

PART I



1

Sophie Makes a Wish

There is an uneasiness that remains after your best friend tries to kill you.

But as Agatha gazed out at her and Sophie's golden statues, towering over the sun-speckled square, she swallowed it away.

"I don't know why it has to be a musical," she said, sneezing from the carnations on her pink dress.

"No sweating in your costumes!" Sophie barked at a boy struggling in a ferocious plaster dog head, while the girl roped to him stumbled around in her own cuddly dog head. Sophie caught two boys labeled CHADDICK and RAVAN trying to swap outfits. "No switching schools either!"



“But I want to be an Ever!” RAVAN groused, and pulled at his dumpy black tunic.

“My wig itches,” mewled BEATRIX, clawing her blond hair-piece.

“Mummy won’t know it’s me,” whined a boy in the SCHOOL MASTER’S shiny silver mask.

“AND NO SULKING ABOUT PARTS!” Sophie boomed, branding DOT on the blacksmith’s daughter before stuffing two chocolate ice pops in her hands. “You need to gain twenty pounds by next week.”

“You said it’d be small,” Agatha said, eyeing a boy teetering on a ladder as he painted two familiar green eyes on the massive theater marquee. “Something tasteful for the anniversary.”

“Is *every* boy in this town a tenor?” Sophie squawked, inspecting the males with these very same eyes. “Surely *someone*’s voice has changed? Surely *someone* can play Tedros, the most handsome, charming prince in the—”

She turned to find red-haired, bucktoothed Radley in tight breeches, puffing his chest. Sophie gagged and stamped him HORT.

“This doesn’t seem small,” Agatha said, louder, watching two girls pull the canvas off a ticket booth with twenty neon Sophie faces silk-screened across it. “And it doesn’t seem tastef—”

“*Lights!*” Sophie called to two boys suspended from ropes—

Agatha spun from the blinding detonation. Through fingers, she peeked up at the velvet curtain behind them, embedded with a thousand white-hot bulbs spelling out:

*CURSES! The Musical**Starring, Written, Directed, and Produced by Sophie*

“Is this too dull for the finale?” Sophie said, whirling to Agatha in a midnight-blue ballgown with delicate gold leaves, a ruby pendant around her neck, and a tiara of blue orchids. “That reminds me. Can you sing harmony?”

Agatha swelled like a tick. “Have you lost your mind! You said it’d be a tribute to the kidnapped children, not some fairground burlesque! I can’t act, I can’t sing, and here we are having a dress rehearsal for a vanity show that doesn’t even have a scrip— What is THAT?”

She pointed at the sash of red crystals across Sophie’s dress.

Ball Queen

Sophie stared at her. “You don’t expect me to tell our story as it happened, do you?”

Agatha scowled.

“Oh, Agatha, if we don’t celebrate ourselves, who else will?” Sophie moaned, looking out at the giant amphitheater. “We’re the Gavalton Curse Breakers! The School Master Slayers! Larger than life! Greater than legend! So where’s our palace? Where’s our slaves? On the anniversary of our kidnapping from this odious town, they should adore us! They should worship us! They should bow down instead of trolling around with fat, badly dressed *widows!*”

Her voice thundered across empty wooden seats. She turned to find her friend studying her.

“The Elders gave him permission, didn’t they,” said Agatha. Sophie’s face darkened. She spun quickly and started handing sheet music to the cast.

“When is it?” Agatha asked.

Sophie didn’t answer.

“Sophie, when is it?”

“The day after the show,” Sophie said, sprucing the garlands on a giant altar set piece. “But that might change once they see the encore.”

“Why? What’s in the encore?”

“I’m fine about it, Aggie. I’ve made my peace.”

“Sophie. What’s in the encore.”

“He’s a grown man. Free to make his own decisions.”

“And this show has nothing to do with trying to stop your father’s wedding.”

Sophie twirled. “Why would you ever think that?”

Agatha glared at the fat, homeless hag, slouched in a veil under the altar, stamped HONORA.

