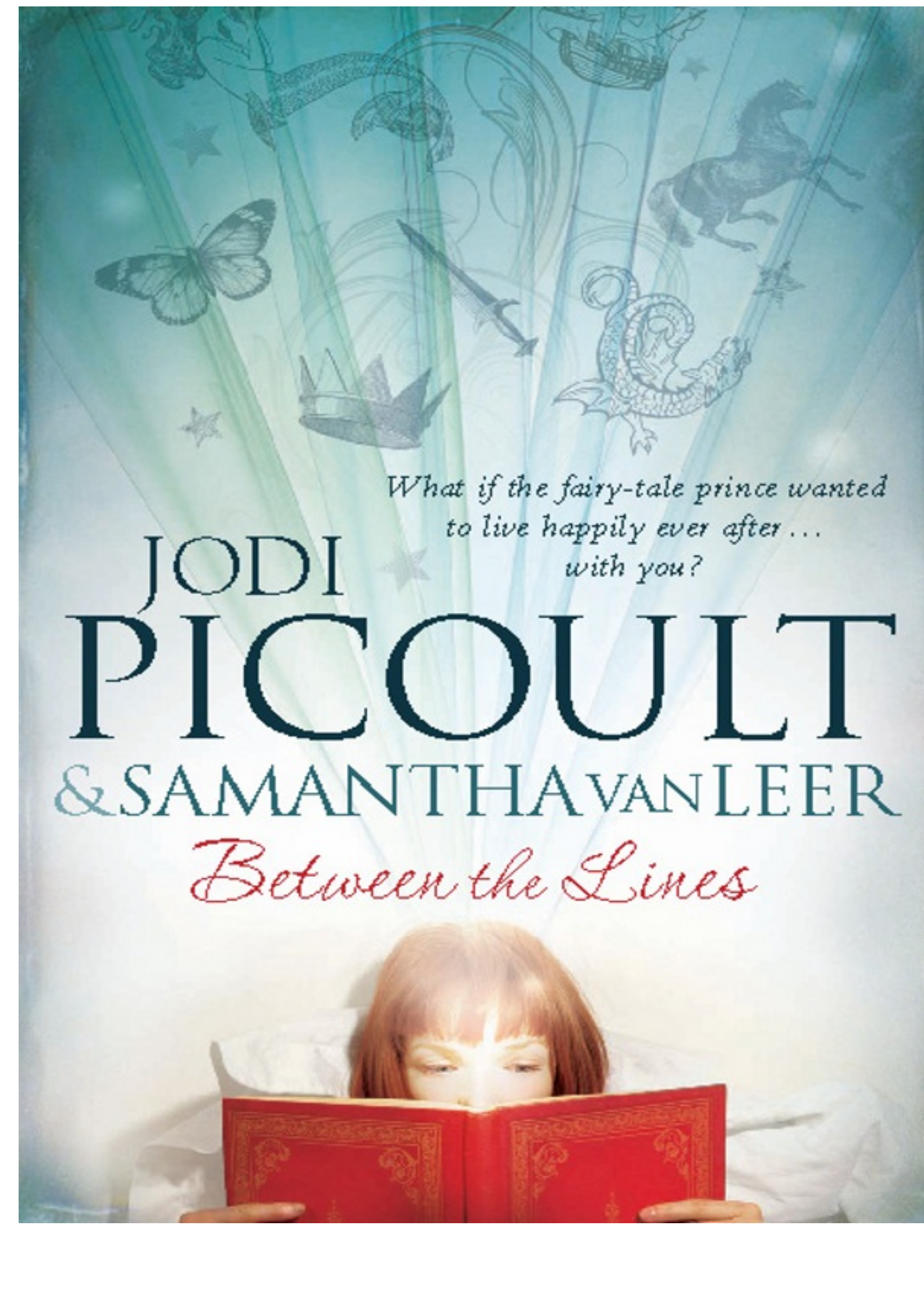


*What if the fairy-tale prince wanted
to live happily ever after ...
with you?*

JODI
PICCOULT
& SAMANTHA VAN LEER

Between the Lines





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ALSO BY JODI PICOULT

Lone Wolf

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The Pact

Mercy

Picture Perfect

Harvesting the Heart

Songs of the Humpback Whale

AND FOR THE STAGE

Over the Moon: An Original Musical for Teens



JODI
PICOULT
& SAMANTHA VAN LEER
Between the Lines



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The paper in this book is FSC® certified. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

To Ema,

*Who will always be
the hero in my story.*

*Love,
Sammy*

To Tim,

*Because sometimes
fairy tales do come true.*

*Love,
Jodi*

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A Note from Jodi Picoult

I was on a book tour in Los Angeles when my telephone rang. “Mom,” my daughter, Sammy, said. “I think I have a pretty good idea for a book.”

