

SOMAN CHAINANI



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HARPER

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The School for Good and Evil: The Last Ever After

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First Edition

Now, in their love, which was stronger, there were the seeds of hatred and fear and confusion growing at the same time: for love can exist with hatred, each preying on the other, and this is what gives it its greatest fury.

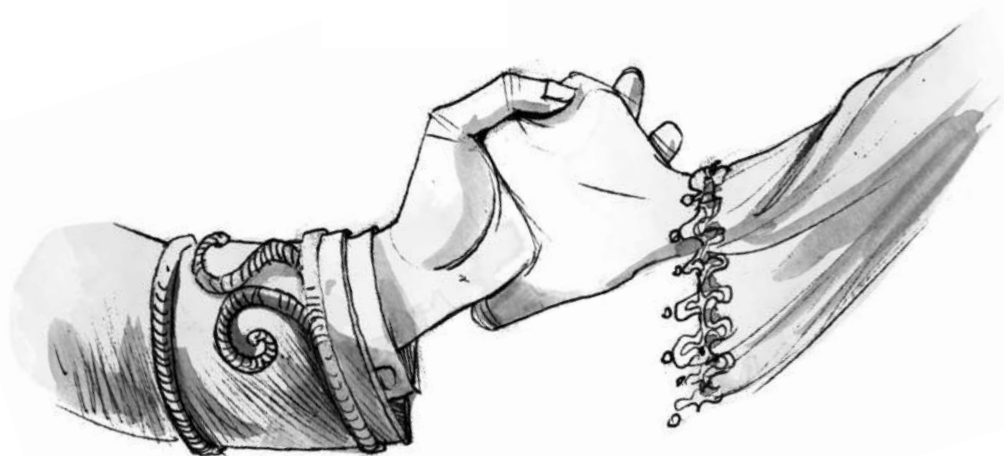
T. H. White, *The Once and Future King*



IN THE FOREST PRIMEVAL
A SCHOOL FOR GOOD AND EVIL
TWO TOWERS LIKE TWIN HEADS
ONE FOR THE PURE
ONE FOR THE WICKED
TRY TO ESCAPE YOU'LL ALWAYS FAIL
THE ONLY WAY OUT IS
THROUGH A FAIRY TALE



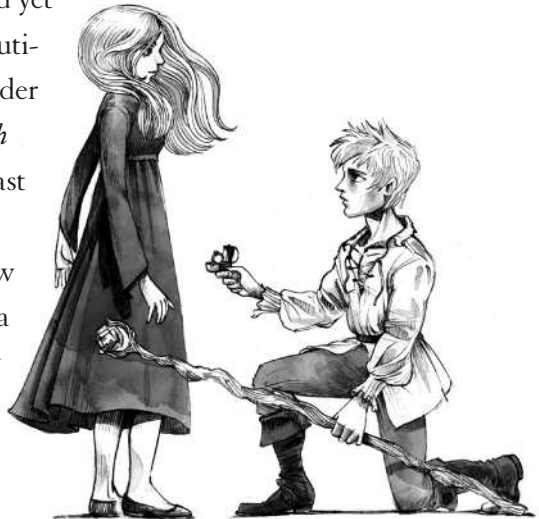
PART I



The Master and the Queen

It is natural to doubt your true love when you do not know if he is young or old.

He certainly looks young, Sophie thought, peering at the lean, shirtless boy as he gazed out the tower window, bathed in faded sunlight. Sophie studied his hairless white skin and snug black breeches, his thick spiked hair the color of snow, his tight-veined arms, his glacier-blue eyes. . . . He didn't look a day more than sixteen. And yet somewhere within this beautiful stranger was a soul older than sixteen—much, *much* older than sixteen. For the last three weeks, then, Sophie had refused his ring. How could she bond herself to a boy with the School Master inside of him?



And yet the more Sophie looked at him, the more she couldn't see the School Master. All Sophie could see was a fresh, ethereal youth asking for her hand, with sharp cheekbones and full lips—more handsome than a prince, more powerful than a prince, and unlike Prince You-Know-Who, this boy was *hers*.

Sophie reddened, remembering she was all alone in this world. Everyone else had abandoned her. Every desperate effort to be Good had been punished with betrayal. She had no family, no friends, no future. And now, this ravishing boy in front of her was her last hope for love. Panic burned through her muscles and dried out her throat. There was no choice anymore. Sophie swallowed and slowly stepped towards him.

Look at him. He's no older than you, she soothed herself. *The boy of your dreams*. She reached shaking fingers for his bare shoulder . . . until she suddenly froze in her tracks. *It was only magic that had brought this boy to life*, she thought, pulling her hand back into her sleeve. *But how long does magic last?*

"You're asking yourself the wrong questions," came the smooth voice. "Magic thinks nothing of time."

Sophie lifted her eyes. The boy didn't look at her, his focus on the sallow sun, barely a force through the morning fog.

"Since when can you hear my thoughts?" Sophie said, unnerved.

"I don't need to hear thoughts to know how a Reader's mind thinks," he replied.

Sophie took her place beside him in her black cloak, feeling the chill off his marble-colored skin. She thought of Tedros' skin, always sweaty and tan, with the warmth of a bear's. A hot

flash bolted through her body—rage or regret or something in between. She forced herself closer to the boy, her arm brushing his pale chest.

He still didn't look at her.

"What is it?" Sophie asked.

"The sun," he said, watching it flicker through the mist. "Every day it rises weaker than the one before."

"If only you had power to make the sun shine too," Sophie murmured. "Every day could be a tea party."