Sophie shoved Agatha music. “If I were you, I’d be learning how to sing.”

When they returned from the Woods nine months before, the hubbub had been frightening. For two hundred years, the School Master had kidnapped children from Gavaldon to his School for Good and Evil. But after so many children lost forever, so many families torn apart, two girls had found their way back. People wanted to kiss them, touch them, build statues for them, as if they were gods fallen to earth. To satisfy

demand, the Council of Elders suggested they hold supervised autograph signings in the church after Sunday services. The questions never changed: “Did they torture you?” “Are you sure the curse is broken?” “Did you see my son?”

Sophie offered to endure these on her own, but to her surprise, Agatha always showed. Indeed, in those first months, Agatha did daily interviews for the town scroll, let Sophie dress her up and slather her with makeup, and politely endured the young children her friend loathed.

“Totems of disease,” Sophie grumbled, dabbing her nostrils with eucalyptus before signing another storybook. She noticed Agatha smile at a boy as she autographed his copy of *King Arthur*.

“Since when do you like *children*?” Sophie growled.

“Since they beg to see Mother when they’re sick now,” said Agatha, flashing lipstick stains on her teeth. “Never had so many patients in her life.”

But by summer, the crowd had thinned. It was Sophie’s idea to do posters.



THE
CURSE BREAKERS
LIVE THIS SUNDAY
FREE KISS
with
AUTOGRAPH

Agatha gaped at the sign on the church door. “Free *kiss*?”

“On their storybooks,” Sophie said, puckering garishly red lips into a pocket mirror.

“That’s not what it sounds like,” said Agatha, pulling at the clingy green dress Sophie had loaned her. Pink had noticeably disappeared from her friend’s closet after they returned, presumably because it reminded her of her time as a bald, toothless witch.

“Look, we’re old news,” Agatha said, yanking at the dress’s straps again. “Time to go back to normal like everyone else.”

“Maybe it should just be me this week.” Sophie’s eyes flicked up from the mirror. “Perhaps they sense your lack of enthusiasm.”

But no one except smelly Radley showed that Sunday or the next week, when Sophie’s posters hawked an “intimate gift” with every autograph, or the next, when she promised a “private dinner” too. By the fall, the Missing signs in the square had come down, the children had shoved their storybooks in closets, and Mr. Deauville put a *LAST DAYS* sign in his shop window, for no new fairy tales had come from the Woods for him to sell. Now the girls were just two more fossils of the curse. Even Sophie’s father had stopped treading gently. On Halloween, he told his daughter he had received the Elders’ permission to marry Honora. He never asked for Sophie’s.

As she hurried from rehearsal through a hard, ugly rain, Sophie glowered at her once-shining statue, spotted and runny with bird droppings. She had worked so hard for it. A week of

snail-egg facials and cucumber-juice fasts so the sculptor would get her just right. And now here it was, a toilet for pigeons.

She glanced back at her painted face beaming from the distant theater marquee and gritted her teeth. The show would remind her father who came first. The show would remind them all.

As she splashed out of the square toward soddy cottage lanes, trails of smoke wafted from chimneys, and Sophie knew what each family was having for dinner: breaded pork with mushroom gravy in Wilhelm's house, beef and potato cream soup in Belle's, bacon lentils and pickled yams in Sabrina's. . . . The food her father loved and never could have.

Good. Let him starve, for all she cared. As she walked up the lane to her own house, Sophie inhaled for the smell of a cold, empty kitchen, a smell that reminded her father of what he'd lost.

Only now the kitchen didn't smell empty at all. Sophie inhaled again, a smell of meat and milk, and felt herself running to the door. She threw it open—

Honora hacked into raw pork ribs. "Sophie," she panted, wiping plump hands. "I had to close at Bartleby's—I could use some help—"

Sophie stared through her. "Where's my father?"

Honora tried to fix her bushy, flour-crusting hair. "Um, putting up the tent with the boys. He thought it might be nice if we all have dinner toget—"

"Tent?" Sophie charged for the back door. "Now?"