This was not extraordinary. Of my three children, Sammy has always been the one with an imagination that is unparalleled. When other kids were playing “stuffed animals,” Sammy would scatter her toys around the house and create elaborate scenarios—this teddy bear is wounded and stuck on top of Mt. Everest and needs a rescue dog to climb to the top and save him. In second grade, her teacher called me to ask if I’d type up Sammy’s short story. Apparently, it was forty pages long. He sent it home with my daughter, and I fully expected a rambling stream of words—instead, I wound up reading a very cohesive story about a duck and a fish that meet on a pond and become best friends. The duck invites the fish to dinner and the fish says he’d love to come. But then the fish has second thoughts: *What if I am dinner?*

That, ladies and gentlemen, is called CONFLICT, and it’s the one thing you can’t teach. You are either born a storyteller or not, and my daughter—at age seven—seemed to have an intrinsic sense of how to craft literary tension. Sammy’s creativity continued to blossom as she grew up. Her nightmares are so vivid they’d give Stephen King a run for his money. As a teenager, she has written poetry that made me hunt down my own poetry journals from way back when—only to realize she is a much better writer than I ever was at that age.

So . . . when Sammy told me she had an interesting idea for a YA book, I listened carefully.

And you know what? She was right.

What if the characters in a book had lives of their own after the cover was closed? What if the act of reading was just these characters performing a play, over and over . . . but those characters still had dreams, hopes, wishes, and aspirations beyond the roles they acted out on a daily basis for the reader? And what if one of those characters desperately wanted get out of his book?

Better yet, what if one of his readers fell in love with him and decided to help?

“Mom,” Sammy said as I languished in Los Angeles traffic. “What if we wrote the book together?”

“Okay,” I told her, “but that means *we’re* writing it. Not me.”

What ensued were two years of weekends, school vacations, and evenings spent side by side at my computer, diligently crafting a story together. I think Sammy was surprised by how much hard work is to sit and imagine for hours at a time; for my part, I learned that if you think it’s hard to get your daughter to clean her room, it’s even harder to get her to stay focused on finishing a chapter when it’s nice outside. We took turns typing, and literally spoke every sentence out loud. I would say one line, then Sammy would jump in with the next. The coolest moments were when we tripped over each other’s sentences and discovered we were thinking the same thing—it was sort of like we were having the same dream, so that in the act of writing, we were telepathic.

Sometimes when I’m reading a great book, I think, “Wow, I wish I’d been the one to think up that story line.” It has been an honor to have that same reaction when the story line was conceived by my own daughter. When Sammy first called me with her idea, I thought it was a great one. I hope, as you read *Between the Lines*, you think so too.



Once upon a time in a land far, far away there lived a brave king and a beautiful queen, who were so much in love that wherever they went, people stopped what they were doing just to watch them pass. Peasant wives who were fighting with their husbands suddenly forgot the reason for the argument; little boys who had been putting spiders in the braids of little girls tried to steal a kiss instead; artists wept because nothing they could create on canvas came close to approximating the purity of the love between King Maurice and Queen Maureen. On the day they learned that they were going to have a child, it is said that a rainbow brighter and grander than anything ever seen before arched across the kingdom, as if the sky itself was waving a banner of joy.

But not everyone was happy for the king and queen. In a cave at the far edge of the kingdom lived a man who had sworn off love. When you have been burned by fire once, you don't leap into the flame again. Once upon a time, Rapsullio had expected to be living his own fairy tale, with his own happy ending, with a girl who had looked past his scarred face and gnarled limbs and had shown kindness to him when the rest of the world didn't. In his mind, he replayed the day he had been shoved roughly into the mud by schoolmates—only to find the most slender white hand reaching out to help him up. How he had grabbed on to her, this angel, imagining her as his lifeline! He'd spent days composing poetry in her honor and painting portraits that never did her beauty justice, waiting for just the right moment to confess his love—only to find her in the arms of a man he could never be: someone tall, strong, and destined for greatness. Rapsullio had then grown darker and more twisted by his own hate every day. His portraits of his beloved had given way to intricate plans for revenge against the man who had single-handedly ruined his life: King Maurice.

