

# NEVER AFTER

THE  
THIRTEENTH  
FAIRY

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*For all the magic in my life*

*For my ever-after family*

*Mike & Mattie always*

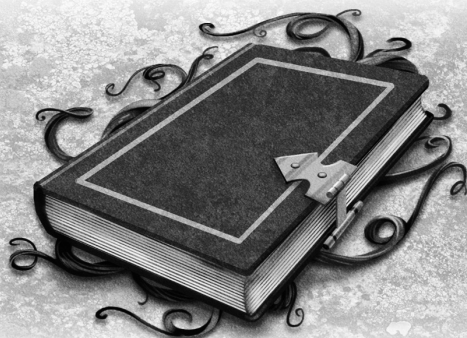
*For my friends who believed*

*Jen Besser*

*Richard Abate*

## PROLOGUE

# THE UNVITATION



*O*nce upon a time in the days of old, eleven fairies gathered at court before a child to hold. Only eleven, for the twelfth was dead and the thirteenth was missing. An invitation for every living fairy—except the thirteenth—had previously been sealed, sent, and delivered: a formal request to come forth and bless the sweet newborn princess.

Now all of Never After had come to Westphalia to celebrate this long-awaited day. Creatures old and new, of every height and hue—from towering dragons, their armored scales glittering gold and green, to warty goblins and

rambunctious dwarves. There were garden gnomes seated on toadstools and tiny pixies fluttering their dragonfly wings, slender forest sprites and weathered crones. There were merchants and farmhands, milkmaids and pageboys. There were grand dukes and great ladies, and too many onlookers to count. For a collective breath had been held in the kingdom for countless nights, countless souls wishing upon countless stars for the overall health of every perfect petite finger and toe. It was time to exhale.

A new princess! The precious future of the kingdom.

On the day of the christening, handsome King Vladimir and beautiful Queen Olga sat atop their thrones, gleaming smiles upon their lips, brilliant white teeth shining and blinding. A dazzling display of both pride and prize as they hosted a fete of impressive size.

It was almost like magic, as if with a snap of the fingers, it had happened at long last. *Voilà*: a baby. All that once was, was now forgotten. A fresh new present, dreamy and vast, devoid of the unfortunate past.

And yet. And yet.

There was a motive behind each mirror.

What was that? A maniacal laugh sounded in the distance if you listened closely enough. But none could hear it, because none *would* hear it.

The babe—Princess Eliana—had been longed for; that she was desperately wanted was the understatement of

the century. The king and queen had been in the throes of despair, hoping and waiting for this baby girl. She was the stuff of dreams delivered.

Princess Eliana was safe and warm, swaddled in cotton and fluff, wishes and moondust. She'd received a kind glance from every assembled guest, and each passing moment was its own tiny and fleeting miracle. Delight flitted through the air, leaving sparkles of joy and wonder in its wake. It was universal bliss to leave a kiss upon the little darling's fingertips.

But something was amiss. Something, *yes, something indeed*, was peculiar. None could pinpoint it, or examine it in depth. No one wanted to look through the thin lace veil, a superb glamour to distract and divert.

Instead! Let us feast on the plates of pastries and pies provided for all. Blueberry, raspberry, lemon sorbet, rich layered cake. Wine and spirit, drink and dance. Let us gaze at the elaborate ball gowns, jewels, and crowns.

For this was an open invitation, come one, come all.

*Come all . . . except one.*

The members of the court chattered among themselves, trading rumor and speculation, whispered into various pointy and curious ears. Questions laced with a hint of dread and agitation.

*"Where is Carabosse?"*

*"Where is the thirteenth fairy?"*

*"What of her blessing?"*

The court murmured and muttered, fretted and frazzled.  
Carabosse, the thirteenth and most powerful fairy in all of  
Never After, was nowhere to be found.

No invitation had been sent.

Quite the opposite.

An *un*invitation, if you will.

The princess has finally arrived.

The king and queen celebrate their child.

However, your presence is not required.

It is unwanted, unwelcome, and undesired.

STAY AWAY, CARABOSSE.

Harps and flutes played melodies of lullabies for the royal  
babe with rosy cheeks and bright copper eyes. She yawned  
and stretched, then wailed. And cried. And cried some more.  
She wanted her mother.

