

RUMPELSTILTSKIN

Anna was just 16 when her old man, a struggling boxing coach, realised that she might just have what it takes to get into boxing. Her father was a proud man. Before even a whole year of her training was complete, he spread the word about his daughter being the one who'd be bringing in gold.

Unprepared, she found herself as a wildcard entrant in a tournament. Her name and her father's as well as a significant amount of money were at stake. She knew her scrawny frame wouldn't be a match for her powerful contender.

She paced about her room the night before her first match, when suddenly she saw this, almost grotesque, man knocking at her door. She let him in when he promised he knew how to help her win. In her troubled state of mind, she let him chop off locks of her hair – something she took pride in – in return for a win.

The next day, she found that even her premature blows were able to knock down a six feet tall girl who towered over her. She felt powerful. Until she came back home again. The man was there. A smile played on his lips.

"You do want to win the next match too, don't you?" He had come prepared with a needle and a blood bag. The price of "healthy" blood is high in the black market. Anna felt helpless.

As the matches came her way, she conquered them all. However, as the

opponents became stronger with each successive match, the price to pay rose too. It bothered her less over time with each passing victory.

When the final match came, she made a decision. With the prize money, she'd have enough to pursue other walks of life. So, she saw the man again for what she believed was the last time. Much to her surprise, when he told her that he didn't demand anything yet, the naive Anna agreed to give anything when the time came.

A few years went by after that tournament where she "gloriously" triumphed over her biggest rival. She lived an uneventful life afterwards, got married and even had a son. It was a regular morning when she walked into her child's bedroom to see him gone and a note that read, "The price is a million dollars or your baby." Anna suddenly realised how the man ensured all her victories.

Anna knew what she had to do. She had to show him she knew who he was – Rumpelstiltskin, the elusive match-fixer. She entered herself into the biggest tournament she could, knowing he would bet against her, the overwhelming favourite to win.

After she lost intentionally, as promised, Rumpelstiltskin came by, her baby with him. Anna, despite a broken nose and a few ribs along with the biggest loss in her career felt complete when she held her child again.

SLEEPING BEAUTY

"As you know the injury to her skull was severe, but her condition has been improving rapidly. I think we can hope to see her awake soon."

"Thank God. And you, Armaan. You've been more than just a doctor to her. We can never thank you enough."

"Please, she isn't just a patient to me, you know that. Her recovery means more to me than anything else..."

As the others filed out, Armaan looked down at Aarya's immobile form on the hospital bed – at the face that radiated beauty despite the pallor of long-term coma.

Would she remember him?

He hoped she would, but a part of him prayed that she'd forget the horror that had caused all this in the first place.

The Chowdhurys were renowned Dhaka elites – wealthy, respected and kind. Aarya, their firstborn, was swathed in love and attention. A young girl named Moina came to work at the Chowdhurys' as a maid. "Don't hesitate to ask for anything

you need. You're part of our home now," Mrs. Chowdhury had told her. Naive Moina had taken the words to heart and started thinking of herself as part of the family.

The illusion shattered on the day of a party thrown on Aarya's birthday. Hurt and humiliated, Moina promised vengeance on their precious child before being removed from the premises.

Years passed. Aarya grew up to be an enchanting young woman. Loved and guarded fiercely by her family, she found respite in practicing the piano. It was the melody pouring from her fingers that drew Armaan – boy from next door – to her. As time passed, the love of music bound a shy musician and an eager med student in friendship that soon grew into love.

It was Armaan who had found Aarya unconscious and bleeding in the garden on her 18th birthday. Since then, every minute of Armaan's life had gone into Aarya's treatment and in trying to wake her up.

EVERYDAY FAIRY TALES

We've had almost too many modern takes on Cinderella and the Stockholm syndrome that is Beauty and the Beast, with many other immensely popular fairytales going unnoticed. So we bring you a cornucopia of some classic fairy tales with makeovers that place them in the world of today.

