

Prologue

“Once upon a time there was a beautiful maiden who was trapped in an enchanted castle. The castle was surrounded by a forest of thorns and guarded by a fearsome dragon—”

A girl with long brown pigtails starts frantically waving both arms in the air, so I pause from my reading.

“Yes, Isla? Do you need the toilet?” the teacher, Mrs. Hollybush, asks the girl.

“What’s the dragon’s name?” Isla asks. More small hands shoot up.

“Are dragons nocturnal?” asks a boy wearing purple glasses.

“Is it home time?” comes the muffled cry of a girl who’s pulled her school jumper up over her face.

Mrs. Hollybush sighs. “We’ve talked about this, IH, please just let Ethan’s mummy read the story. There’ll be time for questions at the end, okay?” She gives me an encouraging smile, then nods for me to continue.

Every Friday afternoon my son Ethan’s primary school invites a parent to come and read a book to their child’s class. Ethan has been asking me to sign up for months. It’s been a disruptive year, with Dan and I separating, so I’ve been trying to assuage my mum guilt in other small ways: pretending I enjoy board games, cooking waffles at weekends, and now ducking out of work early to read a fairy tale to thirty noisy six-year-olds. As I sit perched on a tiny chair, looking out at the children sitting cross-legged on the carpet in front of me, my gaze falls on Ethan. He beams, thrilled to have me here. I return his smile, then turn back to the book.

“The dragon scared everyone away, but a few brave princes tried to rescue the fair maiden. They would need to fight their way through the thorns and defeat the beast to win her hand in marriage.”

“Does she have Lego?” shouts out a little boy with wild blond curls.

“No, Kenny, she doesn’t have Lego. That’s not part of the story,” Mrs. Hollybush interjects with a tight smile. I notice she has a slight eye twitch.

“What does she play with?” Kenny asks. “Does she have a brother?”

“Does she have Pokémon cards?” asks a girl with a distractingly runny nose.

“Does she have *really* long hair?” asks a boy lying on the floor with his eyes closed.

Mrs. Hollybush claps her hands three times, which makes the children sit up straight, then zip their mouths closed. I pause for a moment, but they are quiet, so I continue.

““One day a handsome prince was riding by. He spied the fair maiden at the window of the tallest turret and immediately fell in love with her.”” I clear my throat. I did not choose this book, and I’m not sure I approve of the messaging. How could the prince possibly fall in love with her from that far away? Even if you believe in love at first sight, which I don’t, from the ground, with a giant, fire-breathing dragon in the way, how much of this maiden could this man possibly see? ““The prince managed to fight his way through the thorns, reach the castle gates, defeat the dragon, leap the drawbridge, and—””

“Did the dragon die?” cries a little girl with red felt-tip pen around her mouth, her eyes wide with concern.

“I don’t think so. It probably just got tired and ran out of fire,” I say, hiding the graphic illustration of the prince stabbing the dragon in the heart.

“Dragons don’t run out of fire,” Kenny scoffs. Then there’s a hurling sound as a child sitting right by my feet throws up all over the carpet, splattering my black suede boots.

“Oh, Jason, oh no, not again,” Mrs. Hollybush says with a groan. She jumps up to deal with the situation, grabbing a pale Jason by the elbow, then pointing me in the direction of the hallway. “I’m so sorry, Mrs. Humphries, the guest toilet is along the corridor.”

In the bathroom, I use a green paper towel to wipe off my shoes, feeling grateful that I chose a career in journalism rather than teaching. After washing my hands, I pull out my phone and take a moment to check my e-mail. At the top of my inbox, there is something from the government. Why is the government e-mailing me?

From: HMCTS Divorce Services

Subject: Your divorce is now complete

Dear Ms. Anna Humphries,

Your decree absolute has been granted and you are now divorced. You can find your certificate of Decree Absolute attached. This is the final document proving you are now divorced. You will need to show this certificate if you get married again, or should you wish to change your name.

Divorce Services, UK Government

A sudden wave of nausea hits me, and I hold on to the washbasin to steady myself. My legs feel as though they might buckle. Twelve years of marriage dissolved in an e-mail. *An e-mail?* What did I expect, a scroll delivered on horseback, a town crier? A reverse wedding ceremony where we solemnly retract our vows? I know we live in a digital age, but an e-mail just feels so callous, so cold, so . . . so inadequate. Did Dan get this e-mail too? How did he feel when he opened it? Relieved? Upset? A confusing combination of the two?

My chin begins to tremble and my eyes start to water. *Oh no, please, not now.* I've held it together this far, I can't fall apart now, at my son's school. I knew this was coming, of course I did, but I didn't expect it to happen like this. *I'll need to change my name, apply for a new passport, I'll have to tick a different box on forms now . . . no, no, don't let your mind spiral, Anna. Just go back to the classroom, finish reading the stupid book, then you can go home and digest this in private.*

Below the e-mail from the government is a new message from Dan. Maybe he got the same communication and feels strange about it too. Clicking it open, I see it's just one line: **Can you show these to the kids so they can see what I'm up to?** D. He's currently on holiday in South America, climbing Machu Picchu, the "trip of a lifetime." He's attached photos of himself looking tanned and

happy, standing beneath bright blue skies with the Incan citadel in the background. So no, he's not feeling sick about the divorce e-mail, he's having a lovely time enjoying his newfound freedom. *I always wanted to see Machu Picchu. It's number three on my bucket list, it wasn't even in Dan's top ten.*

Looking at the photo of my ex, I am hit with sudden pang of nostalgia for the Dan I used to know. The Dan I fell in love with at university, who held my hand beneath the table at a pub quiz, who liked me wearing his rugby shirts so they'd smell of me, who first kissed me in the rain outside a lecture theater at nine in the morning, then as I walked away up the steps called after me, "Anna Appleby, I'm going to marry you one day." Pushing my phone to the bottom of my bag, I splash my face with cold water and head back to the clamor of the classroom.