The boy shot her a sour glare. Sophie stiffened, reminded that unlike her once Good best friend, her new suitor was neither Good nor friendly. She quickly looked back out the window, shivering at an icy breeze. "Oh for heaven's sake, suns weaken in the winter. Don't need a sorcerer to know that."

"Perhaps it takes a Reader to explain this too," he replied, sweeping to the white stone table in the corner, where a long, knife-sharp pen, shaped like a knitting needle, hovered over an open storybook. Sophie turned to the book, glimpsing the colors of the last page: her painted self kissing the School Master back to youth as her best friend vanished home with a prince.

The End

"Three *weeks* since the Storian wrote our Never After," said the boy. "Within days, it should have begun a new story with love on Evil's side now. Love that will destroy Good, one fairy tale at a time. Love that turns the pen into Evil's weapon instead of its curse." His eyes narrowed to slits. "Instead it

reopens the book it just closed and *stays* there, hanging over The End like a play whose curtain won't *shut*."

Sophie couldn't look away from Agatha and Tedros on the page, embracing lovingly as they disappeared. Sophie's gut twisted, her face searing hot—"Here," she croaked, slamming the cover down on them, and shoving the cherry-red storybook next to *The Frog Prince, Cinderella, Rapunzel*, and the rest of the Storian's finished tales. Her heartbeat calmed. "Curtain shut."

Instantly the book ricocheted off the shelf and smashed into her face, knocking her against the wall, before it flew onto the stone table, swinging open to the last page once more. The Storian glimmered defiantly above it.

"This is no accident," spoke the boy, stalking towards Sophie as she rubbed her stinging cheek. "The Storian keeps our world alive by writing new stories, and at the moment, it has no intention of moving on from *your* story. And as long as the pen does not move on to a *new* story, the sun dies, day by day, until the Woods go dark and it is The End for us *all*."

Sophie looked up at him, silhouetted by the weak light. "But—but what is it waiting for?"

He leaned in and touched her neck, his fingers frigid on her peach-cream skin. Sophie recoiled, jamming into the bookshelf. The boy smiled and drew closer, blocking out the sun. "I'm afraid it has doubts whether I'm your true love," he cooed. "It has doubts whether you've committed to Evil. It has doubts whether your friend and her prince should be gone forever."

Sophie slowly gazed up at the black shadow.

“It meaning *you*,” said the School Master, holding out his hand.

Sophie looked down to see the ring of gold in his cold, young palm and her terrified face in its reflection.

Three weeks before, Sophie had kissed the School Master into a boy and banished her best friend home. For a moment, she’d felt the relief of victory as Agatha silently disappeared with Tedros. Her best friend may have chosen a prince over her, but there was no such thing as a prince in Gavaldon. Agatha would die an ordinary girl, with an ordinary boy, while she basked in Ever After, far, far away. Wrapped in the arms of her true love, soaring towards his silver tower in the sky, Sophie waited to feel happy. She’d won her fairy tale and winning was supposed to mean happiness.

But as they landed in his murky, stone chamber, Sophie started to shake. Agatha was gone. Her best friend. Her soul-mate. And with her, she’d taken a boy who Sophie had grown close to in so many forms: when she was a girl, when she was a boy, when he was her true love, when he was just her friend. Agatha had won Tedros, the only boy Sophie ever truly knew; Tedros had won Agatha, the one person Sophie never thought she’d live without. And Sophie had won a beautiful boy of whom she knew nothing, except the dark depths of his evil. As the School Master moved towards her, young as a prince, with a cocky smile, Sophie knew she’d made a mistake.

Only it’d been too late to turn back. Through the window, Sophie glimpsed Agatha’s vanishing embers, the castles rotting

vulturous black, boys and girls smashing into vicious war, teachers firing spells at students, at each other. . . . Stunned, she'd twirled to the School Master—only to see the frost-haired boy on one knee before her, ring in hand. Take it, he'd said, and two years of war would cease. No more Good versus Evil. No more Boys versus Girls. Instead, only indisputable Evil: a School Master and his queen. Take the ring, the beautiful boy said, and she would have her happy ending at last.

Sophie didn't.

The School Master left her alone in the tower, sealing the window so she couldn't escape. Every morning when the clock struck ten, he came and asked again, his young, sinewy body inexplicably clad in different clothes—one day a lace-up shirt, the next day a draping tunic or tight vest or ruffled collar—and his cloud-white hair just as fickle, whether sleeked or tousled or curled. He brought gifts too: exquisite jeweled gowns, luscious bouquets, lavender perfumes, vials of creams and soaps and herbs, always anticipating her next wish. Still Sophie shook her head each time and then he'd be gone without a word, scowling with teenage sulk. She'd stay there, trapped in his chamber alone, with the company of his fairy-tale library and his old blue robes and silver mask abandoned like relics to hooks on a wall. Food would appear magically three times a day at the moment she felt hungry, and precisely what she was craving, in perfect portions on plates made of bone—steamed vegetables, steamed fruit, steamed fish, and the occasional bowl of bacon and beans (she couldn't shake the cravings from her time as a boy). When night fell, a giant bed would materialize in the

chamber, with velvet sheets the color of blood and a white lace canopy. At first, Sophie couldn't sleep, petrified he would come in the dark. But he never returned until the next morning for their silent ritual of ring and refusal.

By the second week, Sophie began to wonder what had happened to the schools. Had her rejections prolonged the war between boys and girls? Had she cost any lives? She tried to ask what had become of her friends—of Hester, Dot, Anadil, Hort—but he answered no questions, as if the ring was the price of moving forward.