She barreled into the garden. In gusty rain, the widow's

two boys each manned a roped-down stake while Stefan tried to loop the billowing white tent around a third. But just as Stefan succeeded, the tent ripped away, burying him and the two boys beneath it. Sophie could hear them giggling before her father poked his head from under the canvas. “Just what we need. A fourth!”

“Why are you putting up the tent?” Sophie said, ice-cold. “The wedding is next week.”

Stefan stood tall and cleared his throat. “It’s tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Sophie went white. “*This* tomorrow? The one after today?”

“Honora said we should do it before your show,” Stefan said, running a hand through a newly grown beard. “We don’t want to distract from it.”

Sophie felt sick. “But . . . how can—”

“Don’t worry about us. We announced the date change at church, and Jacob and Adam here will have the tent up in no time. How was rehearsal?” He hugged the six-year-old to his brawny flank. “Jacob said he could see the lights from our porch.”

“Me too!” said eight-year-old Adam, hugging his other side.

Stefan kissed their heads. “Who’d have thought I’d have two little princes?” he whispered.

Sophie watched her father, heart in her throat.

“So come on, tell us what’s in your show,” Stefan said, smiling up at her.

But Sophie suddenly didn’t care about her show at all.

Dinner was a handsome roast, with perfectly cooked broccoli, cucumber salad, and a flourless blueberry tart, but she didn't touch any of it. She sat rigid, glaring at Honora across the cramped table as forks speared and clinked.

"Eat," Stefan prodded her.

Next to him, Honora rubbed her neck wattle, avoiding Sophie's stare. "If she doesn't like it—"

"You made what she likes," Stefan said, eyes on Sophie. "Eat."

Sophie didn't. Clinks petered to silence.

"Can I have her pork?" Adam said.

"You and my mother were friends, weren't you?" Sophie said to Honora.

The widow choked on her meat. Stefan scowled at Sophie and opened his mouth to retort, but Honora grabbed his wrist. She dabbed at dry lips with a dirty napkin.

"Best friends," she rasped with a smile, and swallowed again. "For a very long time."

Sophie froze over. "I wonder what came between you."

Honora's smile vanished and she peered down at her plate. Sophie's eyes stayed locked on her.

Stefan's fork clanked against the table. "Why don't you help Honora in the shop after school?"

Sophie waited for Adam to answer him—then saw her father still looking at her.

"*Me?*" Sophie blanched. "Help . . . *her?*"

"Bartleby said my wife could use an extra hand," Stefan pushed.

Wife. That's all Sophie heard. Not thief. Not tramp. *Wife.*

"After the wedding and the show is over," he added. "Get you settled into normal life."

Sophie spun to Honora, expecting her to be as shocked, but she was just anxiously slurping cucumbers through dry lips.

"Father, you want me to—to—" Sophie couldn't get words out. "Churn *b-b-butter?*"

"Build some strength in those stick arms," her father said between bites, as Jacob and Adam compared biceps.

"But I'm famous!" Sophie shrieked. "I have fans—I have a *statue!* I can't work! Not with *her!*"

"Then perhaps you should find somewhere else to live." Stefan picked a bone clean. "As long as you're in this family, you'll contribute. Or the boys would be happy to have your room."

Sophie gasped.

"Now *eat,*" he spat, so sharply she had to obey.

As he watched Agatha slip on her old, saggy black dress, Reaper growled suspiciously, sucking on a few trout bones across the leaky room.

"See? Same old Agatha." She slammed the trunk on Sophie's borrowed clothes, slid it near the door, and kneeled to pet her bald, wrinkled cat. "So now you can be nice again."

Reaper hissed.

"It's me," Agatha said, trying to pet him. "I haven't changed a bit."

Reaper scratched her and trundled away.

Agatha rubbed the fresh mark on her hand between others barely healed. She flopped onto her bed while Reaper curled up in a moldy green corner, as far away from her as he could.