One night, a roar rose from outside the gates of the kingdom, unlike any other sound heard before. The ground shook and a streak of fire shot through the sky, burning the thatched roofs of the village. King Maurice and Queen Maureen ran out of the castle to see a monstrous black beast with scaled wings the size of a ship's sails, its eyes as red as embers. It stormed through the night sky, hissing sulfurous breath and spitting flames. Rapsullio had painted a dragon onto a magical canvas, and the demon had come to life. The king looked at the panicked faces of his subjects and turned to his wife, but she had fallen to her knees in pain. "The baby," she whispered. "It's coming."

Torn between love and duty, the king knew what he had to do. He kissed his beloved wife where she lay in bed with her maids attending her, and promised to be back in time to meet his son. Then, with a hundred knights armored in glinting silver, he raised his sword high and rode out across the castle drawbridge on a wave of bravery and passion.

But it is no easy feat to best a dragon. As he watched his loyal soldiers being torn from their mounts and flung to their deaths by the fiery beast, King Maurice knew that he had to take matters into his own hands. He grabbed the sword of a fallen knight in his left hand and, holding his own sword in his

right, stepped forward to challenge the dragon.

As the night grew deeper, and the battle raged outside the castle walls, the queen struggled to bring her son into the world. As was the tradition for royal babies, the kingdom's fairies arrived bearing gifts just as the newborn was delivered. They hovered, incandescent, above the queen, who was out of her mind with pain and worry for her husband.

The first fairy sent a spray of light over the bed, so bright that the queen had to turn away. "I give this child wisdom," the fairy said.

The second fairy sprinkled a flash of heat that surrounded the queen where she lay. "I give this child loyalty," she promised.

The third fairy had been planning to gift the royal child with courage, because every royal child needs a healthy dose of bravery. But before she could offer her gift, Queen Maureen suddenly sat up on the bed, her eyes wide with a vision of her husband on the battlefield, in the fierce clutches of the dragon. "Please," she cried. "Save him!"

The fairies looked at each other, confused. The baby lay on the mattress, silent and still. They had attended plenty of births where the baby never drew its first breath. The third fairy tossed aside the courage she had been planning to give the child. "I give him life," she said, the word swirling yellow from her lips into her palm. With a kiss, she blew it into the mouth of the newborn.

It was said in the kingdom that at the very moment Prince Oliver cried for the first time, his father, King Maurice, cried out for the last.

It's not easy to grow up without a father. At age sixteen, Prince Oliver had never really been given the chance to just be a kid. Instead of playing tag, he had to learn seventeen languages. Instead of reading bedtime stories, he had to memorize the laws of the kingdom. He loved his mother, but it seemed to Oliver that no matter who he was, he would never be the person she wanted him to be. Sometimes he would hear her in her chambers, talking to someone, and when he entered there would be nobody with her. When she looked at his black hair and blue eyes, and remarked on how tall he was getting and how much he resembled his father, she always seemed to be on the verge of tears. As far as he could see, there was one critical difference between himself and his heroic late father: courage. Oliver was smart and loyal, but he was a complete disappointment when it came to bravery. In an effort to make his mother happy, Oliver overcompensated, spending his teenage years trying to do everything else right. On Mondays, he held court so that the peasants could bring him their disputes. He conceived of a way to rotate crops in the kingdom so that the storerooms were always full, even in the harshest of winters. He worked with Orville, the kingdom wizard, to create heat-resistant armor just in case there was ever another dragon attack (although he nearly passed out with anxiety when he had to test the armor by walking through a bonfire). He was sixteen, fully old enough to take over the throne, yet neither his mother nor his subjects were in any hurry to make that happen. And how could he blame them? Kings protected their countries. And Oliver was in absolutely no rush to go into battle.