Today was the first day he'd even spoken since he brought her here. Now, standing beside him in the glow of a dying sun, Sophie saw she could no longer delay without consequence. The time had come for her to seal her ending with him or slowly fade into death too. The gold ring sparkled brighter in the School Master's hand, promising new life. Sophie looked up at the bare-chested boy, praying to see a reason to take it . . . and saw nothing but a stranger. "I can't," she breathed, shrinking against a shelf. "I don't know the first thing about you."

The School Master stared at her, square jaw flexing, and put the ring back into his breeches. "What is it you would like to know?"

"For one thing, your name," Sophie said. "If I'm going to stay here with you, I need something to call you."

"The teachers call me 'Master.'"

"I'm not calling you 'Master,'" Sophie snapped.

He gritted his teeth about to fire back, but Sophie wasn't cowed. "Without me, your Never After doesn't exist," she

preempted, voice rising. “You’re nothing but a boy—a well-built, virile, obscenely handsome boy—but still, a *boy*. You can’t lord over me. You can’t scare me into true love. I don’t care if you’re gorgeous or rich or powerful. Tedros had all of those things and la-di-da, didn’t *that* turn out well. I deserve someone who makes me happy. At *least* as happy as Agatha and Agatha doesn’t have to call Tedros ‘Prince’ for the rest of her life, does she? Because Tedros has a name, like every boy in the world, and so do you and I will call you by it if you expect me to actually give you a chance.”

The School Master swelled crimson, but Sophie was breathing flames now. “That’s right. *I’m* in charge now. You might be the Master of this infernal school, but you are not my Master and you never will be. You said it yourself: the Storian won’t write because it is waiting for *my* choice, not yours. I choose whether I take your ring. I choose whether this is The End. I choose whether this world lives or dies. And I’m happy to watch it burn to dust if you expect a slave instead of a queen.”

The School Master glowered at her, veins pulsing beneath his ghost-white neck. He bit his lip so hard Sophie thought he was about to eat her and she stepped back in horror, only to see him slacken with an angry pant and look away. Then he was quiet for a very long time, his fists clenched.

“Rafal,” he mumbled. “My name is Rafal.”

Rafal, Sophie thought, astonished. In an instant, she saw him anew: the callow milk of his skin, the adolescent sparkle in his eyes, the erect puff to his chest, matching the storm and youth of a name. *Rafal*. What is it about a name that

gives us a story to believe in?

She suddenly felt the blush of desire, craving to touch him . . . until she remembered what choosing him would mean. This was a boy who'd butchered his own blood in the name of Evil and he believed her capable of the same. Sophie held herself back.

"What was your brother's name?" she asked.

He spun, eyes aflame. "I don't see how that will help you get to know me any better."

Sophie didn't press the point. Then behind him, she noticed the fog abating, revealing a greenish haze over two black castles in the distance. It was the first time in three weeks he'd unsealed the window long enough for her to see through. But both schools seemed dead quiet, no sign of life on any of the roofs or balconies. "W-w-where is everyone?" she sputtered, squinting at the healed Bridge between the castles. "What happened to the girls? The boys were going to kill them—"

"A queen would have the right to ask me questions about the school she rules," he said. "You are not a queen yet."

Sophie cleared her throat, noticing the bulge of the ring in his tight pocket. "Um, why do you keep changing clothes? It's . . . strange."

For the first time, the boy seemed uncomfortable. "Given your refusals, I assumed dressing like the princes you chase would move things along." He scratched his rippled stomach. "Then I remembered the son of Arthur wasn't fond of shirts."

Sophie snorted, trying to ignore his perfect torso. "Didn't think the all-powerful were capable of self-doubt."

“If I was all-powerful, I could make you love me,” he growled.

Sophie heard the petulance in his voice and for a moment saw an ordinary boy, lovesick and striving for a girl he couldn't have. Then she remembered this was no ordinary boy. “No one can make anyone love them,” she hit back. “I learned that lesson harder than anyone. Besides, even if you *could* make me love you, you could never love me. You can't love anything. Not if you embrace Evil as a choice. It's why your brother is dead.”

“And yet, I'm alive because of true love's kiss,” he said.

“You tricked me into it—”

“You never broke your grip.”

Sophie blanched. “I'd *never* kiss you and mean it!”

“Oh? For me to return to life, to return to youth . . . the kiss had to go *both* ways, didn't it?” He looked into Sophie's stunned face and grinned. “Surely your best friend taught you that.”

Sophie said nothing, the truth extinguishing her fight. Just as Agatha once could have taken Tedros' hand before she chose Sophie instead, Sophie too could have sent the School Master back to the grave. But here they were, both beautiful and young, victims of a kiss she was trying to deny. Why had she held on to him that night? Sophie asked herself. Even once she knew it was *him* she was kissing? Looking up at the porcelain boy, she thought of everything he'd done to win her, across death and time . . . his unyielding faith that he could make her happy, beyond any family, friend, or prince. He had come for her when no one else wanted her. He had believed in her when

no one else did. Sophie's voice clumped in her throat. "Why do you want me so much?" she rasped.

He stared at her, the clamp of his jaw easing, his lips falling open slightly. For a moment, Sophie thought he looked the way Tedros did when he let down his guard—a lost boy playing at a grown-up. "Because once upon a time, I was just like you," he said softly. He blinked fast, falling into memory. "I tried to love my brother. I tried to escape my fate. I even thought I'd found—" He caught himself. "But it only led to more pain . . . more Evil. Just as every time you seek love, it leads you to the same. Your mother, your father, your best friend, your prince . . . The more you chase the light, the more darkness you find. And yet still you doubt your place in Evil."