She rolled over and hugged her pillow.

I'm happy.

She listened to rain slosh against the straw roof and spurt through a hole into her mother's black cauldron.

Home sweet home.

Clink, clink, clink went the rain.

Sophie and me.

She stared at the blank, cracked wall. *Clink, clink, clink . . .* Like a sword in a sheath, rubbing against a belt buckle. *Clink, clink, clink.* Her chest started pounding, her blood burning like lava, and she knew it was happening again. *Clink, clink, clink.* The black of the cauldron became the black of his boots. The straw of the ceiling, the gold of his hair. The sky through the window, the blue in his eyes. In her arms, the pillow became tanned muscles and flesh—

“Some help, dear!” a voice trilled.

Agatha jolted awake, gripping her sweat-stained pillow. She lurched off the bed and opened the door to see her mother lugging two baskets, one teeming with stinky roots and leaves, the other with dead tadpoles, cockroaches, and lizards.

“What in the world—”

“So you can finally teach me some potions from school!” Callis chimed, eyes bulging, and plunked a basket in Agatha's hands. “Not as many patients today. We have time to brew!”

“I told you I can't do magic anymore,” Agatha snapped,

closing the door behind them. “Our fingers don’t glow here.”

“Why won’t you tell me anything that happened?” her mother asked, picking her oily dome of black hair. “The least you could do is show me a wart potion.”

“Look, I put it all behind me.”

“Lizards are better fresh, dear. What can we make with those?”

“I forgot all that stuff—”

“They’ll go bad—”

“Stop!”

Her mother stiffened.

“Please,” Agatha begged. “I don’t want to talk about school.”

Gently Callis took the basket from her. “When you came home, I’d never been so happy.” She looked into her daughter’s eyes. “But part of me worries what you gave up.”

Agatha stared down at her black clump shoes as her mother towed the baskets into the kitchen. “You know how I feel about waste,” Callis sighed. “Let’s hope our bowels can handle a lizard stew.”

As Agatha chopped onions by torchlight, she listened to her mother hum off-key, like she did every night. Once upon a time, she had loved their graveyard haven, their lonely routines.

She put down the knife. “Mother, how do you know if you’ve found Ever After?”

“Hmmm?” said Callis, bony hands scraping a few roaches into the cauldron.

“The people in a fairy tale, I mean.”

“It should say so, dear.” Her mother nodded at an open storybook peeking from under Agatha’s bed.

Agatha looked down at its last page, a blond prince and raven-haired princess kissing at their wedding, framed by an enchanted castle . . .

THE END.

“But what if two people can’t see their storybook?” She gazed at the princess in her prince’s arms. “How do they know if they’re happy?”

“If they have to ask, they probably aren’t,” said her mother, jabbing a roach that wouldn’t drown.

Agatha’s eyes stayed on the prince a moment longer. She snapped the storybook shut and tossed it in the fire under the cauldron. “About time we got rid of these like everyone else.”

She resumed chopping in the corner, faster than before.

“Are you all right, dear?” Callis said, hearing sniffles.

Agatha dabbed at her eyes. “Onions.”

The rain had gone, but a harsh autumn wind raked across the cemetery, lit by two torches over the gates that clung to skipping flames. As she approached the grave, her calves locked and her heart banged in her ears, begging her to stay away. Sweat seeped down her back as she kneeled in the weeds and mud, her eyes closed. She had never looked. Never.

With a deep breath, Sophie opened her eyes. She could barely make out an eroded butterfly in the headstone above the words.

LOVING WIFE & MOTHER

Two smaller gravestones, both unmarked, flanked her mother's like wings. Fingers covered by white mittens, she picked moss out of the cracks in one, overgrown from the years of neglect. As she tore away the mold, her soiled mittens found deeper grooves in the rock, smooth and deliberate. There was something carved in the slab. She peered closer—

“Sophie?”

