

The Clearing

by Dominic Louise

The Prince's entourage knocked at my door. I couldn't be uninviting to a royal decree. The Prince was welcomed into my house. I had spent all night removing anything essential to our survival. Allowing each of my daughters a small token of familiarity for the next place we arrived at to be called home. Three horses waited in the stables. I saw last night how much attention a carriage could draw. My daughters and I would not be returning to this kingdom after today.

My two daughters fought over who met The Prince first. At this point, all an act which bought our stable-hand more time to get the horses on the pathway and ready to ride. The three of us would not stop until we were beyond the border. My two girls strained and performed but they were only stretching seconds. It was never about the fit of the slipper. Think how easily you yourself could step into a borrowed shoe. It was about the cut of the glass.

My stepdaughter always saw me as cruel. She even called me wicked. But I made a promise to her father. Cinderella was cursed with her mother's beauty. She wasn't safe since the royal family appreciated such finer things. They demonstrated this appreciation when The King claimed by his royal right Cinderella's mother, as his new queen. I knew Cinderella's father would not be back from his business at the castle the day after our quick paper wedding. Revenge never has the storybook endings we tell children.

My marriage to her father secured my legal claim protecting the girl. I still needed to hide her away from the royal family. Locked away, scrubbing and cleaning, was the best I could do given my local resources. She was hidden under a fine layer of soot. I only regretted my own two daughters. They falsely put themselves above Cinderella's station. The royal family did not crave inner beauty so there wasn't a need to keep my daughters hidden. But, I sheltered them in other ways. Their free reign and finer clothing allowed them a sense of decadence over Cinderella. Before the invite for



The Grand Ball arrived, my mothering had my daughters masking proper behavior for years. Allowing them to play dress up as long as possible, I ended up overprotecting all three girls.

The night of The Grand Ball had me preoccupied with my daughters. I thought Cinderella was secured away, My head was in a fog preparing for my daughters' clouded realities to dissipate. All that day, my daughters were showing pure ugliness in their behavior. No lavishness could masquerade how spoiled they were. I raised them like dress up princesses. After The Grand Ball, they both would see how long they have been playing in costumes.

My daughters walked around the house with their heads held so high that they never saw how long the rodents were running past their feet. If only, I had laid out some mousetrap. This torment could have been avoided with a bit of cheese and a quick snap. The royal family was known for their bloodlust. But their curse brought forth other talents. They sent servants scurrying and searching throughout the entire kingdom for The Queen's lost daughter. Unfortunately, Cinderella was lonely enough to welcome into our home any form of companionship.

I was never naive to the earthly lengths the royal family would cross to claim Cinderella. But, I could not have predicted that they would have recruited such powerful otherworldly alliances to entice her out of the house. The Prince went outside the castle and beyond our realm to get just a sight of her at The Grand Ball. The Faire Folk's reality warping always delivered promised results. But, their word warping could be so finely twisted the girl could become Faire property. We all heard the stories about the abductions. The golden spinner and his name game for a baby. No parent wanted their child with Faire Folk.

With everyone so elegantly masqueraded at The Grand Ball, I barely recognized my daughters as they came to the slow realization that castle life wasn't all it promised. The Faire's spell was that everyone noticed Cinderella. She stood out wearing those glass slippers. They were designed especially to entice The Prince to her and with his attention everyone else's notice.



Even my new pair of dress shoes caused discomfort but rarely would a pair of shoes so cut the feet. By the time Cinderella walked the castle steps from the enchanted coach, The Prince was drawn towards the scent of her. After their first dance, the slippers sliced deeper and his desire grew as the glass stained scarlet. When the clock struck midnight, a single red footprint on the castle steps ignited an obsession in The Prince, which would be known throughout The Kingdom.

No one knew the true magical transformation of the evening was my daughters seeing through themselves. Up close, they saw the royal family was something to work against not towards. They saw what I had been working against. They saw The Prince not as charming but as a hypnotic monster. And it was their plan to distract The Prince when he arrived the next day while I tried to talk Cinderella out of his trance.

Other young women in The Kingdom would have fit that particular shoe size. But none would have the bandaged cuts. No other young woman would have had the intoxicating scent of the fresh wounds. The Prince knew Cinderella was in our house without the help of his rodent spies. The Prince could smell her again once he was unfortunately invited inside.

wish the happy ending to this story was that a fourth horse was added to our escape. We made our way out the door as the entourage circled around the new princess to be. For them, it was a momentous day. The Prince could hardly contain his composure at this moment. Cinderella was focused on the glass slipper. There was no reflection in the glass as The Prince's eyes turned blood red and fangs slowly descended.