Sophie tensed as he gently lifted her chin. "For thousands of years, Good has told us what love is. Both you and I have tried to love in their way, only to suffer pain," he said. "But what if there's a different kind of love? A darker love that turns pain into power. A love that can only be understood by the two who share it. That's why you held our kiss, Sophie. Because I see you for who you really are and love you for it when no one else can. Because what we've sacrificed for each other is beyond what Good can even fathom. It doesn't matter if they don't call it love. We know it is, just as we know the thorns are as much a part of the rose as the petals." He leaned in, lips caressing her ear. "I am the mirror of your soul, Sophie. To love me is to love yourself," he whispered. Then he raised her hand to his mouth and kissed it like a prince, before he gently let it go.

Sophie's heart wrenched so sharply she thought he'd torn

it out of her. She'd never felt so naked in her life and huddled tighter into her black cloak. Then little by little, staring into the harsh symmetry of his face, Sophie felt her breath come back, a strange safe warmth flooding her core. He understood her, this dark-souled boy, and in the sapphire facets of his eyes, she suddenly saw how deep they went. She shook her head, rattled. "I don't even know if you're really a boy."

He smiled at her. "If your fairy tale has taught you one lesson, Sophie, it is that things are only as you see."

Sophie frowned. "I don't understand—" she started . . . but somewhere in her soul she did.

The boy looked out at the sun, frail and hazy over his school, and Sophie knew that the time for questions was over. As he slid his hand into his pocket, Sophie could feel her whole body trembling, as if pulled towards a waterfall she wouldn't escape.

"Will we be as happy as Tedros and Agatha?" she pressed, voice cracking.

"You must trust your story, Sophie. It has come to The End for a reason." He turned to her. "But now it's time for you to believe it."

Sophie looked down at the gold circle in his hand, breaths growing faster, faster. . . . With a shudder, she pushed him away. He reached for her and Sophie shoved him against the wall, pinning her own palm flat against his frigid chest. He didn't resist as Sophie moved her hand over his sternum, eyes wild, panting hard. She didn't know what she was looking for until she found it beneath her fingers and froze. Her hand rose

and fell on his chest, rose and fell, his heart throbbing between them. Slowly Sophie looked up at him, drinking in his strong, hopeful beat, no different than her own.

“Rafal,” she whispered, wishing a boy to life.

His fingertips caressed her face and for the first time, Sophie didn’t flinch from the cold. As he drew her in, Sophie felt the doubts melt out of her, fear giving way to faith. Black cloak pressed to his white body, like two swans in balance, Sophie raised her left hand into the sunlight, steady and sure. Then Rafal slipped his ring onto her finger, the warm gold sliding up her skin inch by inch, until it fit tight. Sophie let out a gasp and the snow-white boy smiled, never breaking his gaze.

In each other’s arms, Master and Queen turned to the enchanted pen over their fairy tale, ready for it to bless their love . . . ready for it to close their book at last . . .

The pen didn’t move.

The book stayed open.

Sophie’s heart stalled. “What happened?”

She followed Rafal’s eyes to the red-amber sun, which had darkened another shade. His face steeled to a deadly mask. “It seems our happy ending isn’t the one the pen doubts.”

After Ever After

You don't know the first thing about me," Tedros spat, and clubbed his princess in the face with a musty pillow.

Agatha coughed and bashed him with a pillow right back, knocking him against her black bed frame, as feathers burst all over him. Reaper leapt onto Tedros' face, trying

to eat them. "I know too much about you is the problem," Agatha snarled and grabbed at the poorly set bandage under her prince's blue collar. Tedros shoved her away—Agatha tackled him back, before Tedros snatched Reaper and threw the cat at her head. Agatha ducked and Reaper sailed into the bathroom, flailing bald, wrinkled paws,



before landing headfirst in the toilet. “If you knew me, you’d know I do things *myself*,” Tedros huffed, tightening his shirt laces.

“You threw my *cat* at me?” Agatha yelled, launching to her feet. “Because I’m trying to save you from *gangrene*?”

“That cat is Satan,” Tedros hissed, watching Reaper try to climb out of the toilet bowl and slide back down. “And if you knew me, you’d know I *hate* cats.”

“No doubt you like dogs—wet-mouthed, simple, and now that I think about it, a lot like you.”

Tedros glowered at her. “Getting personal over a bandage, are we?”

“Three weeks and the wound isn’t healing, Tedros,” Agatha pressed, scooping Reaper up and toweling him off with her sleeve. “It’ll fester if I don’t treat it—”

“Maybe they do it differently in *graveyards*, but where I come from, a bandage does the trick.”

“A bandage that looks like it was made by a two-year-old?” Agatha mocked.

“You try getting stabbed with your own sword as you’re vanishing,” said Tedros. “You’re lucky I’m even alive—one more second and he’d have run me through—”

“One more second and I’d have remembered what an ape you are and left you behind.”

“As if you could find a boy in this rat trap town better than me.”

“At this point, I’d trade you for a little space and quiet—”

“I’d trade you for a decent meal and a warm bath!” Tedros boomed.

Agatha glared at him, Reaper shivering in her arms. Finally Tedros exhaled, looking ashamed. He stripped off his shirt, spread out his arms, and sat on the bed. “Have at it, princess.”

For the next ten minutes, neither spoke as Agatha rinsed the four-inch gash across her prince’s chest with rose oil, witch hazel, and a dash of white peony from her mother’s cart of herbal potions. Thinking about how Tedros earned the wound, a hairbreadth from his heart, made Agatha’s stomach chill, and she forced her focus back to her task. She didn’t need to think about it—not when the screaming nightmares did the job of reminding her well enough. The School Master turning young . . . grinning at Tedros, bound to a tree . . . eyes flashing red as he stabbed . . . How Tedros didn’t have nightmares about their last moments at school, Agatha couldn’t grasp, but maybe that was the difference between a prince and a Reader. To a boy from the Woods, every day that didn’t end in death was a good one.