She turned to see Agatha approach in a tattered black coat, balancing a drippy candle on a saucer.

“My mother saw you from the window.”

Agatha crouched next to her and laid the flame in front of the graves. Sophie didn't say anything for a long while.

“He thought it was her fault,” she said at last, gazing at the two unmarked headstones. “Two boys, both born dead. How else could he explain it?” She watched a blue butterfly flutter out of the darkness and nestle into the carving on her mother's decayed gravestone.

“All the doctors said she couldn't have more children. Even your mother.” Sophie paused and smiled faintly at the blue butterfly. “One day it happened. She was so sick no one thought it could last, but her belly still grew. The Miracle Child, the Elders called it. Father said he'd name him Filip.”

Sophie turned to Agatha. “Only you can't call a girl Filip.”

Sophie paused, cheekbones hardening. “She loved me, no

matter how weak I had left her. No matter how many times she watched him walk to her friend's house and disappear inside." Sophie fought the tears as long as she could. "Her friend, Agatha. Her best *friend*. How could he?" She cried bitterly into her dirty mittens.

Agatha looked down and didn't say a word.

"I watched her die, Aggie. Broken and betrayed." Sophie turned from the grave, red faced. "Now he'll have everything he wanted."

"You can't stop him," Agatha said, touching her.

Sophie recoiled. "And let him get *away* with it?"

"What choice do you have?"

"You think that wedding will happen?" Sophie spat. "*Watch.*"

"Sophie . . ."

"*He* should be the one dead!" Sophie flushed with blood. "Him and his little princes! Then I'd be happy in this prison!"

Her face was so horrible that Agatha froze. For the first time since they returned, she glimpsed the deadly witch inside her friend, yearning to unleash.

Sophie saw the fear in Agatha's eyes. "I'm s-s-s-sorry—" she stammered, turning away. "I—I don't know what happened—" Her face melted to shame. The witch was gone.

"I miss her, Aggie," Sophie whispered, trembling. "I know we have our happy ending. But I still miss my mother."

Agatha hesitated, then touched her friend's shoulder. Sophie gave in to her, and Agatha held her as she sobbed. "I wish I could see her again," Sophie wept. "I'd do anything. Anything."

The crooked tower clock tolled ten times down the hill, but loud, doleful creaks thickened between each one. In each other's arms, the two girls watched the hunched silhouette of old Mr. Deauville as he wheeled a cart past the clock with the last of his closed-down shop. Every few paces he stopped, laboring under the weight of his forgotten storybooks, until his shadow disappeared around the corner and the creaks faded away.

"I just don't want to end like her, alone and . . . forgotten," Sophie breathed.

She turned to Agatha, trying to smile. "But my mother didn't have a friend like you, did she? You gave up a prince, just for us to be together. To think I could make someone happy like that . . ." Her eyes misted. "I don't deserve you, Agatha. I really don't. After all I've done."

Agatha was still quiet.

"Someone Good would let this marriage happen, wouldn't they?" Sophie pressed her softly. "Someone as Good as you."

"It's late," Agatha said, standing up. She held out her hand.

Sophie took it limply. "And I still have to find a dress for the wedding."

Agatha managed a smile. "See? Good after all."

"Least I can do is look better than the bride," Sophie said, swishing ahead.

Agatha snorted and grabbed the torch off the gate. "Wait. I'll walk you home."

"How lovely," Sophie said, not stopping. "I can smell more of that onion soup you had for dinner."

“Lizard and onion soup, actually.”

“I really don’t know how we’re friends.”

Through the groaning gate, the two slipped side by side, torches lighting up their long shadows across overgrown weeds. As they waded down the emerald hill and out of sight, a gust flew back through the cemetery, igniting a flame on a candle dripping onto its mud-stained saucer. The flame grew over a blue butterfly settled curiously on a grave, then stoked brighter, long enough to illuminate the carvings on the two unmarked graves beside it. A swan on each. One white.

The other black.

With a roar, the wind lashed between them and blew the candle out.