The vomit has been cleaned up, Jason sent to the school nurse, and Mrs. Hollybush is full of apologies. But I can't hear what she's saying, because a ringing has started in my ears. My head is pounding, my skin feels clammy and hot. A child thrusts the storybook back into my hands, the teacher claps the children into zipped-up silence, I let out a long, slow exhale through pursed lips. But as I look down, the words swim in front of my eyes. "The prince carried the fair maiden out of the enchanted castle, and they rode off into the sunset. They were married in a beautiful wedding and lived happily . . . happily . . ." I pause; my throat feels parched. I can't finish the sentence.

"Happily ever after?" little Isla suggests as the room begins to sway.

"Maybe," I mutter beneath my breath. Looking down at the illustration of the fairy-tale wedding, a mental corset pings open. "Or maybe there's no such thing as happily ever after. Maybe they had a good few years of being happy, then they slowly drifted apart, argued about who left crisp packets in the carriage and dirty washing all over the turret floor. Maybe the prince got really into triathlon training and left the princess at home with the kids every weekend. Then one day they realized they were lonely in each other's company and that they didn't love each other anymore." The children look up at me in confusion, and Mrs. Hollybush—eye twitching faster—lets out a burst of nervous laughter. I stand up from my tiny chair and hold the book aloft. "Maybe these kinds of stories are perpetuating a damaging narrative of a woman needing to be rescued by a man, telling little girls that getting married is the goal,

that life will make sense once they're in love. But it's a lie, because everything ends, even the greatest love stories." Then I start ripping the pages out of the book, throwing them like confetti around the classroom. "Maybe the maiden was happy with her dragon, maybe she didn't want to leave her nice, safe turret. Maybe the prince was a jerk!" The children squeal with delight and shock, and Mrs. Hollybush claps her hands, attempting to restore order, but this time it doesn't work. They leap around the room trying to catch the torn pages.

"Smash the patriarchy!" I cry.

"Smash the patriarchy!" the children repeat, wild with glee.

My sister, Lottie, picks me up from the headmaster's office. The school was understanding when I feigned not feeling well. Mrs. Hollybush kindly suggested that "maybe something is going around," but she also said she would have to remove me from the "reading parents" list, and that I would need to pay for a replacement book.

"What happened?" Lottie asks me as we sit in her car, waiting for Ethan to be let out of school. "The headmaster said you'd had 'an episode'? What kind of episode?"

I silently pass her my phone, with the e-mail open, and watch her as she reads it. To look at us, you wouldn't think Lottie and I were sisters. I have long, dark hair and skin that tans easily, while she is a pale English rose, with blond, wavy hair curling into a halo around her face. If this were a fairy tale, she would be the good witch, and I would be the bad. "I didn't expect to get an e-mail," I tell her. "I don't know what happened. I lost it reading a fairy tale about happily-ever-afters."

"Oh, Anna," Lottie says, reaching across the car to tuck a strand of hair back behind my ear. The gesture unsettles me. For as long as I can remember, it's my little sister who has been the emotional one. At thirty-three, she's four years younger than me. I've had two decades of her crying to me about boyfriends and breakups, swearing she could never love anyone as much as **insert name here**. I was always the stable, sensible one, ready with a box of tissues and an appropriately uplifting movie. Now she's happily married, and I'm ripping up schoolbooks. She pats my hand, and I close my eyes to try to

stop myself from bursting into tears. “I think the problem is, you bottle everything up and then occasionally it all bursts out,” Lottie says.

“I don’t know why, but seeing it written down, it all feels so final. I feel like such a failure,” I tell her, letting my shoulders slump as I hear how pathetic that sounds. “Dan’s in South America living his best life, and I’m here, getting divorced in a primary school toilet. The wording of the e-mail, too—‘if you get married again’—I genuinely can’t imagine ever wanting to meet someone else.”

“I know it feels awful right now, it’s too soon to think about anything like that. But it will get easier, I promise you.” Lottie strokes my hair, circling her fingers around my crown just like our mother used to do when we were children.

“I’m thirty-seven and I’m done with love,” I tell her.

“No, you’re not, but you’re still grieving. Trust me, this time next year, or maybe eighteen months from now, everything is going to look so different. You’ll have moved on. I know you can’t imagine it now, but you’ll be dating; you might even have met someone. There is a whole new chapter waiting for you, all you need to do is keep turning the pages.”

I give her a grateful smile, but I want to scream that these trite generalizations do not apply to me. My thoughts are interrupted by a clunk as Ethan opens the car door and jumps into the backseat.

“Hi, Aunt Lottie! Did Mum tell you what happened?” he says, bouncing up and down with excitement. “Mum ripped up a schoolbook, then blamed it on Patrick E.”

“Who’s Patrick E.?” Lottie asks.

Ethan shrugs. “I don’t know. Mum wanted to smash him.”

“The patriarchy,” I explain, covering my face with my hands.

“Oh yes, I know him,” Lottie says, biting back a smile, as she thrusts her car into gear. “That guy’s got a lot to answer for.”