Agatha sprinkled boiled turmeric on his wound and Tedros clenched with low moans. “Told you it wasn’t healing,” she murmured.

Tedros gave her a lion’s growl and turned away. “Your mother hates me. That’s why she’s never home.”

“She’s busy looking for patients,” said Agatha, rubbing the yellow powder in. “Have to eat, don’t we?”

“Then why does she leave her medicine cart here?”

Agatha’s hand paused on Tedros’ chest. She’d been asking herself the same question about her mother’s long

disappearances. Agatha rubbed harder and her prince winced. “Look, for the last time, she doesn’t hate you.”

“We’ve been trapped in this house for three weeks, Agatha. I eat all her food, am crap at cleaning, tend to clog the toilet, and she keeps seeing us fighting. If she doesn’t hate me, she will soon.”

“She just thinks you’re a complication to an already complicated situation.”

“Agatha, there is an entire town out there that will kill us on sight. There’s nothing complicated about it,” Tedros argued, sitting up on his knees. “Listen, I’ll be sixteen in a month. That means I take over Camelot as king from my father’s council. Sure, the kingdom’s broke, half the people are gone, and the place is in shambles, but we’ll change all that! That’s where we belong, Agatha. Why can’t we go back—”

“You know why, Tedros.”

“Right. Because you don’t want to leave your mother forever. Because I don’t have a family anymore and you do,” he said, looking away.

Agatha’s neck rashed red. “Tedros—”

“You don’t need to explain,” her prince said quietly. “If my father was still alive, I’d never leave him either.”

Agatha moved closer to him. He still didn’t look at her. “Tedros, if your kingdom needs you . . . you should go back,” she forced herself to say.

Her prince sighed. “I’d never leave you, Agatha.” He pulled at a thread in his dirty socks. “Couldn’t even if I wanted to. Only way back into the Woods is to make the wish together.”

Agatha went rigid. He'd thought about leaving her behind? She swallowed hard and grasped his arm. "I can't go back, Tedros. Terrible things happen to us in the Woods," she rasped anxiously. "We were lucky to escape—"

"You call this 'lucky'?" He finally looked at her. "How long can we stay trapped in this house, Agatha? How long can we be prisoners?"

Agatha tensed. She knew he deserved answers, but she still didn't have them. "It doesn't matter where your Ever After is, does it? It just matters who you're with," she said, trying to sound hopeful. "Surely a teacher said that once."

Tedros didn't smile. Agatha lurched up and ripped a strip from a clean towel hanging on the bedpost. Tedros flopped back onto the bed, arms splayed cactus-style, and lapsed into silence, as Agatha bound his wound tight with the cloth.

"Sometimes I miss Filip," he said softly.

Agatha looked at him, startled. Tedros turned pink and picked at his nails. "It's stupid, given all he did to us—or she . . . or whatever. I should hate him—her, I mean. But boys get each other in a way girls can't. Even if he wasn't really a boy." Tedros saw Agatha's face. "Forget it."

"You really think I don't know you?" Agatha asked, hurt.

Tedros held his breath a moment, as if contemplating whether to be honest or to lie. "It's just . . . those first two years, we were chasing the idea of being together, rather than *actually* being together. I got to know Filip better than I ever got to know you: staying up past curfew together, stealing lamb chops from the Supper Hall, or even just sitting on a rooftop and

talking—you know, about our families or what we're afraid of or what kind of pie we like. Doesn't matter how it all turned out, really. . . . He was my first real friend." Tedros couldn't look at Agatha. "You and I never even got to *be* friends. Don't even have nicknames for each other. With you, it was always stolen moments and faith that love would somehow be enough. And now, here we are, three weeks cooped up in a house, no time alone or room to go for a walk or a hunt or a swim, and then sleeping, eating, *breathing* with the other person hovering around like a keeper, and still we feel like strangers. I've never felt so *old*." He glimpsed Agatha's face. "Oh come on, surely you feel it too. We're like fusty married saps. Every tiny thing that bothers you about me must be magnified a thousand times."

Agatha tried to look understanding. "What bothers you about me?"

"Oh let's not play this game," Tedros puffed, rolling onto his stomach.

"I want to know. What bothers you about me?"

Her prince didn't answer. Agatha flicked hot turmeric onto his back.

Tedros flipped over angrily. "First off, you treat me like I'm an idiot."

"That's not true—"

Tedros frowned at her. "Do you want to know or not?"

Agatha folded her arms.

"You treat me like I'm an idiot," Tedros repeated. "You pretend to be busy every time I attempt conversation. You act like

it's easy for me to give up *my* home, even though a princess is supposed to follow her prince. You clump around the house in those horrible shoes like an elephant, you leave the floor wet after your baths, you never even *try* to smile these days, and if I question anything you say or do, you give me this attitude that I shouldn't dare challenge you because you're just so . . . so . . .”

“So what?” Agatha glared.

“*Good,*” said Tedros.

“My turn,” said Agatha. “First off, you act like you're my captive, as if I kidnapped you away from your best friend, who doesn't even *exist*—”

“Now you're just being spiteful—”

“You make me feel guilty for bringing you here, as if I shouldn't have *saved your life*. You act like you're all sensitive and chivalrous and then declare things like a princess should ‘follow’ her prince. You're impulsive, you sweat too much, you make sweeping generalizations about things you know nothing about, and whenever you knock things over, which is *often*, you blame my *house* instead of yourself—”

“There's barely any room to walk—”

“You're used to living in a *castle*! With west wings and throne rooms and pretty little maids,” Agatha snapped. “Well, we're not in a castle, oh princely one—we're in *real* life. Have you thought that maybe I'm spending all my time worrying about keeping us alive? Have you thought that maybe I'm trying to figure out how to make our happy ending *happy* and that's why I'm not spending all my time smiling like a clown and having deep conversations over cappuccino? Of course

not, because you're Tedros of Camelot, handsomest boy in the Woods and god forbid he feel *old!*"

Tedros cocked a grin. "That handsome, am I?"

