

The Thorny Thicket

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“The Red Shoes”

The shoes sparkled and the gleam caught Karen’s eye. She turned from the clergyman as he ranted about damnation and the temptations that Christ had endured. She just couldn’t bring herself to care when she had something of such magnificent beauty right before her. Karen twisted and turned her foot this way and that so the shoes would catch all of the light pouring in from the stained-glass windows. Her mind wandered, venturing out of the dusty old church and down the road. It wandered out into the fields and even farther.

The shoes were crafted out of the finest silk and leather. No matter how often Karen wore them or where she went the shoes never showed a speck of dirt. It was almost as if they were illuminated by some internal light, glowing and sparkling well into the darkest of nights. Karen thought the shoes might contain some sort of magic. She had never seen anything like them.

Sunday after Sunday, Karen continued to wear the shoes to church. As soon as the sermon turned to the dangerous temptations of the material world, Karen’s mind would flit off to some other corner of the town. She imagined purchasing a dress of flaming red scarlet to complement her shoes. She imagined dancing in various pubs, driving the men wild with lust and filling the women with jealousy. She imagined living on her own away from the judging eyes of the rich old woman.

Karen had not grown up in possession of these shoes or living with the woman that she now called mother. She had grown up begging in the streets. Her real mother had only provided rags to cover her body and couldn't afford shoes for her feet. Karen was forced to wander the town, crossing rough stones and streets. In the winter Karen had been forced to wear horrid wooden shoes that chafed and left her feet blistered, swollen, and red. Year after year Karen grew to resent her mother, until finally the woman fell ill with a mysterious disease.

Karen told her woeful tale to the old shoemaker's wife. The kind woman took pity on the eight-year-old girl. She used old pieces of red cloth and scraps that she could find. The day that the old woman finished the shoes was the same day that Karen's mother died. The red shoes were far too gaudy to be appropriate for mourning, but they were all Karen had so she was forced to wear them. All through the funeral she couldn't help but stare at her feet and marvel at how nice it felt to wear real shoes.

As the funeral drew to a close a large carriage pulled by the most magnificent white horses passed by. A woman with snow-white hair and a large upturned nose poked her head out of the window. Around her neck the woman wore many heavy chain of gold and diamonds. Her fingers were encrusted with rings and jewels. Even the carriage had been covered in gold and inlaid with silver. She shouted at the clergyman.

“Sir! What will you do with that child? Look at her rags. She isn’t fit for anywhere other than an orphanage.” The woman waved her arm towards Karen, her many bracelets clacking together. “I have longed for a daughter of my own. Give her to me and I will raise her into a proper young woman. Much better than any orphanage ever could.”

The clergyman seeing no other option than the poor house decided to turn Karen over to the extravagant woman. This woman had a reputation as being not only extremely wealthy but also exceedingly pious and devoted to the church. The old woman didn’t have any children of her own and she wished with all her heart to impart the proper wisdom and behavior to a child before she left this world. She saw it as her God given responsibility.

The clergyman explained that Karen was going to go live with this woman. Karen’s eyes flitted from her shoes, which she had been continuously staring at, and the woman sitting in her golden bejeweled carriage. There had to be a link between the two, she thought.

Karen grew up under the old woman’s tutelage - never allowed to go anywhere without supervision, never allowed to buy anything, she wasn’t even supposed to converse with men. Often Karen thought she would have been better off at an orphanage where she could at least make her own decisions.. Every Sunday the two of them would go to church. They sat in the front pew and the old woman

made sure that she and Karen prayed and sang the loudest that they could.

Eventually it became time for Karen to be confirmed into the church.

“Karen, dear, you may take this money and purchase two new dresses and a pair of shoes to match them. But only buy black leather shoes for it would be improper to wear any other.” The old woman placed three gold coins into Karen’s palm. The old woman had grown too old and her vision was too impaired for her to accompany Karen out. Karen flitted around town, flaunting her newfound freedom. She waved at all the boys around town and made her way to the shoemaker’s house. In the window stood a beautiful pair of leather shoes. They shone like a rubies and reminded Karen of the shoes that the kind shoemaker’s wife had given her years before. She could not tear her eyes away from the shoes. She had to have them. She lusted after them as if she had never wanted anything else in her life.

After her purchases were finished and she returned to the dreary home of the old woman, Karen modeled her dress and shoes for confirmation. The old woman peered down at Karen’s feet.

“Those shoes,” she started, “are they made of shiny leather? They shine so that even my old eyes can tell how finely crafted they are.”

The day of her confirmation Karen dressed in her finest dress and placed the red shoes upon her feet. She and the old woman paraded down the streets, drawing all eyes toward them. The old woman wanted the town to know what a fine job she

had done transforming such a wayward child into what she believed to be a pious protégé. Karen wanted the town to note the red shoes; she was drawn to them and felt immensely important while she was wearing them. They filled her head with all sorts of thoughts and she couldn't resist. As they approached the church, Karen imagined that even the statues of ancient saints turned their heads to look upon to her beauty. As she spoke her vows and agreed to the baptism and listened to the sermon, her mind was filled with thoughts about the shoes. She stared down at them the entire ceremony and smiled to herself.

Thus Karen came to own the red shoes and wore them week after week to church. While the rest of the congregation was getting educated about Christian charity, Karen could only think of her shoes and the next time that she would get to wear them.

"Dear me, what fine red dancing shoes those are!" One of the other churchgoers exclaimed after the ceremony when they were all pouring out of the church doors. Karen could not resist the compliment and extended her foot and danced two or three steps of her favorite jig. The old woman whipped around.

"Karen!" The old woman bellowed. "Child! I told you specifically to get only plain black shoes. I asked you what you had purchased when you returned and you said that you got *plain black shoes*. But no, now this man here so kindly informs me that you are wearing sinful red shoes. I had my suspicions about you, girl. But you

explained that the shoes shone like that because you cared for them so much and you wanted to look well dressed for church.”

Karen looked up at the old woman and her eyes filled with tears. She didn't want to disappoint this woman, but at the same time she was never allowed to do anything she wanted. Karen stared and stared but couldn't resist the next few steps in the jig. She pressed her hands hard into her thighs but her legs continued to dance. It was as if the shoes were controlling her legs. Karen was too shocked to scream out and she danced her way down from the church and down the lane towards her house. The clergyman sprinted after Karen, hoping to stop her, and wrestled her to the ground. A farmer clamped his arms around her legs, but they kept on thrashing. Her whole body wanted to dance. She convulsed on the ground as the church congregation sat and watched her. They soon linked hands and lead by the priest began to pray for Karen's soul for they thought that she was possessed by a demon. The men ripped off Karen's stockings and tried to unlace the shoes, but they held fast. With the clergyman holding her down, the farmer was able to pry the red shoes off of Karen's feet. They quickly threw the shoes into a burlap sack and carried the unconscious Karen to the old woman's carriage.

The shoes were locked away in a glass cabinet and life resumed its normal routine for Karen. But she could not help but stare at the shoes every time she passed by. The old woman, who by now had become ancient, fell ill and could not rise from her bed, not even for her daily prayers. Karen snuck into the woman's

room one night as she dozed and lifted the pillow from beneath her head. The old woman didn't trust Karen and had taken to sleeping with the key to the glass cabinet under her pillow. Karen snatched the key from the woman's bed and rushed to the cabinet.