Her mother!

Where was her mother?

Was she not there, on the throne? Holding a goblet to her  
lips, oblivious to the cries of her sweet daughter?

No!

That was not her mother.

No!

That woman on the throne—that was not her mother.  
The mother she would never know was not there.

Her mother was dead. Buried underground. Rotting.

The late queen, Rosanna, would never hold her daughter, the newborn in the forefront of the court, the center of this new world that kept spinning without her.

For Queen Rosanna was dead.

That woman on the throne, married to her father—that woman was not her mother.

Was it only a few weeks since King Vladimir had knelt at Queen Rosanna's graveside and wept? It could not be, but it was. A few weeks. Mayhap a few days. Not enough time for proper mourning, no room for sufficient grieving. A king had lost his queen, yet no dirges were sung, no banners lowered in memoriam. No respects paid to his previous wife. No tears, no years of waiting. Not even a single moment of reflection. Not even a *what if* remaining on his tongue.

No eulogy made, the soil still fresh on the grave, King Vladimir remarried. As if he'd inhaled at her passing and exhaled a new life.

There he was, sitting proudly with his new wife, Queen Olga, and their cherub—the already-famous princess Eliana.

But largely unmentioned in the tales to come is that the thirteenth fairy, the uninvited fairy, the fairy Carabosse, was the late queen Rosanna's sister and hence Princess Eliana's aunt.

Carabosse had warned Rosanna about the mortal world, warned her about leaving the safety of the forest. But Rosanna didn't listen. Rosanna gave up her magic to follow her heart, and now she was dead and buried underground.



But Carabosse was very much alive.

And, at last, she had arrived.

Unvitation and all.

A fevered hush swept over the court as Carabosse strolled in, gown trailing behind her. The tales told after this day speak of an ugly crone, hunchbacked and withered, of a threatening and vile fairy enchantress. A wicked witch, wreathed in black, with eyes like braziers and a voice of snakes and sandpaper.

The tales are wrong. The tales are twisted and untrue.

For Carabosse was breathtaking.

Tall and dark and wild and striking. She had Rosanna's long black locks and scissor-cut cheekbones, her petal-pink lips and regal bearing, but Carabosse's eyes were all her own. Rosanna's eyes were chestnut brown, as warm as rain. Carabosse's eyes were as black as night and as deep as the ocean's depths. Her dress was gossamer and ebony, dipped in gold and sparkling with the light of a thousand fireflies. Her bare feet scarcely touched the floor. She did not walk but glided over the ballroom with hardly a sound.

The music stopped. The creatures froze. Worry reverberated and bounced off the castle walls. An eerie quiet unsettled the merry hall. More whispers sprang from lips. Gluttonous gulps became silent sips. And then came the pointing from various fingertips. All aimed at Carabosse.

*"At last! She is here!"*

*"What will she do?"*

*“What has she come for?”*

She eyed her sisters, the assembled fairies all in a row, with sorrow, and many hung their heads in shame. Carabosse, the eldest and best of them, strode purposefully to her niece’s crib, a wooden sleigh covered in twine and vine, and lifted her beloved sister’s baby in her arms. This little girl was all she had left of her dear Rosanna. Her heart nearly burst at the sight of the child. The resemblance uncanny, almost as though she were looking into her sister’s own warm brown eyes.

As she whispered to the babe under her breath, then bent her head to kiss her stolen niece, whom another woman claimed as her own, their first moment together was also stolen—by a shrill shriek.

Queen Olga looked askance. “What are you doing? Hand me back my child!” she cried.

“Your child,” Carabosse echoed, with the slow rise of a perfectly arched eyebrow as she turned to the new queen. “*Your* child . . .”

“My child,” said Queen Olga, with eyes like braziers and a voice of snakes and sandpaper.

“I have come to bestow my blessing,” said Carabosse.

And the court held its breath . . .

# PART ONE

Wherein . . .

Filomena Jefferson-Cho embarks  
on an unexpected adventure.

Jack the Giant Stalker arrives on the  
scene to pull her into Never After.

Our heroes are attacked and escape  
in the nick of time.