"Even Sophie was more tolerable than you!" Agatha yelled into a pillow. "And she tried to kill me! *Twice!*"

"So go into the Woods and get your Sophie back!" Tedros retorted.

"Why don't you go and get your Filip back!" Agatha barked—

Then slowly, they both blushed to silence, realizing they were talking about the same person.

Tedros slid next to his princess and put his arms around her waist. Agatha gave in to his tight, warm hug, trying not to cry.

"What happened to us?" she whispered.

When Agatha rescued Tedros from the School Master, she thought she'd found the way out of her fairy tale. She'd escaped death, saved her prince, and left the Woods behind, with her lying, betraying best friend still in it. As she clutched her true love, haloed by the white light between worlds, Agatha breathed in the relief of Ever After. She had Tedros at last— Tedros who loved her as much as she loved him . . . Tedros whose kiss she could still taste . . . Tedros who would make her happy forever . . .

Agatha smashed face-first into a wall of dirt.

Dazed, she'd opened her eyes to pitch darkness, her body on top of her prince's in Gavaldon's snowy cemetery. In an instant, she remembered all she'd once left behind in this tiny

village: a broken promise to Stefan to bring his daughter home, the Elders' threat to kill her, the stories of witches once burned in a square. . . . *Relax. This is our happy ending*, she'd soothed herself, her breath settling. *Nothing bad can happen anymore.*

Agatha squinted and saw the slope of a roof atop the snow-capped hill, shaped like a witch's hat. Her heart had swelled at the thought of being home once and for all, of seeing her mother's euphoric face. . . . She looked down at her prince with an impish grin. *If she doesn't have a stroke first.*

"Tedros, wake up," she'd whispered. He'd stayed limp in her arms in his black Trial cloak, the only sounds coming from a few crows pecking at grave worms and a weak torch crackling over the gate. She grabbed her prince by the shirt strings to shake him, but her hands were flecked with something warm and sticky. Slowly Agatha raised them into the torchlight.

Blood.

She'd dashed frantically between jagged graves and sharp-edged weeds, clumps crunching through powdery snow, before she saw the house ahead, none of its usual candles lit over the porch. Agatha turned the doorknob slowly, but the hinges squeaked and a body bolted out of bed, tangled in sheets like a stumbling ghost. Finally Callis' head poked through, her big bug eyes blinking wide. For a split second, she colored with happiness, reunited with her daughter who'd been gone for so long. Then she saw the panic in Agatha's face and went pale. "D-d-did anyone see you?" Callis stammered. Agatha shook her head. Her mother smiled with relief and rushed to embrace her, before she saw her daughter's face hadn't changed. Callis

froze, her smile gone. “What have you done?” she gasped.

Together, they’d fumbled down Graves Hill, Callis in her saggy black nightgown, Agatha leading her back to Tedros. Plowing through snow, they lugged him home, each grappling one of his arms. Agatha peeked up at her mother, just an older version of herself with helmet-black hair and pasty skin, waiting for her to balk at the sight of a real-life prince—but Callis’ pupils stayed locked on the darkened town below. Agatha couldn’t worry to ask why. Right now, saving her prince was the only thing that mattered.

As soon as they pulled him through the door, her mother lay Tedros on the rug and slit open his wet shirt, the prince unconscious and covered with cockleburs, while Agatha lit the fireplace. When Agatha turned back, she nearly fainted. The sword wound in Tedros’ chest was so deep she could almost see the pulsing of his heart.

Agatha’s eyes filled with tears. “H-h-he’ll be okay, won’t he? He has to be—”

“Too late to numb him,” said Callis, rifling through drawers for thread.

“I had to bring him, Mother—I couldn’t lose him—”

“We’ll talk later,” Callis said so sharply Agatha shrank to the wall. Crouched over the prince, her mother made it five stitches in, barely closing the wound, before Tedros roused suddenly with a cry of pain, saw the needle in a stranger’s hand, and grabbed the nearest broomstick, threatening to bash her head in if she got an inch closer.

He and Callis had never quite seen eye to eye after that.

Somehow Agatha sweet-talked Tedros into sleeping, and that next morning, while he snuffled shallow breaths, his stitches half-done, Callis took her daughter into the kitchen, hanging a black sheet to close off the bedroom. Agatha had sensed the tension immediately.

“Look, first time we met, he threatened to kill me too,” she’d cracked, pulling two iron plates from the cupboard. “He’ll grow on you, I promise.”

Callis ladled foggy stew from the cauldron into a bowl. “I’ll sew him a new shirt before he leaves.”

“Uh, Mother, there’s a real-life prince from magical fairy land sleeping on our floor and you’re worrying about his shirt?” Agatha said, perching on a creaky stool. “Forget that the sight of me within a hundred feet of a boy should be cause for a town parade or that you’ve been telling me fairy tales are real from the day I was born. Don’t you want to know who he is—” Agatha’s eyes widened. “Wait. Before he *leaves*? Tedros is staying in Gavaldon . . . forever.”

Callis put the bowl in front of Agatha. “No one likes toad soup cold.”