The shoes called out to her. She pushed the key into the lock and opened the door silently. Carefully, she took the shoes down and laced them onto her feet. She stepped, once, twice, and then suddenly broke out into a dance. If she tried to go left, the shoes would make her dance to the right. If she wanted to move into a room, the shoes would carry her to a different portion of the house. She danced out the door and into the street. She danced down the street and off into the moonlight.

Karen danced and reeled around the moors and countryside all through the night. Her only rest came when her foot became lodged in a small hole. Her leg, her entire body continued to convulse with the beat of the dance but she was able to remain seated for a bit. Karen reached down and ripped at the shoes. The laces were steadfast, the knot held up under her attack. Her fingernails cracked as she dug at the slick red leather. Karen ripped her stockings off, but still the shoes held tight to her feet.

After seven days the crazed dancing finally brought her to the churchyard, past the parsonage and down into the graveyard. She wished that she could join the dead in their endless rest but there was no peace for Karen.

She peered up at what she thought was a statue. An angel draped in a pure white robe, from his shoulder sprouted two enormous wings that swept down to the ground. His face was etched with lines of worry and his mouth was set in a way that conveyed judgment upon the damned. His right hand clutched the hilt of a huge broadsword that would strike fear into any who saw it. The statue, or what Karen had thought was a statue, shifted with a flutter of his wings and leveled the sword with Karen's heart.

"Dance! All your mind could think of was dancing. Dancing and those red shoes. You ignored the Lord, you let your soul fall to the temptations of shoes! Dance you shall in your little red shoes until you are pale and cold, until your skins falls from your bones. Dance from door to door so that wicked little children will learn from your horrible mistakes."

Karen cried out for mercy, but the stern angel just beat his wings three times and sent Karen off dancing again. She whirled and tapped her way out of the churchyard, down the highways and byways, through fields and forests, and finally back into the town. She longed to return home to the old woman. Karen no longer scorned her rules and wished to thank her for trying to instill a sense of right and wrong. But as Karen neared the familiar house she heard much sobbing. The door was flung open and the sound of a hymn issued out from the depths of the house. The clergy led a small procession out of the house. Each member sobbed piteously, for they had all known the piety of the old woman, as they carried a coffin covered

with flowers out of the house. It was in that instant that Karen knew that she had been completely forsaken by God and by all good things in the world. She was completely alone. Alone with her red dancing shoes for all eternity.

Karen danced for days, only eating what she could snatch off of carts and the street as she danced by. She could only drink the rain that fell from the sky and the dew that collected in the mornings. It was during these days that Karen decided to repent her sins. She wept continuously and cried out for God to forgive her. She danced across meadows and through the woods until she was bruised and scratched all over. Her magnificent clothing had been reduced to rags. She danced up to a small hut, set aside from the rest of town. Karen knew that this was where the executioner lived. A stench wafted from the house and the air seemed just a bit heavier in this area. Karen tentatively reached out a finger and tapped at the window.

“Sir! Help, please. Come out and help me!”

“Girl, do you even know who I am? I kill people. I chop off the heads of the wicked. Those who have to pay for their sins visit me. Look! I am grumpy and my axe blade seems to want to see some action.” The burly man called out through the window. But Karen danced forward and knocked even louder.

“Don’t cut off my head! If you did, I wouldn’t be able to repent my sins. I’ve been terribly wicked and I’m so sorry. I need people to see how sorry I am. Please

cut my feet off. Cut them off and remove these cursed shoes!" The executioner opened his door and allowed Karen to explain her long dire story. She explained about her childhood and the old lady, the shoes and the dancing, her pride and disobedience, and finally the wretched state of her current existence.

The executioner brought the axe down with all his burly might, but even that was not enough to break the unholy power of the shoes. He grunted and swung again. This time the axe cut through skin, muscle and tendon, it shattered bone. Finally the blade lodged itself into the wood block behind Karen's feet. The deed was done. Her feet dropped from the block onto the ground where they landed with a plop. Blood poured from the ankles and Karen gasped as she saw the feet begin to twitch and tap out the beginnings of a jig. She bent her head and sobbed; she wondered if the dancing curse would ever come to an end. Her dainty little feet clad in the blood red shoes danced out of the executioner's hut and down the road, over fields, and into the distance.

The executioner bandaged poor Karen's legs and set about on another project. For days Karen refused to get out of bed and sobbed continuously all while the executioner toiled away. He carved out two wooden feet, almost as delicate as Karen's real feet, and fastened them to the young girl's ankles. Throughout his carving he hummed the hymn that he so often heard before an execution.

When she heard the music Karen perked up, "Sir, what is that you are singing?"

“A hymn that sinners sing for forgiveness. I don’t know the words but I can teach you the tune.” So the executioner set about crafting crutches for Karen and teaching her the song of forgiveness. After seven days of work and singing Karen decided that she was finally ready to set out.

“I have suffered enough for the red shoes. I will go to the church so that people can see just how much I have changed.”

She hobbled along the path away from the small hut and limped all the way to the church. Karen traveled for many hours, finally reaching the church. As she grasped the door handle a streak of color caught her eye. She stared down at the ground but all she saw was dirt and grass. Another flash of red. Karen spun around and there were her own two feet, still clad in the red shoes, dancing before her. Karen screamed, stumbling on top of the cursed dancing feet. She ripped out her hair with frustration and fear. If she entered the church now the feet would just follow her and everyone would see her sin. Karen fled into the woods surrounding the church and spent the next week weeping and praying. She refused to eat or drink anything other than water. Karen walked by the church everyday but when she did the red shoes would be there dancing away in front of the door, mocking her. Karen lunged at the feet and beat them with her crutch. As she smashed them into the ground the silk and leather split and blood poured out from the cracks and yet they still danced.

Karen spent another seven days praying and punishing herself for her sins. Weakened by the long days without food and from the bitter tears that she had shed, Karen was barely able to crawl to the church. She pulled herself along the path to the door. As her hand reached forward it brushed past a foot, Karen cried out afraid that it would be the damned red shoes that had brought her so much woe and caused her to shed so many tears. Instead she found herself staring at golden sandals; the light radiating from them hurt her eyes. Karen peered up and saw that it was the angel that had appeared to her previously. His white robes fluttered in the breeze and in his right hand he clutched a branch of green wood with brilliant, bright roses all in bloom. He smiled and dipped his hand, brushing the blooms against Karen's forehead. She felt an odd sensation. It was as if she was sitting in that front pew in the church. It felt like she was singing as loudly as she could. She could see the priest giving his sermon; she could feel the thrum and pulse of the organ as hymns were sung. Karen could even feel herself sitting in the pews and felt that it was right that she was there. She gazed up into the beautiful face of the angel and he nodded at her and lifted the branch away.

Karen's lips moved and parted into a smile as her head slumped forward. Her body shivered and shuddered as her heart burst and her soul flew up with the sunlight. She danced with bare feet, she flitted through the gates of Heaven and went to link arms with her departed mother and the old woman. They danced and a smile spread across Karen's face.

