

RUMAYSA

EVER AFTER

Praise for Rumaysa by Radiya Hafiza

‘Glitteringly beautiful and heart-thumpingly exciting. I laughed, gasped and cried tears of joy – this is a fairytale reimagining the world has needed for a long time. It’s going to dazzle and delight readers of all ages.’ Sophie Anderson, author of *The House With Chicken Legs*

‘I loved the three heroines of this wonderful tale, loved how their stories intersected each other and that they were their own rescuers and path-finders. Three classic fairytales, beautifully woven together, sparkling with magic and humour.’ Nizrana Farook, author of *The Girl Who Stole an Elephant*

‘An enchanting and cleverly woven trio of tales filled with humour, charm, and magic.’ Aisha Bushby, author of *A Pocketful of Stars*

‘A laugh-out-loud fairytale . . . a wonderful, immediately likeable gang of characters, hilarious dialogue and that special tale feeling – of both specificity and universality, of now, then and always . . . A joy to read.’ Louie Stowell, author of *The Dragon in the Library*

‘Gorgeous, through and through.’ Amy Wilson, author of *A Girl Called Owl*

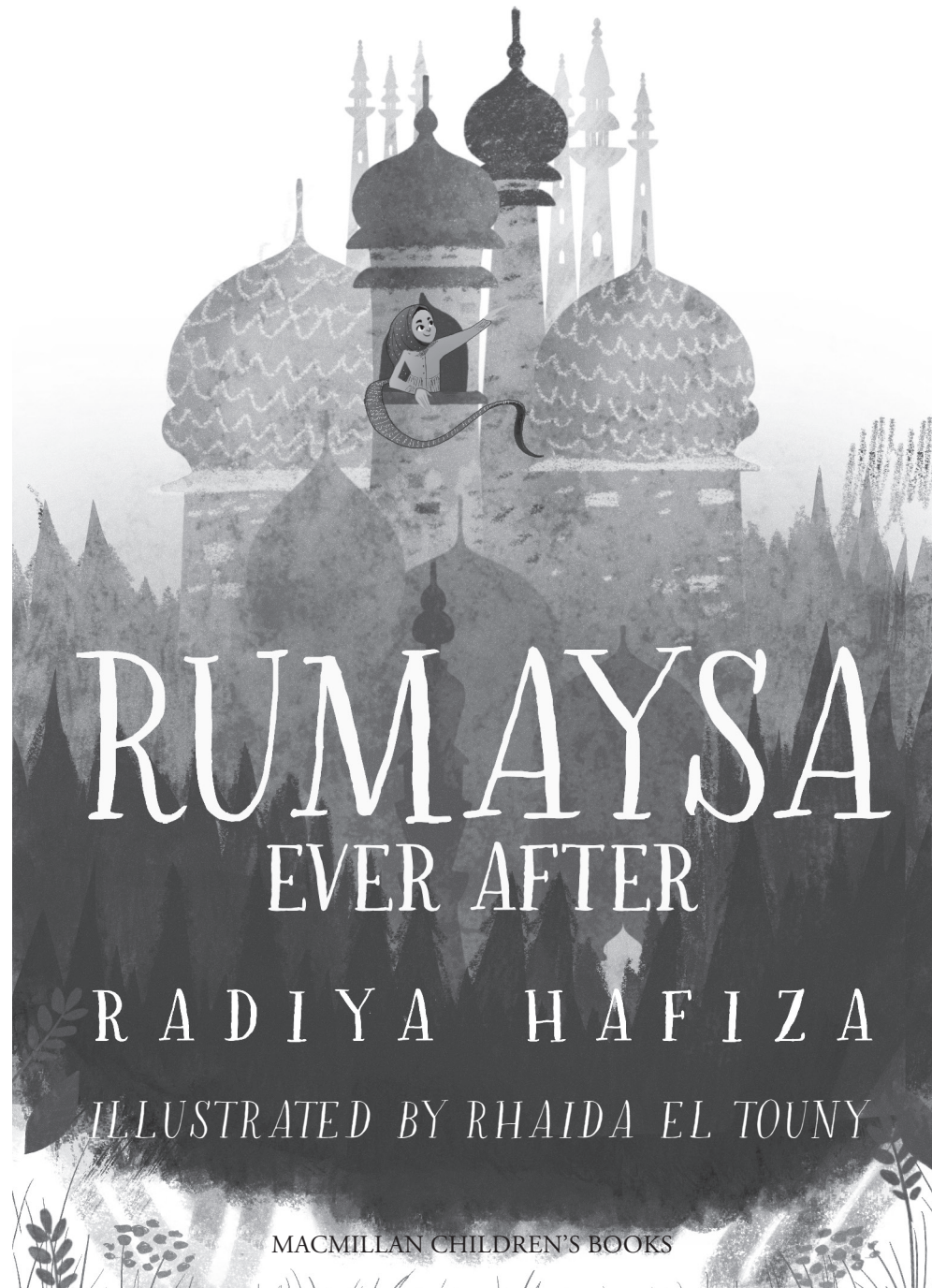
‘This is gorgeous . . . three fairytales reimagined and woven together into a lyrical and funny treat.’ Sophie Wills, author of *The Orphans of St Halibut’s*