Agatha bucked up. “Look, I know it’s crowded with him here. But Tedros and I can get work in the village. Think about it, if we save up enough, maybe we can all move to a bigger house, maybe even something in the cottage lanes.” Agatha grinned. “Imagine, Mother, we could actually have *living* neighbors—”

Callis fixed her with a cold, brown stare and Agatha stopped talking. She followed her mother’s eyes to the small,

slime-crust window over the sink. Agatha pushed out of her chair, bowl untouched, and grabbed a wet dishtowel from the rack. Pressing against the glass, she scraped at the gray smear of dust, grease, and mildew, until a stream of sunlight pierced through. Agatha backed away in surprise.

Down the snow-coated hill, bright red flags billowed from every lamppost in the square:



“Witch?” Agatha choked, gaping at a hundred reflections of her own face. Beyond the square, the colorful storybook houses, decimated by attacks from the Woods, had been rebuilt

as monotonous stone bunkers. A phalanx of guards in long black cloaks and black-iron masks carried spears, patrolling the cottage lanes and forest perimeter. Dread rising, Agatha's eyes slowly fell on the spot where her and Sophie's statues once glistened near the crooked clock tower. Now there was only a raised wooden stage, with a giant pyre made of birches, two flaming torches fixed to the scaffolding, and a banner of her and Sophie's faces hanging between them.

Agatha's stomach dropped. She'd escaped a public execution at school only to find one at home.

"I warned you, Agatha," her mother said behind her. "The Elders believed Sophie a witch who brought the attacks from the Woods. They ordered you not to go after her the night they surrendered her to the attackers. The moment you disobeyed them, you became a witch too."

Agatha turned, her legs jellifying. "So they want to *burn* me?"

"If you'd come back alone, the Elders might have spared you." Callis was sitting at the table, head in hands. "You could have taken punishment, like I did for letting you escape."

A chill went up Agatha's spine. She looked at her mother, but there were no wounds or marks on her hooked-nose face or gangly arms; all her fingers and toes were intact. "What did they do to you?" Agatha asked, terrified.

"Nothing that compares to what they'll do to you both when they find him." Callis looked up, eyelids raw. "The Elders always despised us, Agatha. How could you be so stupid to bring someone back from the Woods?"

“The s-s-storybook said ‘The End,’” Agatha stuttered. “You said it yourself—if our book says ‘The End,’ this *has* to be our happy ending—”

“Happy ending? With *him*?” Callis blurted, jolting to her feet. “There is a *reason* the worlds are separate, Agatha. There is a reason the worlds *must* be separate. He will never be happy here! You are a Reader and he is a—”

Callis stopped and Agatha stared at her. Callis quickly turned to the sink and pumped water into a kettle.

“Mother . . .,” Agatha said, suddenly feeling cold. “How do you know what a Reader is?”

“Mmm, can’t hear you, dear.”

“A *Reader*,” Agatha stressed over the strident cranks. “How do you know that word—”

Callis pumped louder. “Must have seen it in a book, I’m sure . . .”

“Book? What book—”

“One of the storybooks, dear.”

Of course, Agatha sighed, trying to relax. Her mother had always seemed to know things about the fairy-tale world—like all parents in Gavaldon who had feverishly bought storybooks from Mr. Deauville’s Storybook Shop, hunting for clues about the children kidnapped by the School Master. *One of the books must have mentioned it*, Agatha told herself. That’s why she called me a Reader. That’s why she wasn’t surprised by a prince.

But as Agatha glanced up at Callis, back to her, pumping water into the kettle, Agatha noticed that the pot was already full and overflowing into the sink. She watched her mother

staring off into space, hands clenched, pumping water faster, faster, as if pumping memories away with it. Slowly Agatha's heart started to constrict in her chest, until she felt that cold sensation deepening . . . whispering that the reason her mother wasn't fazed by Tedros' appearance wasn't because she'd read storybooks . . . but because she knew what it was like to live through one . . .

"He returns to the Woods as soon as he wakes," Callis said, releasing the pump.

Agatha wrenched out of her thoughts. "The *Woods*? Tedros and I barely escaped alive—and you want us to go *back*?"

"Not you," said Callis, still turned. "Him."

Agatha flared in shock. "Only someone who's never experienced true love could say such a thing."

Callis froze. The skeleton clock ticked through the loaded silence.

"You really believe this is your happy ending, Agatha?" Callis said, not looking at her.

"It has to be, Mother. Because I won't leave him again. And I won't leave you," Agatha begged. "I thought maybe I could be happy in the Woods, that I could run away from real life . . . but I can't. I never wanted a fairy tale. All I ever wanted was to wake up every day right here, knowing I had my mother and my best friend. How could I know that friend would end up being a prince?" Agatha dabbed at her eyes. "You don't know what we've been through to find each other. You don't know the Evil that we left behind. I don't care if Tedros and I have to stay trapped in this house for a hundred years. At least we're

together. At least we'll be happy. You just have to give us the chance."

Quiet fell in the sooty kitchen.

Callis turned to her daughter. "And Sophie?"

Agatha's voice went cold. "Gone."

Her mother gazed at her. The town clock tolled faintly from the square, before the wind drowned it out. Callis picked up the kettle and moved to the wooden stove. Agatha held her breath, watching her spark a flame beneath the pot and stew a few wormroot leaves in, circling her ladle again and again, long after the leaves had dissolved.

"I suppose we'll need eggs," said her mother at last. "Princes don't eat toads."

Agatha almost collapsed in relief. "Oh thank you thank you thank you—"

"I'll lock you both in when I go to town each morning. The guards won't come here as long as we're careful."

"You'll love him like a son, Mother, you'll see—" Agatha grimaced. "Into town? You said you had no patients."