“Little Red Riding Hood”

i.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I ate them. So what? Look. It's what wolves do. We eat things. We are scary and we like meat so we eat stuff. We aren't cute and cuddly. She should have known I was going to eat her. But then again I've heard that humans are pretty dumb. So I was out hunting, trying to find some squirrel or rabbit or other snack, when I see this girl bouncing her way down the path. A red cloak wrapped around her, a wooden basket hanging from her shoulder. Of course, I crept closer and closer, staying hidden in the woods. I had never eaten a girl before. Sure, I had eaten plenty of young boys cause they wandered into the woods regularly. But my friends had told me that little girls are the best. They don't have to work and they usually just sit around doing nothing so they are so much more tender and tasty. The basket, I saw when I got close enough, contained bread and pastries and a huge bottle of wine. My mouth watered. I could definitely go for a meal of little girl washed down with some wine.

She shouldn't have even been there. Humans don't belong in the forest. They don't respect our ways. Things here work without them. We get along just fine, actually we were better off before they showed up. They kill the rabbits for their

own stews and then get upset when we pick off their sheep. Quid pro quo, I say, this for that. You eat our food and leave us hungry, we'll just eat yours.

So there I was, a big, bad, starving wolf and what do I see but a plump, naïve young girl, skipping through the dark forest, carrying food. What'd you expect I would do? I leapt out from the bushes and struck up a conversation with the pretty, little girl. My initial plan was to just gobble her up on the spot but after she saw me, she greeted me and started talking.

She explained that she was taking the basket (she indicated the basket swinging from the crook in her arm) to her grandmother, who lived in a tiny little cottage in the middle of the woods. I knew the place. It was one of the first houses built in the forest, the first sign that the area was going downhill. Poor Granny was on her deathbed, not even strong enough to make her own food. My stomach gurgled as I processed this information.

Here's the law of the forest. If you're old, young, injured, lame, dumb, slow, fat, confused, etc, etc, you're gonna get eaten. That's just how things happen. Survival of the fittest, baby, and this wolf is one fit dude. Except for the whole starving part. But seriously, if you're going to live in the forest then you have to follow the rules. Granny equals old. Old equals an easy meal. I just couldn't resist. Plus these humans always seem to keep their houses stocked full of food.

I needed to figure out a way to get to the house before the little girl did. I took a gamble, hoping that she was as dim as I had heard human girls normally are. I remembered that not too far, but far enough, off the path ahead is a small field of wildflowers. Girls like flowers, right? So I tell her that it would perk her granny up if she brought some flowers to her. (I don't understand the human custom of giving flowers, but hey, if it works then go with it). I'm shocked. She falls for it; off she goes and off go I.

ii.

A knock on the door. I don't even get up to answer it. Heavens! I can't have guests now. I'm sick! I haven't gotten my hair done in over a week and the curls are all limp and silly now. This goes against my one rule in life. I always have to look my best. What if I were to just drop dead?! I wouldn't want someone to stumble across my body and have my hair look a mess. No, that wouldn't be acceptable at all. I'm not even dressed! I call out, weakly, to tell the person to come back, that I am unwell and not fit to take visitors. But they just keep on knocking. Maybe I wasn't loud enough. I try calling out again, but my voice is too weak from hacking, coughing, and wheezing.

Climbing out of bed is difficult, but I manage to do so and shuffle to the door. Halfway across the room I have to stop, prop myself against a table, and wheeze. My nightgown is loose so I pull it around me tightly. Lord knows I can't be indecent, even if I'm don't plan on seeing anyone today. I cinch the belt and continue towards

"Excuse me, stranger, but I am not well, not dressed, and not accepting visitors." I called out from behind the door. I don't dare open the door; an honorable lady can never be too safe.

“Oh, I am so sorry madam. I ran into your granddaughter in the forest. Her mother heard that you were feeling ill and she sent Little Red to bring you a basket of food and wine.”

I ease the door open, it creaks on its hinges. The traveler, who supposedly carries food and medicine from my own family stands with his back to the door. A tattered cape is wrapped around his shoulders. I can't see his hands but his arms are freakishly hairy, covered in thick, coarse hair. He turns towards me and I cover my mouth with a shaky hand. This thing isn't a man but a wolf. A lean, wild creature whose eyes are filled with a burning rage and hunger. He snarls at me and leaps across the threshold. I stumble back and his jaws latch onto my leg. He drags me towards him, his teeth digging into my flesh. I wheeze out a scream as he gobbles me down.

iii.

I know things now. I've had time to sit here and to think. You know, sitting around in a wolf's stomach, waiting to be digested gives you plenty of time to realize all that has gone wrong in your life. In fact, it kind of forces you to face those problems, since you know you will be dead in a little bit.

Yeah, yeah, I know what you'll say to me. You'll say "Little Red, just look at him. Couldn't you tell that he was dangerous? How would you ever mistake him for your little ol' granny?"

It wasn't so much that I couldn't tell them apart. I would have been able to if I had actually really looked at them, or if I really cared what my grandmother looked like. I hadn't seen her in years and was not too happy about having to give up my day to take food to her in the middle of that stupid forest. Mom knows that I absolutely hate the forest, I don't like spiders, or worms, or trees. They freak me out! But my stupid mom told me that I needed to go bond with my granny. Apparently she's dying or something like that. Like I care! I just wanted to go into town and hang out with my friends and stare at all of the peasant boys. They were supposed to be bringing their crops in to the market. We totally enjoy staring at them and picking out which would make the best husbands. It's our favorite thing to do.

So instead of staring at hot young hunks, I was forced to walk all the way to my grandmother's house to take her some stupid bread and cakes and a bottle of dumb wine. I am walking through the forest when this sweet puppy dog thing comes up to me. He looks nice enough so I say hi and he asks me what on earth would bring me out to the middle of the forest. I explain that my granny is sick and that I have to bring food to her. The animal points out a field of flowers and suggests that I pick some, I decide to do that, but not for my grandmother. My plan is to get some flowers, deliver the food, and then back into town just in time to see the boys leaving the market. I am going to give the flowers to this one boy that I have had my eye on for quite some time.

I collect the flowers and then follow the path on to the cottage. Granny is tucked into bed, the covers pulled up to cover most of her face and a nightcap pulled down over her ears. The room was dark and I waltzed in and set the basket on the table.

"Hello Granny. I brought you some food. Not sure if you remember me, but mom sent me." The old woman doesn't even answer but just grunts. She shifts in bed and one of her hands appears. It is hairy and I think it is just a trick of the darkness. I step closer to her.

"God, Granny, your eyes seem really big." I stare at her and she explains something about how she just wants to see me cause it has been so long.

Her voice is scratchy and strangely deep. I don't even care but I guess it is because she has been so sick. I shift my gaze to her ears, they are also really large.

"What big ears you have." Bla bla bla she explains something about wanting to hear me, but I really don't care. I just want to get out of there and back to the town with my friends.

