



Cinderella

Once upon a time there lived a little girl named Ella. She was sweet and gentle with fair hair and dark eyes that brightened on sunny afternoons. Her mother died bringing her into the world and her father, Count Rinaldo, was left to care for the girl alone. Ella was the world to him and he called her Principella for she was his princess. He was rather wealthy and they lived together in a large manor house not very far from the King's palace. They grew pumpkins in autumn and oranges in the summer and, on the morning of Ella's birthday (which was in September), she always awoke with the last of the orange harvest and the first of the pumpkin harvest beside her bed. The Count gave little Ella everything she could want and more; all except a mother to love her and playmates to keep her company. So, when Ella was five years old, her father set about remarrying.

Cordelia seemed to him to be lovely and kind, if not wise, and her two young daughters were near in age to Ella's. But he was a poor judge of character, for Cordelia was not only wise but crafty. She had spent the money her first husband had left her and marriage to another rich man would ensure that she and her twin daughters, Lavinia and Lenora, would be provided for. Therefore Cordelia made herself out to be gentle and affectionate and was a loving stepmother to Ella, always taking her side against the mischievous twins. Things, however, did not stay that way.

Gradually Cordelia became more demanding of her husband and harsher toward her innocent stepdaughter. Lavinia and Lenora were given the run of the household and the once happy family steadily descended into chaos. Rinaldo was not a young man and this sad turn caused a steep decline in the Count's health. Though he clung desperately to life for the sake of his darling daughter, for he would not leave her alone for all the world, he finally succumbed to the heartbreak and stress and he died.

After that, the name Principella was never heard again for the young girl had become a slave in her own house. All her toys and dresses and pretty playthings became the sole property of her stepsisters, who fought over and, ultimately, broke most of them. Ella was tasked with the maintenance of the house; cooking, cleaning, washing, and mending; and her duties left her covered from head to foot in ashes and cinders. Because of this her wicked family mockingly came to call her Cinderella.

She was forced out of her own bedroom and given quarters in a small room in the cellar, hardly more than a closet. The basement, dismal as it was, was the girl's sanctuary for the others would not trouble themselves to go down there. The larger section had a fireplace of its own, for it once served as a lower parlor, and there was a rear door leading to the pumpkin patch behind the house and a couple of small windows that let in a little sunlight early in the morning. Now everything there was covered in dust and soot and, though the poor girl tried to clean it up as best as she could, most of her time was spent elsewhere taking care of her abominable stepmother and stepsisters. Her only friends were the mice who would visit her in the daytime and the crickets who sang her to sleep

at night. This was Cinderella's pitiful life for ten long years and she nearly forgot that she was happy and loved once upon a time.

"Cinderella!" The cry tore through the many rooms and corridors of the old mansion; far more easily than should have been possible in a house that size. "Cinderella!" But Lavinia and Lenora both inherited, among other things, a healthy set of lungs from their mother and, for them, shouting was as natural as breathing. "Cinderella!" The hollering reached all the way from Lenora's room, through the upper hall, down the stairs, through the great room, across the kitchen, down the stairs again, through the lower hall, and into Cinderella's tiny bedchamber where the girl sat; feverishly thrusting a needle in and out, in and out. Over the years, she had become a speedy seamstress. She never seemed to be fast enough though.

"Cinderella! Are my stockings fixed yet?" The shouts were accompanied by the reverberation of frantic footsteps above her. "We have less than an hour! What's taking so long?" Cinderella increased the speed of her needlework, never slowing, even after pricking herself twice. Lenora was always tearing her stockings.

"Maybe if you did a better job mending them, you wouldn't have to do it so often," she would scold. Cinderella knew that her stitching was not to blame, but Lenora's fat calves. She never would have admitted it out loud, though, nor the fact that they were Cinderella's own stockings her stepsister was tearing through. She was content to sit and sew and ignore the rebuking until she was finished.

"It certainly took you long enough," Lenora spewed, snatching them out of Cinderella's hands with her pudgy fingers. She ran a scrutinizing eye over the girl's handiwork and, barely satisfied, retreated to her room and slammed the door.

"Cinderella!" came the shrill scream from the other end of the hall. "Have you fixed my necklace yet?" Lavinia shoved her head through the doorway and stared coldly as she awaited an answer.

Cinderella shut her eyes for a moment and shook her head. "I'm sorry, I forgot." She reached into the pocket of her apron and pulled out a handful of pearl beads. "I was going to but I couldn't find the right string for them and it slipped my..."

"Then get to work quick," she squawked. "We're going to be late and it'll be your fault!" Again the door was slammed in her face and Cinderella returned to the cellar to begin work stringing Lavinia's pearls together. It isn't that she expected gratitude. That was the last thing she expected. But she was still a member of the family. She had lived in that house all her life. As she carefully threaded the needle through the beads, a tear formed in her eye and her vision became a little cloudy. She just thought they might have at least told her about the party. She had just as much of a right to know as any of them.

It was All Hallow's Eve and the Prince was throwing a grand masked ball at his palace. He had invited gentry from all across the kingdom and, being the wife of a count, Cordelia was invited. Since Lavinia and Lenora were the daughters of a countess they, too, were invited. Cinderella was just the servant girl, regardless of whatever she may have been before. She was just the servant girl.

“Cinderella! Are those pearls finished yet?” She knew there was no use in yelling back; Lord knows she had tried it when she was younger. It didn’t work back then and it wouldn’t work now. So she silently climbed the steps to Lavinia’s room and presented the necklace which, of course, was taken without even a modicum of appreciation before the next command came.