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE GIRL



Filomena Jefferson-Cho walks along the sidewalk, looking down and wondering if there are more cracks in the curb than terrible things that happened to her today. Because in her small, sleepy, and perpetually sunny hometown of North Pasadena, California, where nothing ever happens, she's quickly learning that anything that can go wrong . . . will.

At least for her.

School *sucked*. She'd left her laptop at home, which triggered an automatic demerit; the cafeteria was out of the

“good” chocolate milk; and she got a C-minus on her Algebra One Honors quiz. And even though she’s the only sixth grader in eighth-grade algebra, which is an honor in itself, it still stung.

Worst of all, her best friend, Maggie Martin, is currently ignoring her to hang out with the Fettucine Alfredos—the obnoxious rich kids who order fancy pasta delivered from the snooty restaurant across the street. Unlike the rest of the class, who line up for hot lunch or eat the same old vegan bologna sandwich, like Filomena does every day.

But there are a few bright spots in her day, for which Filomena is grateful. One, her neurotic and way too overprotective parents finally allowed her to walk somewhere alone for once. Two, the thirteenth and final book in the *Never After* series was released today.

Oh, joy! Oh, profound happiness! A new book! And not just a book but the *finale* to the series! All the questions answered! The princess rescued! The villains vanquished! The hero’s journey victorious at last!

It’s the best thing to have happened since the *last* book in the series came out. Maybe the best thing to have happened even since the latest smartphone was released. The one with the better camera and the talking cartoon emoji. Or was that *two* new smartphones ago? Who can keep track?

Filomena can’t contain her excitement, especially as she’s allowed to go pick it up all by herself. Her parents never let her walk anywhere alone, and she’s twelve years old, for

British Kit Kats' sake. Yeah, British Kit Kats. They're smaller and yet . . . somehow *more* chocolaty. She prefers them to the bigger and infinitely less tasty American version. Most things that are bigger are not necessarily better, she has discovered.

But back to the point: her overshelteredness. It's reached the point of suffocation. She can hardly breathe most days! She deserves some freedom, a little trust here and there. A playdate or two, maybe? To ride a bike or scooter without a helmet and an irrational and overwhelming fear of bad guys lurking nearby, just waiting to snatch her up?

For as long as Filomena can remember, her parents have been talking about all kinds of abductions, even legends about fairies who steal kids, switching them for one of their own. Her parents have very vivid imaginations. (They're writers. It comes with the territory.)

Filomena's parents treat her like a precious treasure, a cherished gift. Little do they know that most people actually avoid her. Or bully her. Or make fun of her. At least, people her age do. Everyone else just seems generally uninterested in her. Come to think of it, maybe it would be better if she was snatched by fairies.

Maybe fairies would be nicer than most kids. Maybe if they were half goat and half human, or had glowing green skin and horns, they wouldn't tease her for being smart, wouldn't ask her where she came from (here) or rudely wonder if she was black or Asian or white or what on earth was she (all of the above). For the record, she has

curly dark hair, dark brown eyes, and skin the color of maple syrup. Maybe fairies wouldn't think she was weird for reading so much; instead, they'd pick her brain about it—literally. Oh, wait, that's aliens, not fairies, and maybe that would be bad . . .

Either way, it doesn't matter to her parents. The bottom line is that Filomena is *never* allowed to walk home from school by herself. Or go anywhere by herself, for that matter. They made it crystal clear that this afternoon would be the one and only exception, because they know how important the Never After books are to her. And since both her mom and dad had looming deadlines, they weren't able to give her a ride to the bookstore.

Still, regardless of their smothering and overly protective ways, Filomena loves her parents. She also loves her Pomeranian puppy, Adelina Jefferson-Cho. And her beta goldfish, Serafina Jefferson-Cho.

She named them that way so that they would all sound like they belong in the same family. The way some families give all their kids names that rhyme (Stan, Jan, Fran) or names that all start with the same letter (Carrie, Corey, Caitlyn). It screams, "Hey! We're a family unit, in case you couldn't tell by our appearances!"

Because people sure can't tell by the Jefferson-Chos' appearances. Filomena is adopted. Her dad is Korean-Filipino and her mom is British. No one in her family looks like the others. And despite her parents' compassion and kindness

and deep abiding love, she often wonders if they have any idea how she feels. How not knowing who your biological kin are or what they look like can plague you. How wondering why you were given up can haunt you, making you feel sort of un-special from the start. No matter how special her parents did make her feel.