"Well, hope you feel better. There's some bread and wine on the table. Eat it when you feel like it. See you later." I stumble forward through the gloom of the room and lean forward to give her a hug. I pat her back once and realize that she feels weird, not quite like a person. I stare closer at her as I back up. A candle sits on the bedside table so I quickly strike a match and light it.

Imagine my surprise! It wasn't my granny but that stupid wolf that I talked to in the forest. He smiles at me sadistically as he pounces on top of me. I can smell the stench of his breath as he pants on top of me. His breath is sickly sweet, a strange mixture of berries, rotting woodland creatures, and the occasional waft of the smell of old people. The wolf opens his mouth wide, wrapping it around my head and shoulders and then he gobbles me down.

So this is how I came to realize that maybe hunting boys might not be the best way to pass time. Maybe I should care about things like paying attention and taking care of family. If I had known what my grandmother looked like I wouldn't have gotten close enough for this dumb wolf to eat me. So now I'm just

sitting around inside his stomach, waiting to die. I knew I hated the forest for some reason. Damn animals, damn trees.

iii.

Dude, there I was, walking home after a long day of chopping wood. I'm carrying my axe and my plaid flannel shirt is open just a bit to show off my chest hair, gotta look good for the ladies. Anyway, I am walking through the forest with my axe when I pass by this little cottage. I stare in the window. A wolf lounges lazily on the small bed, swigging from a bottle of wine. A small feminine shoe dangles from his mouth. That bastard! He ate whoever lived in this cottage.

As a man, it's my duty to save people even when they don't want my help. Plus for all I know that punk ass wolf could have eaten some bodacious girl. I shoulder the door open and race across the room to the bed. The wolf barely has time to raise his head before I am on him. He snarls and snaps at me before backing into the corner and he starts to speak. I don't give him time to explain. He clearly has done something heinous.

A hard uppercut to the chin knocks the wolf unconscious. My muscles ripple and gleam in the late dusk as I swing my axe at his stomach. Fur and skin and muscle split open with a wet splashing sound. Blood and fluid rush out and spill onto the floor. I get a little excited at all of this, it's pretty damn cool. An old woman, dressed

in a dingy nightshirt, tumbles out onto the floor. She claws at her face, sputtering and coughing and pulling away the slime, blood, and gore that have stuck to her face.

After the woman pulls herself free from the wolf's stomach, a rather large red ball falls onto the floor. The ball wiggles and thrashes, a hand pokes out here, a leg kicks free there. Finally a girl emerges. I keep staring hoping that it will be some hot chick that will be impressed that I just cut her out of the stomach of a wolf. And of course, once she looks at me she won't be able to resist. Come on, dude, I am so hot. Just look at this bloody axe and my bulging muscles. I'm a total babe magnet.

I square my feet, sling the ax over my shoulder and flex my muscles.

"Excuse me, miss, do you need any help there?" The girl brushes her hair away from her eyes, which are moist with wolf-y stomach juices. I stare down at her and then let the ax fall to my side and I slump a little.

Damn it! She's just a little bratty girl. No doubt this woman's granddaughter. I help her up and she starts to thank me, but I cut her off. My job here is done, I inform her. I leave out the part about thinking that she was going to be some knockout babe who would sleep with me. I flash them a smile and walk out the door, leaving them to deal with the wolf's carcass.

Just my luck, probably not gonna get any action tonight. I should've just kept going and ignored that damn wolf. Just kept on walking and gone to the tavern where I could pick up that busty barmaid, she kept staring at me last week. Hey! I

can tell her all about this. Bet she will be impressed and come home with me. Dude, even if she doesn't find my wolf crushing skills to be impressive, at least I got to cut something open. That was pretty damn awesome.

“Rumpelstiltskin”

On the first night she cursed her father. She sat, head bent over the spinning wheel, tears streaming down her face. How was she supposed to spin all this straw into gold? She didn't even know how to do it. Her father, that stupid man, had gotten her into this mess. He had paraded around town announcing to any who would listen that his daughter, his blessed daughter, was able to spin straw into gold. She didn't know how to spin gold, let alone transform wool into a single thread. Her father berated her every day, telling her that if only she was a bit more pretty that she would be able to marry a prince and bring fortune to the family, telling her how disappointed he was to have a daughter who could do nothing to make him famous. He only wished for people to know his name, to be able to hear his name tripping off the tongues of the townspeople. His desire to be well known had led him to lie to the King and everyone he saw on his way to the palace. Now she was locked in a damp, cramped cell full of molding straw with the instruction to turn all of it into gold or else she would die.

Her tears dripped from the tip of her nose onto the spindle and then slid down onto the straw. It glistened in the dim light streaming in from the small window. Her sobs turned to sighs and she set about feeding straw into the spinning wheel. She turned the wheel with all her strength and hoped for the best. She glanced up at the spindle, hoping against hope that somehow the straw had been

turned into gold. All that remained was a strand of straw that had been mashed and that flopped off of the spindle.

The young girl flung herself to the floor and sobbed hideously. With a thunderous crack the door flew open and before her stood the strangest creature she had ever seen. An ancient man with a beard that flowed down past his feet and curled on the floor at his side. He was as bent and gnarly as the tree that the girl could see from the window. He wore a small green vest that barely covered his sagging belly. The vest was covered in jewels of all shapes and colors

“Good evening, little miss. Why are you crying so?”

“I’m supposed to spin that straw into gold and I have no idea how to do it,” she cried.

“Well, what will you give me if I do it for you?”

“My necklace,” she said as she handed him the simple trinket that she had worn since childhood.

The creature pushed the girl out of the way and straddled the spinning wheel. He grabbed a handful of straw and whir, whirl, whirl the wheel spun. Suddenly the bobbin was collecting the finest golden thread the girl had ever seen. The thing worked and worked till dawn, steam pouring up from the wheel as he spun the straw around and around. As soon as he finished he patted the girl on the head and stepped out the door, which locked behind him. As the sun rose above the window in her cell, the door unlocked and in stepped the king.

On the second night she cursed the King. He had returned the next morning, expecting to kill this poor peasant girl but instead he found the cell overflowing with gold filament. As he eyed his prize, the King rubbed his hands together and declared that the girl be moved to a new, larger cell. He told her that he couldn't quite believe her gift just yet and that she needed to prove herself one more time.

The poor peasant girl tried to do what the mysterious man had done. She spun the wheel three times, whir, whirl, and whir, but nothing happened. All that appeared before her was more straw. She sighed in desperation and began to cry. As it had the night before the door to the girl's cell was flung open and there stood that odd creature. This night he demanded the ring given to her by her father.

The next morning the exhausted girl was moved to yet another room. This time the King hung a noose from the ceiling to remind the girl of what was at stake. He also informed her that if she were able to turn this room of old straw into gold that he would take her to be his Queen and that she would rule over the land. When she was alone the girl cradled her head in her hands and released a long sigh. She had already given away her necklace and her ring, what else could she offer to the magic little man?

On that night she cursed that damned goblin of a man. He knew that she had to give into any of his demands. He knew that if he did this favor for her again that she would become Queen. She wished that she had refused his help on the first night. She had absolutely no desire to carry on this sham or to get married to the old

King. What would the King do if he learned that she wasn't the one who had actually created all the gold?