"Don't light the fireplace or open the windows," ordered Callis, pouring two cups of tea.

"Why won't the guards come here?" Agatha pushed. "Wouldn't it be the first place they'd check?"

"And don't answer the door for a soul."

"Wait—what about Stefan?" Agatha asked, brightening. "Surely he can talk to the Elders for us—"

Callis whirled. "*Especially* not Stefan."

Mother and daughter locked stares across the kitchen.

“Your prince will never belong here, Agatha,” said Callis softly. “No one can hide from their fate without a price.”

There was a fear in her mother’s big owl eyes that Agatha had never seen before, as if she was no longer talking about a prince.

Agatha crossed the kitchen and wrapped her mother in a deep, comforting hug. “I promise you. Tedros will be as happy here as I am,” she whispered. “And you’ll wonder how you ever could have doubted two people so in love.”

A clang and clatter echoed from the bedroom. The curtain drew back behind them before collapsing entirely, and Tedros lumbered through, groggy, red-eyed, and half-naked with a torn, bloodied piece of bedsheet stuck haplessly over his wound. He sat down at the counter, smelled the soup and gagged, shoving it aside. “We’ll need a sturdy horse, steel-edged sword, and enough bread and meat for a three-day journey.” He looked up at Agatha with a sleepy smile. “Hope you said your goodbyes, princess. Time to ride to my castle.”

That first week, Agatha believed this was just another test in their story. It was only a matter of time before the pyre came down, the death sentence lifted, and Tedros felt at ease with ordinary life. Looking at her handsome, teddy-bear prince who she loved so much, she knew that no matter how long they stayed in this house, they would still find a way to be happy.

By the second week, however, the house had started to feel smaller. There was never enough food or cups or towels; Reaper and Tedros fought like demented siblings; Agatha

began to notice her prince's irritating habits (using all the soap, drinking milk out of the jug, exercising every second of the day, breathing through his mouth); and Callis had the burden of supporting two teenagers who didn't like to be supported at all. ("School was better than this," Tedros carped, bored to tears. "Let's go back and you can finish getting stabbed," Agatha replied.) By the third week, Tedros had taken to playing rugby against himself, dodging invisible opponents, whispering play-by-play, and flinging about like a caged animal, while Agatha lay in bed, a pillow over her head, clinging to the hope that happiness would fall like a fairy godmother from a star. Instead, it was Tedros who fell on her head one day while catching a ball, reopening his stitches in the process. Agatha belted him hard with her pillow, Tedros clocked her with his, and soon the cat was in the toilet. As they lay on the bed, covered in feathers, Reaper dripping in the corner, Agatha's question hung in the air unanswered.

"What happened to us?"

As the fourth week went on, Tedros and Agatha stopped spending time together. Tedros ceased his manic workouts and sat hunched at the kitchen window, unshaven and dirty, silently looking out at the Endless Woods. He was homesick, Agatha told herself, just as she'd once been in his world. But each day, a darker anguish settled into his face, and she knew it was deeper than homesickness—it was the guilt of knowing that somewhere out there, in a land far away, there would soon be no new king to take the crown from the old. But Agatha had nothing to say to make him feel better, nothing that didn't

sound self-serving or trite, and hid beneath her bedcovers, reading her old storybooks again and again.

Gazing at beautiful princesses kissing dashing princes, she wondered how her Ever After had gone rancid. All these fairy tales had tied up so neatly and satisfyingly . . . while the more she thought about her own, the more loose ends seemed to appear. What had happened to her friends: to Dot, Hester, Anadil, who had risked their lives for her during the Trial? What had happened to the Girls, charging into war against Aric and the Boys? Or to Lady Lesso and Professor Dovey, now faced with the School Master's return? Agatha's chest clamped. What if the School Master started kidnapping children from Gavaldon again? She thought about the parents who would lose more daughters and sons . . . about Tristan and how his parents would learn about his death . . . about the balance in the Woods, tilting to death and Evil . . . about her once Evil best friend, left to fend for herself . . .

Sophie.

This time no anger came at the name. Only an echo, like the password to her heart's cave.

Sophie.

Sophie, who she'd loved through Good and Evil. Sophie, who she'd loved through Boys and Girls. Sophie, who she vowed to protect forever, young or old, until death did them part.

How do you turn your back on your best friend? How do you leave them behind?

For a boy.

Shame colored her cheeks.

For a boy who can barely stand the sight of me anymore.

Agatha's heart shrank as small and hard as a pebble. All this time, she thought she had to choose between Sophie and Tedros to find a happy ending. And yet, each time she picked one over the other, the story twisted back upon itself and the world fell out of balance more than before. Every thought of Sophie, alone in a tower with a deadly villain, brought on more guilt, more pregnant fear, as if she was trapped in a purgatory of her own making, as if she hadn't failed by choosing a prince over her best friend . . . but in making that choice at all.

"I think about her too."

She turned and saw Tedros at the window, watching her, his mouth trembling. "About how we just left her," he rasped, eyes welling. "I know she's a bad friend, I know she's Evil, I know Filip was a lie . . . but we just left her . . . with that *monster*. We left all of them. The whole school . . . just to save ourselves. What kind of prince is that, Agatha? What would my father think of me?" Tears spilled down his stubbled cheeks. "I don't want you to leave your mother. I really don't. But we're not happy, Agatha. Because the villain's still alive. Because we're not heroes at all. We're . . . cowards."

Agatha looked into her prince's messy, earnest face, and remembered why she loved him. "This isn't our happy ending, is it?" she breathed.

Tedros smiled, his old glow returning.

And for the first time since they came home, Agatha smiled too.