He knew why, of course. His own father had died wielding a sword; Oliver preferred to stay alive, and swords didn't figure into that plan. It would have all been different if his dad had been there to teach him *how* to fight. But his mother wouldn't even let him pick up a kitchen knife. Oliver's only recollection of mock violence was at age ten with a friend named Figgins, the son of the royal baker, who would pretend to fight dragons and pirates with him in the courtyard, but one day Figgins vanished. (Oliver, in fact, had always wondered if his mother might have been behind this

disappearance, in an effort to keep him from even *playing* at battle.) The only friend Oliver had ever had after that, really, was a stray dog that appeared the very afternoon Figgins disappeared. And although Frump the hound was a fine pal, he couldn't help Oliver practice his fencing skills. Thus Oliver grew up nursing a colossal secret: he was thrilled that he hadn't ridden off into battle or jousted in a tournament, or even punched someone during an argument . . . because deep down, he was terrified.

This secret, however, could last only as long as peace reigned. The fact that the dragon that had killed his father had slunk over the mountains and lain dormant for sixteen years didn't mean he wasn't planning a return visit. And when that happened, all the law Oliver had memorized and the languages he spoke wouldn't do any good without the sharp blade of a sword to back them up.

One day, as dispute court was winding to a close, Frump started barking. Oliver peered down the length of the Great Hall to see a lone figure, wrapped in a black cloak from head to toe. The man fell to his knees in front of Oliver's throne. "Your Highness," he begged, "save her."

"Save who?" Oliver asked. Frump, who had always been a good judge of character, bared his teeth and growled. "Down, boy," Oliver muttered, and he held out his hand to the man to help him to his feet. For a moment, the man hesitated, and then he grabbed on as if he were drowning. "Your grievance, good sir?" Oliver asked.

"My daughter and I live in a kingdom far from here. She was kidnapped," he whispered. "I need someone who can rescue her."

This was very different from what Oliver normally heard—that a neighbor had stolen another's chicken, or that the vegetables in the south corner of the kingdom weren't growing as fast as the ones in the north. Oliver had a flash of a vision—himself riding out in armor to save a damsel in distress—and immediately felt like he was going to lose his lunch. This poor man couldn't have known that of all the princes in the world, he'd picked the biggest coward. "Surely there's another prince who's better suited to this," Oliver said. "After all, I'm sort of a novice."

"The first prince I asked was too busy with a civil war in his kingdom. The second prince was leaving on a journey to meet his bride. You are the only one who was even willing to hear me out."

Oliver's mind was racing. It was bad enough that *he* knew he was timid, but what if news of his cowardice spread beyond the kingdom? What if this man went back to his village and told everyone that Prince Oliver could barely fight a cold . . . much less an enemy?

The man mistook Oliver's silence for hesitation and pulled a small oval portrait out of his cloak. "This is Seraphima," he said.

Oliver had never seen a girl so lovely. Her hair was so pale it shimmered like silver; her eyes were the violet of royal robes. Her skin glowed like moonlight, colored only by the faintest blush on her cheeks and lips.

Oliver and Seraphima. Seraphima and Oliver. It sort of had a nice ring to it.

"I'll find her," Oliver promised.

Frump looked up at him and whined.

"I'll worry about it later," Oliver murmured to him.

The man fell backward with gratitude, and for just the briefest of moments, his cloak opened enough for Oliver to see a twisted, scarred face, and for Frump to start barking again. As the girl's father backed out of the hall, Oliver sank back down in his throne, his head in his hands, wondering

what on earth he'd just agreed to do.

"Absolutely not," said Queen Maureen. "Oliver, it's a dangerous world out there."

"There's a dangerous world in here too," Oliver pointed out. "I could fall down the castle stairs. I could get food poisoning from tonight's dinner."

The queen's eyes filled with tears. "This isn't funny, Oliver. You could die."

"I'm not Father."

The minute Oliver said it, he regretted it. His mother bent her head and wiped her eyes. "I've done everything I can do to keep you safe," she murmured. "And you're willing to throw that away for a girl you don't even know?"

"What if I'm *supposed* to know her?" Oliver said. "What if I fall in love with her the way you fell love with my father? Isn't it worth taking a risk for love?"

The queen lifted her face and gazed at her son. "There's something I need to tell you," she said.

For the next hour, Oliver sat transfixed as his mother told him about a boy named Rapsclullo and the evil man he'd become; about a dragon and three fairies; about the gifts that had been bestowed upon him at his birth, and the one gift that wasn't. "For years I've worried that Rapsclullo would return one day," she confessed. "That he'd take away from me the last bit of proof I have of your father's love."

"Proof?"

"Yes, proof, Oliver," the queen explained. "*You.*"

Oliver shook his head. "This has nothing to do with Rapsclullo. Just a girl named Seraphima."