He licked his lips and peered her over.

"Promise to give me your first child after you become queen." The creature stooped and caressed the girl's dress. "Give me your child and I will save your life once more."

The girl dabbed at her eyes, feeling helpless. She couldn't easily refuse this creature, he had already saved her twice before and this was the final task. She raised her head and stared at the man. Her eyes blazed with a new found hatred for him and for her father and for the King. She would agree to his demand. But she knew that one day she would make them all pay. She just knew she would.

Once again the old King returned in the morning. He was only slightly shocked to see that all the straw had been turned into gold thread, just as it had the previous two nights. He clapped his hands with glee and swept the girl up with one arm. She stared up into his wrinkled face and attempted a smile. She hated him for putting her through three nights of hell and for forcing her to accept deals from that awful little man.

The girl spent years plotting how she would take revenge. Two years into their marriage, the queen gave birth to a beautiful young son. She doted on her son, giving him everything that a child could want. She felt her heart swell with joy whenever she looked at her child.

But she had made that bargain and years later the stooped creature reappeared in the throne room. She had been laughing and tossing a ball back and forth with her son when the doors were flung open and in strode that thing, his beard wrapped around his waist and a wide brimmed hat sitting upon his head.

The queen thought back to those nights where she had been locked in various cells and told to spin the straw into gold. She remembered how that horribly crooked little creature had randomly shown up and demanded payment to help her. She remembered how she had no way to refuse. It was either give in to his demands or be killed by the King. And now that creature has returned to demand his final payment, she thought. She knew that he thought he had her backed into a corner. But he had no idea that she went to great lengths preparing for this moment. She had plotted ever since that final night in a cell. That night where he demanded to take her firstborn child. The girl, angered by his many demands, struck a bargain with the creature on that night. She would hand over her child, but only if she was unable to guess his name when he came to claim his prize. The thing, sure that no one would ever discover his true name, quickly agreed to the proposition. At the time she didn't know what his plans were for the child, she thought he was probably going to devour it or something equally dastardly, but she did know that she was not going to let that take place.

“Hand him over. I gave you years to spend with him and now the child is mine. You agreed all those years ago and you knew this day was coming.” The monster marched forward, waving his hands wildly at the young boy. Her son cowered and his lip trembled. He clung to the hem of her dress. She strode from the throne and stood before the disgusting creature. The skin on his hands was cracked and his beard was wrapped around his waist so it wouldn’t tangle his feet.

“Yes, you’re right. I knew that this was coming. But did you forget the rest of the bargain?”

The creature tilted his head to the side and pondered the queen’s words.

“You promised to give me four guesses to figure out your name. If I guess correctly then I will be free from our bargain and my child will stay mine.” She said.

“Yes, yes, if you must, then go ahead. You will never figure my name out. No one knows it. Even I have almost forgotten it many times.” He stood back and waited for the queen to waste her guesses.

“Is your name Conrad?”

“No.”

She paused. “Is your name Harry?”

“No.”

“Your name must be Sheepshanks Crookshanks Spindleshanks!” The queen exclaimed and a brief smile flashed across her face. She would win this game.

“Wrong! And now you only have one guess left, you foolish girl!”

As queen the girl had used her royal power to send foot soldiers to scour the entire kingdom. She wanted them to find this creepy creature that had tried to take advantage of her. On that final night the girl had decided that she would not sit idly by and be a pawn. The first year the soldiers returned and had nothing to report. They searched every forest, cave, and lake but could find no trace of the creature that she had described. Years passed and still no sighting of the creature. Finally one brave soldier ventured out further than before, he went to a mountain where the sun refused to shine and where no animal would dare to set foot. It was on that mountain that the soldier had spied a small wooden hut. Before the hut there was a raging fire and a stooped dwarf with a long scraggly beard danced. The creature sang:

“Tomorrow I brew, today I bake
and then the child away I’ll take
for little knows my royal dame
that Rumepelstiltskin is my name!”

The soldier returned to the queen and told his story. He didn’t know if this was the creature that she was looking for but she clapped him on the back and declared that he be set up with a huge estate. This soldier had provided her with the information that she would need to save her child’s life.

The queen leaned forward so she was nose to nose with the stooped man. She frowned, wanting him to believe that he had won.

“Perhaps...”

“Yes? Your last guess, miss.”

“I think that maybe your name is Rumpelstiltskin.” She reached out and poked the wart-covered nose before returning to the throne.

Rumpelstiltskin opened and closed his mouth several times.

“B-but how? No one knows my name!” He shrieked.

The queen laughed. “Oh, I have my ways.”

Rumpelstiltskin’s face turned beet red and he screamed and screamed and screamed. He couldn’t believe that he had been beaten at his own game. No one had ever discovered his name. She must have cheated somehow. With one more soul splitting scream Rumpelstiltskin stamped his foot down with as much force as he could conjure up. The tile of the throne room floor shattered and broke away to expose the rock underneath. The rock in turn split open as Rumpelstiltskin’s foot drove forward. He tugged at it but it was stuck firm. He pulled and pulled and sweat dripped from his long nose, but his foot would not budge. His entire leg all the way up to his waist disappeared into the chasm that he had created. Rumpelstiltskin gazed up at the queen with hate-filled eyes. He hated her for beating him.

“You’ve cheated! Some demon told you my name. You struck a deal with a demon. You can’t have beaten me.”

Rumpelstiltskin was so angry and embarrassed. He just wanted to leave the palace and return to his cottage. He seized the leg that was not stuck in the earth

and pulled. He continued pulling until he heard the fabric of his pants split and he began to hear his bones break. Yet he kept pulling and pulling until his skin cracked and blood poured out. He refused to let himself be beaten, especially by a simple peasant girl. She should never have been able to figure out his name.

Rumpelstiltskin cried out and with his last gasp he tore himself in two.

The queen stared down at the two halves of the little man. Blood and shards of bone and rock covered the floor. She covered her son's eyes but continued to stare and laugh. She had her revenge.

“Cinderella”

As the cane struck her arm, the rough metal cap scraped against her skin. A small river of blood contrasted against the pale white of the girl’s arm. She wiped hurriedly, smearing the blood with the rag that she clutched in her hand. She flinched, expecting another blow or two, but none came. Her stepmother stood over her, tossing the cane from hand to hand. The woman standing above her wore only a nightgown, but her face was already plastered with powder and rouge. Her ruby red lips narrowed into a thin line and she peered down her hooked nose at the girl.

“Now, Cinderella, what did I tell you about this house? I told you, I know I told you, that we needed the hearth cleaned and the kitchen swept and the dishes washed and that the chickens needed feeding. This house has to be spotless by tonight! We’re having company over to prepare for the ball. We are going to figure out how to get Prince Charming to marry one of your stepsisters.”

Cinderella glared up at her, she had only been given these orders half an hour earlier and she had thoroughly scrubbed the dishes and mopped the floor of the dining room.

“Sorry, Stepmother. I’ll get on that right away. I know that the ball is important to you and I will make sure that the house is clean.” Cinderella squeaked, but secretly she dreamed of going to the ball herself.