So, yeah, “family” means a lot more to her than it might mean to the average twelve-year-old. It means *almost* as much as the doe-eyed singer who just left the world’s hottest boy band to start a solo career. Riley Raymond probably means just as much to the vast majority of other girls her age, and even to an immeasurable number of boys her age. The boys just might not admit it yet because kids can be so evil. They poke and poke and poke at anything they can find that’s different about you.

Filomena hates that about humans as much as she adores Riley Raymond’s floppy brown hair and falsetto singing voice.

What else does she adore? Many things. Well, she doesn’t love any one thing, animal, parent, or pop-star heartthrob in any particular order. However, what she might love the absolute most (don’t tell her parents) are the books in the Never After series.

And the thirteenth and final book is out today.

THE THIRTEENTH AND FINAL BOOK IS OUT TODAY! (*Use megaphone here.*)

But she’s cool. She’s not *running* to the bookstore.



Nah, she's cool as a cucumber. Walking. Backpack slung over her shoulder. And it doesn't have princesses on it, either, okay? She's not a child. Not anymore. Not like her parents consider her, anyway.

Her backpack is sleek, stylish. It's black with gray straps, and instead of a princess, or a cute animal with extra-large eyes, or a fancy designer logo, it has the sigil of Never After on it—a gold circle around a tree with a heart carved on its trunk. Inside the backpack are Never After-themed pencils and a Never After pencil case. Proving devotion to the fandom through merchandise is one of her favorite hobbies. If she could get a Never After tattoo, she would, but she's too young, and her mother forbade it.

She can nearly smell the bookstore from here. It's maybe another fifty steps away. She's got everything she needs.

The money to buy the book? *Check.*

The blaringly loud whistle her mother gave her before she left for school this morning, just in case she needed a way to alert others that she was in danger on the walk home? *Check.*

Her favorite Never After bookmark, just waiting to be placed in the new book she's about to buy? *Check.*

A huge grin on her face that she's trying to stifle but unfortunately cannot, because she's too excited for words? *CHECK.*

After the day she's had, this book is pretty much her prize simply for surviving the last eight hours.

Because her luck is about to change. She is only five steps away from the bookstore—two if she leaps—and her heart starts pounding louder the closer she gets to the door.

She's almost there. And soon she will be reading the climax, the ending, the finale of the series of books that defined—nay, *divined*—her childhood.

She can hardly wait to find out what happens next!

## CHAPTER TWO

# THE BOOK



**A**las, what happens next is not what anyone expected.  
Sad trombone.

Filomena reaches for the door handle like she's reaching for her dreams and accidentally whips it open a little too excitedly.

She feels a familiar blush warm her cheeks and she shrugs, apologizing as she walks in. "Whoopsie," she says, and offers a nervous laugh. "Sorry about that. I think the wind took it and—"

"It's quite all right, dear," the bookseller at the desk says

with an understanding smile that is also full of pity—a reaction Filomena’s not unused to.

Filomena smiles back and fidgets with her hands as her eyes scan the bookstore for what she’s expecting to find: a huge, freshly filled stand full of copies of the new *Never After* book. A ladder of books. A *tower* of books. A ziggurat! A pyramid! An explosion! Just like there was for all twelve books before this one.

The *Never After* series is one of the most popular book series of all time. In the twelve preceding volumes, readers followed the adventures of Jack the Giant Stalker and his lovable, loyal crew of ragtag friends as they met heroes and heroines of popular fairy tales and battled to keep the land of *Never After* safe from a slew of evil witches, villains, and ogres. In the twelfth volume, Jack and his company were running for their lives, hounded to the edge of a cliff and certain to fall to their deaths. Would he find yet another ingenious way to escape and defeat his enemies once and for all? She certainly hopes so. The book ended on a literal cliffhanger.

Filomena is itching to read the thirteenth book. She has waited so long. A whole year!

But instead of the books, she finds a group of fellow die-hard *Never After* fans—better known as *Nevies*—standing around grumbling, seeming as disappointed and let-down as she’s starting to feel. They look like they’re about to take out pitchforks and riot. Then she hears someone say, “Ugh! No way! It can’t be true! No book?!”