Queen Maureen reached for her son's hand. "Promise me you won't fight. Anyone or anything."

"Even if I wanted to, I probably wouldn't know how." He shook his head, smiling. "I haven't exactly worked out a plan for success."

"Oliver, you were blessed with many other talents. If anyone can succeed, it's going to be you." His mother stood up, reaching for a leather cord tied around her neck. "But just in case, you should have this with you."

From the bodice of her dress, she pulled out a tiny circular disk that hung on the end of the necklace and handed it to Oliver.

"It's a compass," he said.

Queen Maureen nodded. "It was your father's," she said. "And I was the one who gave it to him. It has been passed down in my family for many generations." She looked at her son. "Instead of pointing north, it points you home." She smiled, lost in her memories. "Your father used to call it his good-luck charm."

Oliver thought of his bold and daring father, riding off to fight a dragon with this looped around his neck. Yes, it had brought him home, but not alive. He swallowed, wondering how on earth he could rescue this girl without even a sword by his side. "I guess Father never got scared," he muttered.

"Your father used to say that being scared just meant you had something worth coming back to," Queen Maureen said. "And he used to tell me he was scared all the time."

Oliver kissed his mother's cheek and slipped the compass around his neck. As he walked out of the Great Hall, he resigned himself to the fact that his life was about to get very, very complicated.

OLIVER

JUST SO YOU KNOW, WHEN THEY SAY “ONCE UPON a time” . . . they’re lying.

It’s not once upon a time. It’s not even twice upon a time. It’s hundreds of times, over and over, every time someone opens up the pages of this dusty old book.

“Oliver,” my best friend says. “Checkmate.”

I follow Frump’s gaze and stare down at the chessboard, which isn’t really a chessboard at all. It’s just squares scratched onto the sand of Everafter Beach, and a bunch of accommodating fairies who don’t mind acting as pawns and bishops and queens. There isn’t a chess set in the story, so we have to make do with what we’ve got, and of course we have to clean up all evidence when we’re done, or else someone might assume that there is more to the story than what they know.

I can’t remember when I first realized that life, as I knew it, wasn’t real. That this role I performed over and over was just that—a role. And that in order for me to play it, there had to be another party involved—namely one of those large, round, flat faces that blurred the sky above us every time the story began. The relationships you see on the page aren’t always as they seem. When we’re not acting our parts, we’re all just free to go about our business. It’s quite complicated, really. I’m Prince Oliver but I’m *not* Prince Oliver. When the book is closed, I can stop pretending that I’m interested in Seraphima or that I’m fighting a dragon, and instead I can hang out with Frump or taste the concoctions Queen Maureen likes to dream up in the kitchen or take a dip in the ocean with the pirates, who are actually quite nice fellows. In other words, we all have lives outside the lives that we play when a Reader opens the book. For everyone else here, that knowledge is enough. They’re happy repeating the story endlessly, and staying trapped onstage even when the Readers are gone. But me, I’ve always wondered. It stands to reason that if I have a life outside of this story, so do the Readers whose faces float above us. And *they’re* not trapped inside the book. So where exactly *are* they? And what do *they* do when the book is closed?



Once, a Reader—a very young one—knocked the book over and it fell open on a page that has no one but me written into it. For a full hour, I watched the Other-world go by. These giants stacked

bricks made of wood, with letters written on their sides, creating monstrous buildings. They dug their hands into a deep table filled with the same sort of sand we have on Everafter Beach. They stood in front of easels, like the one Rapscullio likes to use when he paints, but these artists used a unique style—dipping their hands into the paint and smearing it across the paper in swirls of color. Finally, one of the Others, who looked to be as old as Queen Maureen, leaned forward and frowned. “Children! This is not how we treat books,” she said, before shutting me out.

When I told the others what I had seen, they just shrugged. Queen Maureen suggested I see Orville about my strange dreams and ask for a sleeping potion. Frump, who is my best friend both inside the story and out, believed me. “What difference does it make, Oliver?” he asked. “Why waste time and energy thinking about a place or a person you’ll never be?” Immediately I regretted bringing it up. Frump wasn’t always a dog—he was written into the story as Figgins, my best buddy from childhood who was transformed by Rapscullio into a common hound. Because it’s only a flashback of text, the only time he’s ever read he’s seen as a dog—which is why he stays in that form even when we’re offstage.

Frump captures my queen. “Checkmate,” he says.