“You better, Cinderella. You have no idea how much of a burden you are on this family, do you? I married your father and then he died, leaving me in charge of you. I can’t afford to feed you and my own daughters!” Cinderella stopped paying attention because she had heard this speech many times before. Her stepmother thought of herself as some great martyr for even keeping Cinderella around; she could just as easily have sent her off to some orphanage. Cinderella had been tempted to point out that they had been living on her father’s estate and off of his money, but she never managed to speak out.

Cinderella picked up the rag and the bucket of brackish water and set about scrubbing the floor. Her father had always said that she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. But now Cinderella stared at her reflection in the dirty water. Her features distorted by the dirt and dust and sweat that clung to her face. Her hair hung down in limp waves of yellow, unwashed for days. But now Father is gone, Cinderella thought, and no one will ever think of me as being beautiful. She threw the rag across the room. She hated the house and her life because it contained too many memories. The years of abuse and neglect had taught Cinderella that it was foolish to hope and yet she continued to do just that. Hope.

It was her hope that she would be able to attend the royal ball. The King and Queen hosted one every single year but this year was different. This was the year that Prince Charming, the most handsome man in the whole kingdom would find a wife. It had been announced that the Prince would pick a bride from all of the girls who showed up at the ball. He would dance with each girl and then at the end of the

night declare who would be the new Princess. Cinderella longed to go to the ball, she longed to dress up and dance her cares away. She went about scrubbing and cleaning the rest of the house.

Cinderella thought back to the few happy years when she only shared the house with her mother and father. But then her mother had fallen ill with some mysterious sickness. Doctors from all over the kingdom came to visit but none could even help the woman. She withered away and her dying wish was to be buried under the tree that grew on the hill overlooking the family's estate. Her father grieved for many years but eventually he decided that Cinderella needed to have a mother in her life. He searched throughout the kingdom and eventually found a woman with two daughters. Cinderella's father thought that it would be wonderful for Cinderella to not only have a mother but also sisters to teach her the ways of the world.

Cinderella remembered the day when that woman and her two horrible daughters had arrived as she threw the breakfast scraps out to the chickens. Her father had pulled her aside and explained that a woman and her two daughters would be coming to live with them. The woman was going to be Cinderella's new mother and the girls, Marguerite and Suzanne, would be her older sisters. Soon a carriage of silver and gold arrived, pulled by two dazzling white horses. Cinderella had been so hopeful, she missed her mother terribly and wanted to have two sisters

to play with. But her hopes fell apart when the door of a carriage swung open and a woman stepped out.

They lived together for a year, Cinderella largely being ignored by her new family. She continued to play in the fields and would visit the tree where her mother was buried to report gossip and drama. Cinderella's stepsisters were jealous of her because her father doted on her endlessly. He would bring home presents for all of them from his trips into town, but Cinderella's was always more magnificent than the presents he gave to his stepdaughters. Suzanne and Marguerite talked about Cinderella behind her back, teasing her mercilessly and plotting various forms of revenge. But they never carried out these plans for they knew that they would be punished severely for teasing their new father's favorite daughter.

Cinderella wiped a tear away from her eye as she thought about her father dying. He slowly withered and wasted away due to the same mysterious illness that had killed her mother. No amount of begging, crying, or medicine would save him. He died when Cinderella was eight years old. This was when things had really changed for Cinderella. Marguerite and Suzanne made up vicious lies about their younger stepsister, that she had forced them to do work for her when her father was alive, that she had pushed them down in the mud, that she stole their toys and broke them on purpose. Of course their mother believed them and punished Cinderella for each and every infraction. During the years when her father was alive, Cinderella had shared a room with her stepsisters, but as soon as he died they kicked her out. They told their mother that she took up too much space in the large room.

Cinderella had been forced to sleep by the hearth for warmth, tending the coals all through the night. For ten years Cinderella had been beaten, abused, and neglected by her stepfamily. Wash the laundry, wash the dishes, scrub the floor, brush their hair, feed the chickens, cook the meals, Cinderella had been forced to do it all.

Cinderella learned to fear her stepmother's wooden cane. She would beat Cinderella if she ever found a spot on a dish or if Cinderella took too long preparing food. Her stepmother believed that Cinderella had been spoiled while her father was alive and that the girl needed to be taught a lesson. She would say "This will give you character and teach you not to be such a lazy brat" as she swung her cane against the young girl's back and shoulders leaving bloody scrapes and bruises.

Ten years without a bed, ten years of servitude, ten years without a proper meal or any relaxation. Cinderella had developed plenty of character, except for one important trait – courage. She never complained and always did as she was asked. She was the good Cinderella, the kind Cinderella, the quiet Cinderella. There had been many times where she could have refused to act or runaway, but she never did. She had stuck around because she thought it was what her father would have wanted her to do. But she had had enough.

After she finished her chores, Cinderella sat by the window and stared out at her favorite tree. She dreamed about the ball and about marrying Prince Charming and escaping her life of scouring dishes and never being allowed to do anything she wanted. Cinderella had never asked her stepmother for anything but she decided

that she would do just that. She knew that four invitations had arrived for the royal ball. She only needed to get permission to go.

Cinderella crept up the stairs to her Stepmother's room.

"Excuse me, Stepmother..." The snoring stopped and the lumpy woman rolled over in bed. Wrinkled hands pushed the eye mask up and bloodshot eyes stared back at Cinderella. Her stepmother raised an eyebrow but didn't bother to open her mouth.

"I...I just wanted to ask you a question. You see –"

"Yes?"

"I know that the Royal Ball is tonight. And I know that I got an invitation to it. So I guess, you know, I just wanted to...I wanted to ask if I could go to the ball with you and Marguerite and Suzanne." Cinderella's voice was slightly louder than a whisper.

"Girl, don't make me laugh! How could *you* go to a royal ball? Just look at yourself. You are always covered in dirt and dust? When was the last time you washed yourself? I've tried to teach you how to be a proper young-lady, but you just refuse to listen. I don't know what to do with you, Cinderella."

"But, Stepmother, I promise that I won't speak to anyone and I will follow behind you all. No one will even know I'm there. I just want to see the palace and the King and Queen and Prince Charming." Cinderella almost swooned when she said his name. She had seen him riding by when she was in the market and had fallen in

love with him. He was perfect. His chiseled jaw, his wavy black hair, his muscular arms and chest. Everything about him was perfect.

“Girl, you don’t even own a dress or shoes for the ball? How would you ever get in?”

“I’ll figure something out! Please, let me know.”

Cinderella continued to beg and plead until her Stepmother couldn’t stand it anymore. She grabbed the bowl of lentil soup that sat by her bed and threw it across the room. The fine china bowl smashed against the fireplace, scattering lentils into the ashes and all across the floor, bouncing here and there.

“I can’t stand the sound of your voice anymore! If you can pick all of the lentils up from the floor in the next two hours, I will give you your invitation to the ball.” She rolled over and buried her face in the pillows.

Over the years of tending to the grounds of the estate and visiting the tree where her mother was buried, Cinderella had learned many things. She had always been fascinated by the different bird songs and had sat out in the fields for hours studying their every sound; she had done this for so long that she learned to communicate with the birds and they learned that they could trust her. Cinderella often called out in bird song and wandered the land with a bird perched on her shoulder as she confided her woes.

