, Nicole had nothing to complain about!

She was dating a great guy, she was getting high marks in class, and all of her scholarships had stayed on for another year—she’d enjoyed every minute of her pre-semester vacation with Graham up until an hour or so ago, and even then she’d started to come around to the living Instagram filter that was the natural county fair magic. If there had been anything that she felt the need to wish for—five dollars or not—Nicole honestly couldn’t muster up anything!

…and for some reason, that almost kind of bothered her. Imagine, coming up to a wishing booth and not having anything to wish for! Not like it was legit anyway, but… still! She couldn’t just *walk away*, could she?

“Yeah right lady, five bucks for a wish?” Nicole laughed again, “You could at least have a game or a prize or something. Nobody’s just gonna *give you* five bucks for saying that you grant wishes.”

“Oh ho, you doubt me?” the fat woman’s jowls creased into a second Cheshire smile that ringed around her buried neck, “You aren’t the first… you probably won’t be the last. But I could make a believer out of you yet, my friend!”

“You think so, huh?” Nicole asked, her eyes narrowing confidently, “You sure enough to waive your fee?”

“As sure as sure can be.” Wilma chuckled thickly, “What is your wish, dear?”

And she hadn’t known *why* she said it. It was already true, for the most part. But she needed *something* to say after sounding so confident. Calling this woman out like that meant that she had to go out on the high ground, so the words just sort of left her lips—

“I wish that I was in the *perfect* relationship.”

“Is that all?” Wilma asked with a little chuckle in her voice, “I think that this is certainly one of my more doable requests.”

Somehow the response startled Nicole a little more than it should. It was as if she’d been called out in her own right for not believing that this fat old gypsy lookalike had genuine magical, wish-granting abilities. The confidence in her voice was one that didn’t speak to a fraud that had been unveiled, but rather as someone who had known better this whole time, and was happy to prove her latest in a long line of naysaying clients wrong.

“Tell me, my friend… does your current lover enjoy the fair?”

“Yeah, he’s nuts about it.” Nicole did her best to hide back the obligatory “for some reason”

“This person, your boyfriend…” Wilma closed her eyes as if to ponder on her next question, “…he enjoys the fair food? Corn dogs and funnel cakes—candy apples and cotton candy?”

“I mean, yeah.” Nicole shrugged her shoulders, barely noticing the ever so slight heaviness with which her arms lingered at her sides, “Who doesn’t?”

Her own words tickled in the drums of her ears for the slightest of seconds before she brushed it off, as if she had told an egregious lie right to this woman’s face. She knew *somebody* that didn’t like carnival food, but she couldn’t for the life of her remember who it was. Maybe her cousin? The warm taste of a mustardy corndog from Rockland tickled at her tastebuds as her nose caught trail of a vendor’s wares wafting in the Autumn wind.

“You know that these are not healthy for you though, yes?” Wilma waved her hands outwards, gesticulating vaguely in Nicole’s direction, “But you enjoy them anyway?”

“Uh yeah, it’s part of *going to the Fair*.”

Nicole rolled her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest. Honestly, what kind of question even was that? There slight tightness in her sleeves, specifically over the upper arm, but she maintained that she had been happy with her selection that morning. Cute flannel for this little country outing, one that did its best to hide her belly. A cute pattern for a cute girl in a cute County Fair… what more could Graham have asked for?

“You are not from around here, are you?” Wilma continued, “Did they have county fairs in… Illinois?”

“Pff—be glad that your sign doesn’t say Psychic.” Nicole chuckled, letting her hands fall on her full hips, “I’m from New York. And yeah, I went every year with my cousins. Lots of good memories there.”

Mostly memories of food. God, how she loved the fair food back in Rockland. Out of all the memories she had about her childhood, the greasy cuisine and sugary sweets that tickled her tongue were probably the most vivid. If Nicole were being honest with herself, she had been chasing that sugar high probably since middle school…

“So you enjoy your life, yes?” Wilma asked with a sense of finality, “And your boyfriend, you and he have much in common?”

“Well I mean, I hope so.”

“Then what are you asking for a perfect relationship for?” Wilma laughed again, “It sounds like you two are made for one another—go, find your boyfriend. Enjoy the fair together!”

“Um… *okay*…”

What a weird encounter. That was all Nicole could take away from it. Who just randomly solicits people to grant their wishes and then doesn’t even doing anything? Honestly, a girl breaks away from her boyfriend for a few minutes to hunt down a good corndog that isn’t *drenched* in mustard, and all of the sudden the weirdos come out.

Picking up where she left off, deep throating the last half of her corn dog, Nicole remembered that she was supposed to be meeting up with Graham. That sweetheart was trying to win her a big stuffed bunny rabbit to go with her collection, and she’d gone and gotten distracted by fair food again.

“Ugh, not on my good shirt…”

The grease of the dog had sapped through the corn breading, dripping on the left boob of her slightly distended flannel. Dabbing at it slightly, her double chin creased ever so slightly as she tried to do a little damage control. Thankfully this wasn’t a formal date or anything, but she still didn’t want her *perfect relationship* to get soured because she suddenly looked like a slob.

“*rrup”*

Nicole patted her belly as it eeked over the waistline of her blue jeans, the slightest little ring of chub threatening to undo the bottom button on her top. She had known that this was going to be a fun day at the fair, but she’d also wanted to look cute—silently, she cursed herself for not wearing her leggings. They were *perfect* for a day at the fair. All that walking around, getting in and out of rides… plus, plenty stretchy for all the food that she liked to put away at these kinds of things. It’d been so long since she’d had a candy apple, Nicole had almost forgotten what they’d tasted like!

“There you are!”

Graham rounded the corner with a big pink bunny in tow, riding on his back like Yoda as he bounded back up to his girlfriend for the first time in what felt like forever. Nicole almost wanted to tell him what had happened with that weird old lady at the Wishing Booth, but she had gotten a little distracted by her three favorite things…

“Omg is that a *funnel cake*?”

“What? Yeah, I figured you might want it—I know that they’re your favorite!”

“Thanks babe, you’re the best.”

Nicole stood up on her chubby little tippy toes and planted a big wet one on Graham’s scruffy cheek. Taking the plate and fork in two hands while her boyfriend escorted the big bunny rabbit into the car, it was all Nicole could do to think that she really *was* in the perfect relationship…

God, she loved the carnival—something about them just seemed so magical.