“Why do you always beat me?” I sigh.

“Why do you always let me?” Frump says, and he scratches behind his ear. “Stupid fleas.”

When we’re working, Frump doesn’t speak—he just barks. He follows me around like, well, a faithful pup. You’d never guess, when he’s acting, that in real life he’s always bossing the rest of us around.

“I think I saw a tear at the top of page forty-seven,” I say as casually as I can, although I’ve been thinking of nothing but getting back there to investigate since first spotting it. “Want to come check it out?”

“Honestly, Oliver. Not that again.” Frump rolls his eyes. “You’re like a one-trick pony.”

“Did you call me?” Socks trots closer. He’s my trusty steed, and again, a shining example of how what you see isn’t always what’s true. Although he snorts and stamps with the confidence of a stallion on the pages of our world, when the book is closed he’s a nervous mess with the self-confidence of a gnat.

I smile at him, because if I don’t, he’s going to think I’m angry at him. He’s *that* sensitive. “No, w didn’t . . .”

“I distinctly heard the word *pony* . . .”

“It was just an expression,” Frump says.

“Well, now that I’m here, tell me the truth,” Socks says, turning in a half circle. “This saddle totally makes my butt look fat, doesn’t it?”

“No,” I say immediately, as Frump vigorously shakes his head.

“You’re all muscle,” Frump says. “In fact, I was going to ask if you’d been working out.”

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better.” Socks snuffles. “I *knew* I shouldn’t have had that last carrot at breakfast.”

“You look great, Socks,” I insist. “Honestly.” But he tosses his mane and sulks back toward the other side of the beach.

Frump rolls onto his back. “If I have to listen to that stupid horse whine one more time—”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about,” I interrupt. “What if you didn’t have to? What if you could be anywhere—*anything*—you wanted to be?”

I have this dream. It’s kind of silly, but I see myself walking down a street I’ve never seen before, in a village I can’t identify. A girl hurries past me, her dark hair whipping behind her like a flag, and in her haste she crashes into me. When I reach out to help her up, I feel a spark ignite between us. Her eyes are the color of honey, and I cannot turn away from them. *Finally*, I say, and when I kiss her, she tastes of mint and winter and nothing like Seraphima—

“Yeah, right,” Frump says, interrupting me. “How many career opportunities are there for a basset hound?”

“You’re only a dog because you were written that way,” I say. “What if you could change that?”

He laughs. “Change it. Change the story. Yeah, that’s a good one, Ollie. While you’re at it, why don’t you turn the ocean into grape juice and make the mermaids fly?”

Maybe he’s right, maybe it *is* just me. Everyone else in this book seems to be perfectly happy with the fact that they are part of a story; that they are enslaved into doing and saying the same things over and over, like in a play that gets performed for eternity. They probably think that the people in the Otherworld have the same sorts of lives we do. I guess I find it hard to believe that Readers get up at the same hour every morning and eat the same breakfast every day and go sit in the same chair for hours and have the same conversations with their parents and go to bed and wake up and do it all over again. I think more likely they lead the most incredible lives—and by incredible, I mean: with free will. I wonder all the time what that would be like: to feel the book opening yet *not* beg the queen to let me go on a quest. To avoid getting trapped by fairies and run ragged by a villain. To fall in love with a girl whose eyes are the color of honey. To see someone I don’t recognize, and whose name I don’t know. I’m not fussy, really. I wouldn’t mind being a butcher instead of a prince. Or swimming across the ocean to be hailed as a legendary athlete. Or picking a fight with someone who cuts in front of me. I wouldn’t mind doing *anything* other than the same old things I have done for as long as I can remember. I guess I just have to believe there’s more to the world than what’s inside these pages. Or maybe it’s just that I desperately *want* to believe that.

I glance around at the others. Between readings, our real personalities show. One of the trolls is working out a melody on a flute he has carved from a piece of bamboo. The fairies are doing crossword puzzles that Captain Crabbe creates for them, but they keep cheating by looking into the wizard’s crystal ball. And Seraphima . . .

She blows me a kiss, and I force a smile.

She’s pretty, I suppose, with her silver hair and eyes the color of violets in the meadow near the castle. But her shoe size is bigger than her IQ. For example, she honestly believes that just because I save her over and over again as part of my job, I must truly have feelings for her.