Spring was blooming outside of the bedroom, sunlight beamed in through the window and Cinderella could hear the birds tweeting out their different songs. She

stepped to the window and threw it open allowing the scent of fragrant flowers to drift in. She longed to run outside and to dance through the fields of spring flowers with Prince Charming, but instead she was stuck inside in her stepmother's bedroom. She begrudgingly bent down to pick the lentils out of the ashes; she would have done anything to go to that ball and to see Prince Charming.

Cinderella pursed her lips and sang out a lovely birdsong. Within minutes a whole flock of bluebirds and robins and doves appear outside the window. One by one the small birds flew into the bedroom. Cinderella nodded her head towards the fireplace and the lentils and whistled out a few notes.

The birds threw themselves into the fireplace and the ashes and pecked out the beans one by one, depositing them in a neat little pile. Cinderella swept up the beans and placed them into a nearby bowl. Her stepmother rolled back over and stared at Cinderella, anger glinted in her eyes. She hated this girl. She wanted nothing more than to humiliate her. She sat and watched as Cinderella and the birds collected all of the beans. Less than an hour later every single lentil had been collected and Cinderella stood before her stepmother with the full bowl.

“Fine! You can have the damn invitation. But listen to me, Cinderella, you still don't have anything to wear to the ball. Without a dress you won't even be allowed in the palace, let alone allowed to even see Prince Charming. He'd never want to see a girl dressed in rags and covered in dirt.” The invitation lay on the bedside table, so Cinderella's stepmother balled it up and hurled it at the girl. Cinderella clutched it to her chest and rushed out of the room.

She waited for hours and hours until Marguerite and Suzanne and their mother to get dressed and to leave for the ball. They made her lace up their corsets and tease their wigs into elaborate curls and waves. They plastered on pounds and pounds of makeup until finally they didn't even resemble themselves. Cinderella waited until they had loaded themselves into their golden carriage and waited until it had been pulled off to the palace.

Cinderella held her breath as she approached the cupboard under the stairs. It was here that she had hidden her one and only treasure. The dress that Cinderella's mother had worn when she had gotten married. The years had yellowed the white dress but it was still of fine quality. Cinderella had kept it hidden for ten years. Many times she had thought about selling it to buy her own freedom, but a twinge in her heart had stopped her. The bodice was intricately beaded with images of birds and flowers. The skirt flowed about her and rippled with every breeze. As she dressed, she chirped out a song. Doves flew in from every window and settled at her feet. She sang out and the birds understood. They braided her hair and then piled it into an elaborate bun on top of her head. To complete the outfit Cinderella pulled out a box that had been hidden behind the dress. Soon after Cinderella's birth, her mother had purchased a pair of glass slippers from a man who claimed to be a magician. These shoes had been specially molded to fit Cinderella's feet and they magically grew over the years so that they continued to fit her and only her.

Cinderella rushed off to the ball, hoping that she would at least catch a glimpse of Prince Charming.

A twitch played across her face and her lips worked themselves into a smile. She had smiled and giggled and danced at the ball this was the first time in years that she had smiled as herself, as the young girl who had been forced into servitude by her own family. Cinderella heard the moans and groans even though hands and walls and doors muffled them. She crept closer and closer to her stepsisters' bedroom. The door stood slightly ajar and Cinderella pressed her body against the doorframe and slowly peered into the room.

Marguerite sat on a wooden chair in the middle of the room. Her mother stood over her holding a knife from the kitchen. Her sister, Suzanne, stood propped in the corner, covering her astonished mouth with one dainty hand. Marguerite stared down at the floor and at the objects that lay there. A small glass slipper, the one that Cinderella had lost the previous night, and five toes that still wriggled about. The toes danced a final jig as they were drained of all life and blood. At last they stood still and all was quiet except for the small whimpers that escaped from Marguerite's mouth. Cinderella glanced from Marguerite's face to the floor and then up to her foot. Her toes had been hastily hacked off with the kitchen knife. Blood splashed onto the floor from Marguerite's mangled stumps. Some pooled in the bottom of the slipper and the rest oozed down the cracks between the floorboards.

Marguerite paled and her face lost all sign of expression or emotion. She sat and sat and stared at her foot. When she regained control of her voice, Marguerite sputtered and wailed.

“But... but... Mother! You promised me that it would work. You promised it would work. You said ‘Marguerite, your foot is only a little long. Just let me cut off your toes and you can marry Prince Charming.’ You assured me that limping for the rest of my life would be worth it to marry the damn Prince.” Her head drooped and tears began mixing with the large pool of blood.

“I’m sorry, dear, I guess I was wrong. Looks like your foot wasn’t too long after all, it was too wide.”

Suzanne, the younger of the stepsisters, shivered in the corner. Cinderella could tell from the determined gleam in their mother’s eye that Suzanne would be next. Cinderella thought about stopping this odd massacre, Suzanne had always been at least a little nice to her. But just how nice had she really been? Sure, she hadn’t hit Cinderella as hard as her mother or her sister had, but Suzanne had still beaten her. Suzanne had made Cinderella do her bidding for so many years now that Cinderella. She thought it simple. Her stepsisters were finally getting what they deserved.

Their mother shoved Marguerite out of the chair with one hand and snatched at the hem of Suzanne’s dress with the other. Within seconds, Suzanne was in the

chair and Marguerite was sprawled out on the floor. She dragged herself to the bed, propped her back against the edge and stared at her mangled right foot and sobbed hideously.

“Suzanne, dear, you know this is going to hurt, but just think. A little bit of pain and then you can be a princess. You can have whatever you want, do whatever you want and you will have hundreds of servants instead of just that lazy, little Cinderella.” The woman didn’t even bother to clean the blood off the knife which had already started to dry and crust.

Suzanne closed her eyes and pressed her foot into the slipper. The collected blood in toe of the glass slipper squelched as she continued to push. She held her breath and tried to slide her foot in, but then her heel caught on the edge of the shoe. Suzanne gasped and frantically mashed down on her foot. But it was just slightly too big, much like her older sister’s foot. Her mother kissed the back of Suzanne’s head and shushed her. Big, sloppy tears spilled out of Suzanne’s eyes.

The knife dug into the flesh easily and with a quick jerk Suzanne’s mother ripped off her daughter’s heel. Suzanne’s eyes bulged and she screamed in agony but then quickly stopped herself. She shoved her foot back into the glass slipper, still slick with the mixed blood of the sisters. It was a painful fit, but it fit nonetheless. She stood experimentally, wobbling and sobbing. The shoe rubbed up and down against the raw wound. She only managed to take one or two steps and collapsed.

Cinderella barely stopped herself from giggling at the horrific and ridiculous sight. All three women still wore their wigs from the ball the previous night, but the wigs had slid out of place and were perched precariously upon their heads. They had appeared as magnificent creations of pins, jewels, and curls in the moonlight but now in the daylight they looked like demented woodland creatures. Marguerite's face was covered in tears and snot and smeared blood. Suzanne wore an expression of determination and anguish, sweat poured profusely from her forehead and she wiped it away slowly as she steadied herself against the wall with her other hand. Their mother surveyed the room, triumphant. Cinderella wondered how she expected this ruse to work; somehow Prince Charming wouldn't notice that Suzanne had had her heel cut off for the shoe to fit? Cinderella wondered how they could be so completely stupid.