‘Brown girls take centre stage in the stories of *Rumaysa*, *Cinderayla* and *Sleeping Sara* as Hafiza puts a playful new spin on three classic fairytales . . . woven into a funny, empowering adventure of sisterhood.’ *Bookseller*

‘Blending fairytales and cultures in a witty and playful story of strong-willed female protagonists, Hafiza crafts a world of magic and enchantment with immense skill.’ *Waterstones.com*

Also by Radiya Hafiza

Rumaysa: A Fairytale



RUMAYSA

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RADIYA HAFIZA

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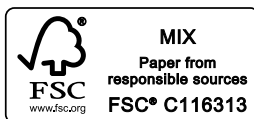
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For my heart and soul, my baby L

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Part I

I



Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there lived a couple named Naina and Samar. Naina was a seamstress and Samar a labourer, and they took work wherever they could find it. Though they had little, they were happy with the life they had together. But that was before their baby girl was stolen from them.

A witch had lurked in the land of Splinterfell. Her name was Cordelia, and she was one of the most powerful witches to have ever walked this earth. She was feared by people from all over the land, from the palace to the villages, such was her cruel reputation. Cordelia lived in a dark house at the edge of the woods and had a bountiful garden full of fruits and herbs that all the villagers knew not to touch.

But Naina and Samar had been struggling through harsh winters and bad harvests and so, in desperation, Samar had stolen from the Witch's garden in order to feed his wife, who was with child.

But the Witch would have her revenge. On the night of their daughter's birth, Cordelia came to collect what she believed to be rightfully hers. Naina and Samar had barely named their daughter Rumaysa before she was taken away from them.

The pair spent endless days and nights looking for their child, but it seemed the Witch had disappeared completely. Her house and garden had been charred to ash with no trace of where either she or their daughter had gone.

The days bled into weeks, and the months bled into years, as Naina and Samar travelled through different towns and countries, beseeching anybody they could find for help. But Rumaysa seemed to have vanished without a trace.

Splinterfell and its neighbouring lands were no ordinary places. They teemed with magic and monstrous creatures, cunning kings and queens. But they were also full of friendly beasts and good people, humans and magical alike – if one knew where to look. For the world is full of both good and

evil, but sometimes it's not always clear which is which . . .

As Naina and Samar scoured the land, they were forced to learn how to defend themselves from bandits, 'merry' men, thieves and all manner of people, and they were taught by those who wished them well: how to use swords and bows, how to skulk in the shadows unseen and how to tread the earth without making a noise. They lived off fruits and vegetables they found growing on trees and bushes, and set up camp in quiet places as they ruled out city after city, endlessly searching for their lost daughter.

Once in a while, Naina and Samar would return to Splinterfell, to their village of Ujabad, to see if anything had been heard of Rumaysa. Their neighbours were always sorry to have nothing to report, but as the years dragged on the sympathetic faces turned into blank expressions as, one by one, the villagers lost interest and forgot about their lost girl.

But Naina and Samar couldn't forget. Rumaysa's disappearance had left a hole in their hearts so wide that nothing could fix it. They were forever bonded by the loss they carried with them, unable to do more than bear it together in solitude.

For twelve long years they continued like this, living in

both hope and torment as they searched for some word of their daughter.

Until, one auspicious night, Naina and Samar returned to Ujabad once more.

The stars shone especially bright in the night sky as the heat of the day faded away into cold air. Their horses trotted through the dried muddied lanes, and the familiar sight of leafy palm trees and wild bushes welcomed them home.

Naina and Samar had changed over the years, their frames worn down by living in the wild. Samar let out a sigh as they passed through the streets where the faded 'Missing' papers they put up every so often were now peeling off the lantern posts. Naina tried not to look at the papers, another reminder of their failed mission. Her warm brown eyes stared down instead, focusing on the dark mane of her horse.

As they approached their village, they saw everyone gathered in the communal courtyard around the roaring fire pit. Orange and yellow flames crackled high, smoke tendrils curling into the air. It seemed they had arrived in time for story night, a weekly affair in Ujabad.

Naina and Samar dismounted from their horses, their weapons clinking at their belts as they did so. They fetched

some water for the horses, and tied them up near their small hut to rest after their long journey home.

'Shall we go to the pit?' Samar asked in his quiet, gravelly voice.