I’ll be honest, it’s not a hard day’s work to kiss a beautiful girl repeatedly. But it all starts feeling same old, same old after a while. I certainly don’t love Seraphima, but that little detail seems to have escaped her. Which makes me feel guilty every time I kiss her, because I know she wants more from me than I’m ever going to give her when the storybook’s closed.



Beside me, Frump lets out a long, mournful howl. That's the second reason I feel so guilty kissing Seraphima. He's had a crush on her for as long as I can remember, and that makes it even worse. What must it be like, watching me pretend to fall in love with the girl he's crazy about, day after day? "I'm sorry, buddy," I say to him. "I wish she knew it was just for show."

"Not your fault," he replies tightly. "Just doing what you have to do."

As if he's conjured it, there is suddenly a blinding light, and our sky cracks open along a seam. "Places!" Frump cries, frantic. "Everyone! Into your positions!" He runs off to help the trolls dismantle the bridge, only so that they can rebuild it again.

I grab my tunic and my dagger. The fairies who were our chess pieces rise like sparks and write the words see you later in the air before me, a trail of light as they zoom into the woods. "Yes, and thank you again," I say politely, intent on hurrying to the castle for my first scene.

What would happen, I wonder, if I was late? If I dawdled or stopped to smell the lilacs at the castle gate, so that I wasn't in place when the book was opened? Would it stay sealed shut? Or would the story start without me?

Experimentally, I slow my pace, dragging my heels. But suddenly I feel a magnetic tug on the front of my tunic, propelling me through the pages. They rustle as I leap through them, my legs moving in double time while I stare down, amazed. I can hear Socks whinnying in his stall at the royal stables, and the splash of the mermaids as they dive back into the sea, and suddenly, I am standing where I am supposed to be, before the royal throne in the Great Hall, at dispute court. "It's about time," Frump mutters. At the last moment there is a brilliant slice of light that opens above us, and instead of looking away like we usually do, this time I glance up.

I can see the Reader's face—a little fuzzy at the edges, sort of how the sun looks from the ocean floor. And just like when one stares at the sun, I can't make myself turn away.

"Oliver!" Frump hisses. "Focus!"

So I turn away from those eyes, the exact color of honey; from that mouth, its lips parted just the tiniest bit, as if she might be about to speak my name. I turn away, and clear my throat, and for the hundred billionth time in my life, I speak my first line of the story.

Save who?

I did not write the lines I speak; they were given to me long before I remember. I mouth the words but the actual sound is in the Reader's mind, not coming from my throat. Similarly, all the moves that we make as if we're performing a play somehow unravel across someone else's imagination. It is as if the action and sound on our tiny, remote stage are being broadcast in the thoughts of the Reader. I'm not sure that I ever really learned this information—it's just something I've known forever, the same way I know that when I look at the grass and associate it with a color, I know that color is green.

I let Rapsclullo convince me that he is a nobleman from afar whose beloved daughter has been

kidnapped—a speech I’ve heard so often that occasionally, I murmur the words along with him. In the story, of course, he has no daughter. He’s just setting a trap for me. But I’m not supposed to know that yet, even though I’ve played this scene a thousand times. So while he is going on and on about the other princes who won’t rescue Seraphima, I think about the girl who is reading us.

I’ve seen her before. She’s different from our usual Readers—they’re either motherly, like Queen Maureen, or young enough to be captivated by tales of princesses in peril. But this Reader looks—well, she looks to be about my age. It doesn’t make any sense. Surely she knows—like I do—that fairy tales are just stories. That happy endings aren’t real.

Frump waddles across the polished black-and-white marble floor, his tail wagging vigorously as he skids to a halt beside me.

Suddenly I hear a voice—distant, through a tunnel, but clear enough: “Delilah, I told you *twice* already . . . we’re going to be late!”

From time to time, I’ve heard Readers talking. They don’t usually read out loud, but every now and then, a conversation occurs when a book is open. I’ve learned quite a lot from being a good listener. Like, for example, *Don’t let the bedbugs bite* is apparently a common way to say good night, even in rooms that do not appear to be infested with insects. I’ve learned about things the Otherworld has that we don’t: television (which is something parents do not like as much as books); Happy Meals (apparently not all meals bring joy. Just the ones that come in a paper bag with a small toy); and showers (something you take before bedtime that leaves you drenched).

“Just let me finish,” the girl says.