Three knocks from the front door echoed through the house. Prince Charming was impatient. He had searched and searched all day for the mysterious girl who had danced with him all night. She had flirted and flirted, but no matter what he had done she refused to give him her name. He begged her all through the night, but dance after dance she would just toss her hair and giggle. Then at midnight, she had dashed from the ballroom. He had called after her, but she wouldn't stop, so he ran after her. However, she managed to evade him and slipped away from the castle, but not before losing one of her magnificent glass slippers. He had spent all day searching throughout the land. Prince Charming had sent out his

servants to tell all of the ladies of the kingdom to expect a visit from him. He just knew that he would find her, even if he had to have every single woman try on this glass slipper. It would only fit the right girl, he thought. It had to, otherwise how would he find his true love. Now he was at the last house in the kingdom and the sounds coming from inside the house sounded like a cat had been killed. Probably two sisters fitting over me, Prince Charming thought to himself again.

The door swung open and Suzanne wobbled out to the Prince. He stared down at her foot and there fitting snugly on her foot was the glass slipper he had sent in with the mother. He peered at her. She was considerably shorter than the girl he had danced with, and her nose was definitely longer and there was a gap in her teeth that wasn't there before. Her hair was lopsided and her face was white as a sheet.

"Uhm, miss, excuse me, but..." Prince Charming started but then his eyes returned to the foot. His advisors had told him that a slipper so delicate could have only been crafted by magic and would fit only one girl in the kingdom. So this had to be her, she was wearing the slipper. Maybe she had just looked different in the candlelight. Plus he had drunk several glasses of wine before the royal ball. Something just felt off to Prince Charming.

"Darling! I'm so glad you found me. I'm so sorry that I...uh...ran off. I had, um, things to take care of. You know, lady issues." Suzanne smiled through gritted teeth and stepped towards the Prince slowly. She toppled into his arms and he embraced

her, squeezing tightly. Prince Charming was filled with pure joy at the thought of finding his true love, but as he squeezed he noticed that something just felt wrong. The girl the previous evening had been light in his hands; she had carried herself with grace. She would have never fallen into his arms; she would have allowed herself to be swept off her feet. No, this wasn't the girl from the ball. Something was going on! Prince Charming shoved the girl to the ground.

“What’s going on here? You’re not the girl I remember.” He reached down to pull the glass slipper off. As shoe came off it rubbed against the exposed bone at the back of Suzanne’s foot. She screamed as her body convulsed in spasms of agony. The blood that had been trapped in the slipper splashed out onto the ground and Prince Charming’s hands.

“You...what have you done? Where is the girl that this slipper belongs to? Damn it! I demand to see her. This is the last house in the kingdom, so I know she has to be here.”

“But, your majesty, the only other person living here is our serving girl. She’s dressed in nothing but rags. There’s no way that she was at the ball. Yes, she got an invitation but she had nothing to wear. You can’t marry a peasant girl. Yes, Suzanne may not have been the girl that you danced with last night. But, just look at the lengths that she would go to to make you happy. She cut her heel off just to please you! Why don’t you two just talk for a little bit?”

Cinderella lurked just inside and peeked out through the window to catch a glimpse of the man she loved. The door muffled what Prince Charming said but Cinderella could tell that her stepmother didn't like it. The woman spun on her heel, spat onto the ground, and marched towards the door. She flung it open and grabbed Cinderella by the arm. Her long nails dug into Cinderella's soft flesh.

"Don't you dare talk to him. Go out there, curtsey, and don't say a word. He is not going to marry you. You're nothing, you're useless, you can't even clean the house!"

Cinderella snapped. She had finally experienced happiness and she wasn't about to give it up. She had seen the lengths that this woman would go to, but she was willing to go farther.

"Don't even talk to me, woman! I have lived here for ten years being abused by you. I have never complained and you will shut up. Yes, I was at the ball last night and yes, I was the one who danced with Prince Charming. I'm the one he wants to marry." The stepmother swung her hand as if to hit her, but Cinderella was too fast. She pulled back her arm and punched her stepmother in the stomach. The old woman wrinkled down onto the floor and stared up at Cinderella with an intense hatred. She had always been jealous of the girl, who had been born into a loving, wealthy family. She had done her best to make that girl miserable.

Cinderella sauntered out of the house and quickly shoved Suzanne onto the ground. She plucked the slipper out of Prince Charming's hand and placed it on her foot. It fit like magic. Prince Charming sighed with great relief. He had finally found the woman he was meant to marry. He bent down and scooped the girl up and twirled her three times.

"I thought I'd never find you. Who would have thought that you would be a serving girl?" The Prince chuckled. "Marry me!" Cinderella craned her neck and kissed the Prince passionately.

Cinderella laughed and stepped down from the throne, smoothing out the wrinkles in the immaculate lace of her skirt. She had invited her stepsisters out of pity, but she had never dreamed that they would actually show up. Prince Charming had already taken care of their mother, something involving a vat of poison and snakes and a painful death. Cinderella hated them. They had never shown her any kindness, never disagreed with their mother about abusing her. Cinderella would never forgive them for their actions. But the stepsisters believed that Cinderella would show them kindness. They believed that she was good, kind, patient, and forgiving.

Cinderella glided elegantly towards her sisters. She wanted to show them just how much she had changed. She was no longer their lowly serving girl, no longer fodder for their abuse. She had married Prince Charming. She was now a princess. She could do whatever she wanted. She was beloved by all. She had changed, now Cinderella had courage. She would no longer hide from the eyes of her stepsisters. She was determined to make Marguerite and Suzanne pay for their cruelty.

She embraced her stepsisters for what would be the last time. Each sister kissed one of Cinderella's cheeks. A smirk stretched across her face and she pointed up toward the windows. Suzanne gasped as the air filled with the thrumming sound of hundreds of birds. Wings and beaks beat against the glass of the windows. With a great groan and a creak the glass and the wood of the windows exploded inward, allowing the flock of birds to swoop down. Wings and claws descended upon the two stepsisters as Cinderella stood among the carnage. The crows first found Suzanne and grabbed at her wig. Clumsy hands attempted to keep it attached to her head but finally it was picked to shreds and she flung herself to the floor. But this didn't stop the onslaught. Bluebirds pecked and ripped shreds of flesh from Marguerite's arms and legs. Feathers, fabric, and hair swirled in the air as more and more birds piled onto the bodies of the stepsisters. Finally, Cinderella's beloved doves swooped down and plucked out the moist, shining eyes and gobbled them down.

Cinderella stood there, spattered with blood, until finally she decided to return to the throne. She nudged the bodies out of the way with her glass slipper. Prince Charming, who had watched the whole ordeal, fluttered his hands around his throat, unable to speak a word. Cinderella's dress fluttered around her as she settled back into the throne. She would never feel powerless again. She would never allow anyone else to tell her what to do. She felt like she could finally live happily ever after.