Naina gave a small smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. 'I guess we can for a little while,' she replied. Not much interested either of them these days, but it saved them from going back to their empty home for a time, at least.

Naina and Samar approached the group gathered around the fire, and sat down tiredly on a wooden bench. A few people smiled at them, noting their return, while others ignored them, staring, seemingly fixated, on the storyteller.

'... Some call this girl a fairy godmother!' Umar, Ujabad's biggest gossip and most dramatic storyteller, said excitedly. He was an old man with thinning hair and a rounded body, dressed in a white tunic and trousers. He leaned on his cane as he spoke, his voice rising dramatically as he continued. 'Some call her a magnificent dragon tamer – I've even heard someone say Rumsasiltskin!'

The crowd broke into excited whispers.

'She can turn anything into gold with a single touch!' Umar went on impressively, his voice booming over the murmurs.



His dark eyes were wide in the firelight. ‘She can speak with animals and spirits, turn up in a flash of purple light and will disappear just as quick!’

‘What is she?’ a child demanded, awed and afraid.

‘Nobody knows,’ Umar said slowly in a hushed voice. ‘She is an unusual girl with unusual gifts. Some also say she is a witch’s child, daughter of the feared Witch of Whistlecrook!’

‘Whistlecrook?’ somebody in the crowd repeated worriedly. ‘That’s the land next to us!’

‘I didn’t know witches were still alive,’ another person added.

‘This is all just a myth – none of it’s real!’ a young boy scoffed.

‘Your lack of imagination is a shame for someone with such a big head,’ Umar said gravely to the boy.

The boy touched his head uncertainly.

‘What’s the girl’s name?’ someone asked.

‘I was getting there,’ Umar grumbled. ‘I can’t tell the story if you all keep interrupting me!’

‘Hurry up, then!’ a woman heckled.

‘All right, keep your hijabs on!’ Umar retorted, wielding

his cane at the crowd. 'Do you want me to continue? If I don't have quiet, I'll leave!'

The crowd fell silent.

Umar smiled in satisfaction. 'Good. Now, her name –' he paused dramatically, peering around the crowd – 'is *Rumaysa*.'

Naina and Samar froze while the crowd whispered excitedly around them.

'She can—'

'What did you say?' Naina asked loudly as both she and Samar rose hastily from their seats.

'Rumaysa,' Umar replied, rolling his eyes and losing his theatrical voice. 'Honestly, don't you people listen? I might as well go home—'

'Where is she? Do you know where she is?' Naina demanded, her face ashen.

'Umar, how did you hear of her?' Samar pressed, his eyes bright in the firelight.

'What's wrong with you two?' Umar asked as everyone looked between them curiously. 'It's just gossip – *Oh*.'

As one of Ujabad's oldest residents, Umar was one of the few who still remembered *why* Naina and Samar were absent from the village most of the year. His eyes widened with

shock. 'I-I didn't realize,' he said in a near whisper.

'Could it be?'

'What's going on?' a young man demanded from the crowd.

'This story night is terrible,' someone else grumbled.

'Oh, go home, the lot of you!' Umar snapped, getting up from his seat. Naina and Samar hurried towards him.

'Is it really her? Is it our Rumaysa?' Samar asked urgently.

Umar hesitated. 'It is possible . . .' He didn't want to get their hopes up; Umar had watched them come and go over the years, each time returning a little more heartbroken than the last. 'Although it's said that the Witch who took her was from Whistlecreek.'

'That's where Cordelia must have taken her,' Naina said, looking urgently between Umar and Samar. 'It explains why she was never seen in Splinterfell again.'

'How did you hear about this?' Samar demanded.

'I was at the fruit festival just a few days ago,' Umar said. 'My friend was telling her tale; it sounds like this Rumaysa is quite popular. She turns up out of the blue and helps save people from all kinds of situations: dragons, bad people, wolves – all sorts!'

‘She’s just a child – she shouldn’t be . . .’ Naina said faintly. She felt so unwell. How could this be? Was her daughter really out there?

‘Where is she?’ Samar asked again.

Umar pulled out a piece of parchment from his robe. ‘I wrote down all the places my friend said she had appeared. It was such a good story that I didn’t want to miss anything. I’m sorry – I should have realized from her name. I’d . . .’

‘Forgotten about her?’ Naina finished for him sadly. ‘You’re not the only one.’

Umar lowered his eyes. ‘I hope you find her,’ he said quietly.

Naina and Samar took the piece of paper in Umar’s outstretched hand and rushed back to their hut. The horses were disgruntled to be disturbed so soon after they had arrived, but Naina and Samar were frenzied. This was the closest they had come to even a whisper of their daughter in twelve years. They consulted Umar’s list and set off immediately to the last city in which their daughter had been seen.