Filomena's heart starts to sink. Another feeling she's grown used to.

Since she's there alone and isn't the most, er, socially outgoing individual, she approaches the familiar and friendly face at the counter instead of the crowd. Mrs. Stewart is not just a bookseller but also a former novelist who opened a bookstore after she'd sold gazillions of copies of her one book and decided she wanted to devote her life to reading instead of writing. Mrs. Stewart is also not just a bookseller but one of Filomena's few friends.

"Excuse me? Mrs. S?" Filomena asks. "Do you have the new *Never After* novel in stock? It was supposed to come out today, and I figured—"

"Oh, honey," Mrs. Stewart says, her sympathetic smile growing more sympathetic. "We figured, too. We were all ready with our fairy-dust cookies and our Stalker hats." Indeed, many of the Nevies gathered at the store are eating crumbly sugar cookies and wearing the pointy green hats that Jack famously sports in the books.

Filomena's heart sinks past her stomach to the floor.

"Except apparently it isn't being published after all. Not this season. Not ever. The author's long gone, and there's no book."

"The author—you mean—Cassiopeia Valle Croix? She's dead?" gasps Filomena.

"Dead or disappeared—they won't say."

Filomena's mouth drops open. "So . . . wh-what do you

mean? The book won't be published? But it's been advertised all year. And the cover's on the website. How can that be?"

"It just is." Another sad headshake.

"It won't be published? At all? Never?"

"Never ever, that's what they say," says Mrs. Stewart, frowning. "Apparently, Cassiopeia wrote all twelve books at once, years and years ago, and her estate has been publishing them all this time. But she never wrote the thirteenth one. Her estate thought they would find it in her files, and promised the publisher they would send it when they did. The publisher kept saying it was coming, hoping the estate would find it. But at last they all had to come clean. There is no thirteenth book. Not anywhere. Either it wasn't written, or it's lost, but in any case, it's not being published. I'm sorry, honey."

Filomena is so devastated she cannot speak. Her mind reels from disappointment. She wants to shake a fist at the sky and scream *Noooooo!* But instead she just turns pale.

"What can I tell you?" Mrs. Stewart sighs. "Sometimes life is stranger than fiction. This is one of those times. We definitely don't have the book in the store. But I don't know, maybe try online?"

(They don't have it online. They don't have it anywhere. The book does not exist. This is something Filomena confirms later that evening after much online searching.)

Filomena opens her mouth to protest—to protest what, she isn't even sure—but stops herself. "Never?" is all she asks.

“Never,” Mrs. Stewart echoes sadly.

Feeling just incredibly, ridiculously, completely bummed and discouraged, Filomena takes one last look at the dejected crowd of Nevies and heads back toward the door. *Maybe we should riot, she thinks. Maybe we should throw some books around, kick a few journals. Something. This will just not do!*

She leaves the bookstore in a huff. All she has left is a long walk home after a terrible day.

She’s too busy feeling sorry for herself to notice that someone started following her about thirty paces ago.

But when she does finally sense a presence behind her—a very *unwanted* presence—she feels an uncomfortable paranoia start to wiggle its way into her bones. She tries to shake it off, convincing herself it’s only her parents’ neuroses playing tricks on her.

But when she turns and spots the person behind her, a tall figure draped in black, her eyes widen. She spins back around, pretending she hasn’t noticed him.

*Oh no, she thinks. Is he a kidnapper? Just like they always warned?*

She reminds herself that her emergency whistle is tucked inside her backpack. She tugs the bag closer to her in preparation, hoping she’ll be fast enough to get away if this person really is a Filomena-snatcher.

Her parents have made her suspicious of everyone. She tries to shake off the fear again, convincing herself she’s just overthinking things.

But a part of her can hear every scary story her parents have told her, about missing kids and mysterious disappearances and changelings left on doorsteps while the real children are whisked off to fairyland, and she wonders if their morbid prophecies are about to come true. Maybe fairies really *are* coming for her. Maybe she's never going to see her parents again, ever. Maybe this is the end of her.

Her heart rate picks up again. Only now it's not due to excitement. It's the exact opposite of excitement.

What would that be?

*Oh.* That's right.

That would be fear.