“You’ve read that book a thousand times—you know how it ends. *Now* means *now!*”

I have heard this Reader speaking to the older woman before. From their conversations, I’m guessing it’s her mother. She is always telling Delilah to put the book away and go outside. To take a walk and get some fresh air. To call a friend (though how many could be within earshot?) and go to a movie (whatever that is). Repeatedly, I wait for her to heed her mother’s directions—but most of the time she finds an excuse to keep reading. Sometimes she does go outside, but opens the book and starts reading again. I cannot tell you how frustrating this is for me. Here I am, wasting away inside a book I wish I could escape, and all she wants to do is stay in the story.

If I could talk to this girl Delilah, I’d ask her why on earth she would ever trade a single second of the world she’s in for the one in which I’m stuck.

But I’ve tried talking out loud to other Readers. Believe me, it was the very first thing I attempted when I started to actively dream about life in the Otherworld. If I could just get one of those people holding the book to notice me, maybe I’d have a chance at escaping. However, the people holding the book see me only when the story is playing, and when the story is playing, I am compelled to stick to the script. Even when I try to say something like “Please! Listen to me!” I wind up announcing, instead, “I’m on my way to rescue a princess!” like some sort of puppet. If I ever had reason to believe that a Reader could see me for who I really am—not who I play in the story—I’d do, well, anything. I’d scream at the top of my lungs. I’d run in circles. I’d light myself on fire. Anything, to keep her seeing me.

Can you imagine what it would be like to know that your life was just going to be a series of days that were all the same, that were do-overs? As Prince Oliver, I may have been given the gift of life . . . but I have never been given the chance to *live*.

“Coming,” Delilah says over her shoulder, and I exhale heavily, a breath I hadn’t even realized I

was holding. The thought of not having to go through the motions again—it's a gift, an absolute gift.

There is a dizzying whirl of gravity as the book starts to close, something we've all gotten used to. We grab on to details—candelabra and table legs and in some desperate cases, the hanging tail of a letter like *g* or *y*, until the pages are completely closed.

“Well,” I say, letting go of the drapery I was clutching. “Guess we got off lucky this—”

Before I can finish, however, I find myself flying head over heels as the pages are riffled through, and our world reopens on the very last bit of the story. As if by magic, and Seraphima is glittering beside me in her shimmering gown. Frump has a wedding band tied to a silver ribbon around his neck. The trolls are holding the pillars of a bridal bower; the pixies have spun silken ribbons that wrap around them and blow in the sea breeze. The mermaids gather in the shallows of the ocean, watching us bitterly as we wed.

I glance down, and suddenly panic.



The chessboard. It's still there. The pixie chess pieces are gone, certainly, but the squares I drew with a stick—the proof that there is life in this book when no one is reading it—are still carved onto the beach.

I don't know why the book hasn't reset itself. It never makes mistakes like this; every time we are flipped to a new page we will find ourselves ready, in costume, with any necessary set in place. Maybe, for all I know, this *has* happened before and I never noticed it. But it stands to reason that if I noticed, someone else might too.

Like a Reader.

Delilah.

Deep breaths, Oliver, I tell myself. “Frump,” I hiss.

He growls, but I can understand him clearly: *Not now.*

Okay, Oliver, I tell myself. This is not a disaster. People read a fairy tale for the happy ending, not to hunt for a faintly visible chessboard scratched into the sand on the final page. Still, I try to pull Seraphima toward me in an attempt to hide the chessboard beneath the fabric of her billowing dress. Seraphima, however, misinterprets this to mean that I might actually want to get closer to her. She tilts up her chin and her eyes flutter closed, waiting for her kiss.

Everyone's waiting. The trolls, the fairies, the mermaids. The pirates with their anchor lines tightly wrapped around Pyro the dragon to keep him subdued.

The Reader is waiting too. And if I give her what she wants, she'll close the book and that will be that.

Oh, *fine.*

I lean forward and give Seraphima a kiss, winding my hands in her hair and pulling the length of her body along mine. I can feel her melt beneath my touch, leaning into me. She may not be my type, but there's no reason I shouldn't enjoy myself at work, after all.

“Delilah!”

As the girl leans closer, the sky darkens above us. “How strange,” she murmurs.

Her finger comes down, pushing at the edges of our world, bending the scenery even as we stand in it. I draw in my breath, thinking she is going to trap me, but instead, she touches the very spot where the chessboard is etched onto the sand.

“That,” she says, “was never here before.”

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