SARAH ANJUM BARI & MAHEJABEEN NIDHI



ILLUSTRATION: ZOHEB MASHIUR

PETER PAN

Neverland: the place where children never grow up, just another name for Childhood Leukaemia Ward. The ward itself is daunting; it's the kind of grim place that no right minded adult would want to venture to or see their children in.

Peter Pan, unlike most, had first-hand experience on how it is to be in the ward. Even though he had been cured, he realised he couldn't really leave. He became a social volunteer for young cancer patients as a reason to stick around – to walk alongside others who shared his suffering.

It was a hard day for Peter when he came across Wendy's case files. He shuddered when he saw her photo. She seemed to have an immense passion for life despite everything and yet her parents had her withdrawn from the hospital because the bills were too "impractical".

With all the courage he could muster, he managed to manipulate the circumstances so he could bring Wendy to the ward for treatment. It seemed that he really only had the support of one other person – Nurse Tinkerbell.

When he demanded treatment for Wendy, Dr. Hook, Head of Oncology Department, was, to say the least, not

pleased. As Tinkerbell urged the issue further, Dr. Hook threatened to have her fired. Hook was a "sensible" person; more deaths would make his department, and him, look bad.

Despite her gloomy surroundings, Wendy's days in Neverland were anything but dull. She quickly befriended the other patients; her personality was heart-warming and her energy infectious. They saw almost everything as an adventure, such as sneaking into the cafeteria, messing around with Tinkerbell and even trips to chemotherapy felt exciting.

Dr. Hook was nothing short of hostile towards Wendy. The prolonged time she hadn't been treated made Hook believe she was the least deserving to be at Neverland. Yet, much to Hook's shock, his aggressive treatments, coupled with her friends' – especially Peter's – encouragement and support, drove Wendy to remission again.

As Wendy was on the road to being cured, she had a change of heart about staying at Neverland. She wished to return home again to her worried parents. She wanted her friends to come too, including Peter Pan, but as it turned out, some people just belong in Neverland.

LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD

"Red, What are you doing?"

Red shut the laptop off and turned to her mother. "Nothing, mom. Just doing some homework."

"I hope that's all it was. I don't want you getting hooked on social media, or talking to strangers online. It's a dangerous place and you're still too young to know your way around it. Is that clear?"

"Yes mom."

Jared Wolfe: "Hello Red. What took you so long to come online?"

Red: "hi! sorry, mom was lecturing me about not talking 2 strangers online. LOL." Jared Wolfe: "But we're not strangers any more, are we? We're good friends now. I feel like I've known you for a long time" Red: "yeah but moms don't get that. anyway, you're right. although you know more about me than i do about you. that's so unfair!"

Jared Wolfe: "We'll have to fix that. Why don't we meet tomorrow? Come on, I've been asking for too long. I have so much fun with you online, it'll be amazing to spend time with you in person"

Red: "Aww, i think so too! but i have to go to my granny's tomorrow."

Jared Wolfe: "You should stop to get her

some flowers. Why don't I meet you there and walk you to your granny's?"

Red: "sure! Omg. So excited!"

The next morning, Red left home with jitters in her stomach. Her excitement dimmed, however, once she met Jared. He was a lot older than she'd expected, and something about him made her uncomfortable. Maybe it was the way his eyes lingered over her or the way he kept touching her shoulders. She insisted she was getting late and started walking towards her grandmother's house.

It was when he grabbed her by the wrist that she noticed the mania in his eyes. Not a friend. Definitely not a friend. Panic rose up her throat as she let out a momentary scream before he clamped a handkerchief over her mouth. He started to drag her away until –

Another pair of hands flung her away from the animal's grasp.

"Are you okay?" asked the construction worker who had run over just in time. Panting, she knelt on the ground, seeing her almost-captor running away in side-vision.

"Yes. Th-thank you," she gasped. "I should've listened to mom."