“Cinderella!” She trudged despondently to her stepmother’s room. Cordelia was seated in front of her vanity, running a comb through her hair; an ivory and gold comb once belonging to Cinderella’s mother. Without looking at the girl, she said, “You left the kitchen in a frightful state after dinner. I expect it to be spotless by the time we return.” Cinderella nodded without a word. “What was that?”

“Yes, mother,” she finally said aloud, and went on her lonely way. She came before the kitchen door and paused in the great room. Looking up at the large painting of her father hanging above the mantle, she smiled slightly. “I miss you, Papa. Why did you have to leave me with them?” The old man’s portrait was sullen and gloomy as if, when he had posed for it, he had already the sorry foreknowledge of what was to come. She turned away and gripped the broom as she strode into the kitchen. She began by washing the pots and plates, putting everything into the cabinets. It was a routine she had gone through three times a day for a decade and she had gotten comfortably used to doing it without any help.

You see their family had no maids or cooks at all. Cordelia fired them all after the Count died for she realized Cinderella could do it all just as well on her own and for no wages. The reward for her labor was the knowledge that she had food to eat (after Lavinia and Lenora had eaten, of course), a bed to sleep in (uncomfortable though it was) and a roof over her head. Cordelia felt the girl neither required nor deserved any more than that and, in time, Cinderella came to believe the same thing. That was why she never complained. She knew it would change nothing and, as long as there was nothing she could do about it, she was content to work as she always had, bearing whatever troubles came along with the life she was saddled with. After all, it was the only life she had.

Once the kitchen had been straightened up she took the broom and swept the steps to the lower parlor while the frenzied footfalls of her sisters echoed overhead. It was remarkably cruel for them to have neglected to tell her about the ball, doing so only because they knew her chores would prevent her from attending. But Cinderella had a surprise for everyone. The steps were immaculate, the kitchen in perfect condition and she had put everything in the parlor in order. With her chores finished, she stepped hurriedly down to her room to get dressed.

Meanwhile, Cordelia appeared outside of her daughters’ rooms urging them to hurry. They hadn’t much time now and Lavinia had only just gotten Lenora into her corset after much struggling and thrashing. “We are going to be the laughing stock of the ball if we arrive late and I’m hoping to marry you both off to someone rich tonight!” The girls glanced at each other and dove into the last of their tasks; fixing their hair, fluffing the feathers around their collars and making certain their makeup was perfect and their masks were straight.

The three proudly descended the stairs to the parlor, the twins arguing constantly over whose costume was more exquisite. The lights had been dimmed somewhat and the fireplace blazed with a row of jack-o-lanterns arranged along the mantle, all with glowing smiles. The dancing flames reflected off of the gold and brass fixtures across the room, jumping playfully like fiery specters. Cordelia stood in front of the hearth and called for Cinderella, for she had more instructions to give before she left. Imagine her surprise, coupled with the shock on the twins' faces, when they beheld the girl emerge from the cellar dressed in a gown and ready for the ball.

"My dear, what is all this about?" Cordelia asked, cracking a slight smirk. Cinderella had washed herself and fixed her hair as well as she could have in front of the old and cracked mirror in her room and, even still, was radiant. Her sisters had to look twice before they could confirm that it was really her for, though she had always been remarkably beautiful, they had long since buried that beauty beneath layers of dirt and had forgotten how truly lovely she was. Her dress was a deep blue with pale blue ruffles at the bottom and around her sleeves and collar. Her golden brown hair was pulled up in a bun with a black velvet band across the top of her head, studded with diamonds (though a few were missing).

"I've been making a dress ever since I heard about this party."

"You always were quick with a needle, weren't you?"

Cinderella smiled. "I've finished all of my chores for the night, mother."

"So you have," Cordelia replied, gazing around the room.

"That dress looks familiar," Lavinia said, looking her stepsister up and down. "I threw that thing out last April!"

"And this is the trim from one of *my* dresses," Lenora exclaimed.

"Well," Cinderella began. "Since you didn't need them anymore, I decided to salvage them."

"Who gave you the right?" Lavinia shouted, with Lenora close behind.

"Now girls," their mother interrupted, placing her hands on their shoulders. "If our little Cinderella has finished cleaning *everything*, then I don't see any reason she shouldn't come to the ball with us." Cinderella's eyes brightened, for she didn't read in her stepmother's face what her sisters did. Lavinia and Lenora adopted mischievous grins and nodded.

"Yes, Mother, you're correct as always," said Lenora who backed into the side table, knocking a stack of books onto the floor.

"After all," Lavinia joined, striding across the room to the loveseat. "She is a member of the family!" She then gripped the pillows in her bony hands and tossed them arbitrarily about the parlor.

"And as soon as everything is straightened up," Lenora continued, dumping a vase of daisies, water and all, onto the carpet. "There's no reason she shouldn't be able to join us!" Cinderella might have understood why her stepsisters were doing this if she hadn't been so accustomed to cleaning up after their messes on a daily basis. As she went around, gathering the scattered pillows, Lavinia tore the fringe; first from her collar, then from both of her sleeves. The girl was so eager to finish her chore that she hardly took

any notice at all. Then, while she stooped down to attend to the spilt flower vase and books, Lenora firmly planted a fat foot upon her blue dress.

When Cinderella stood up, the gown was shredded at the waist and all the seams had burst with ragged bits of thread hanging off. She looked down at the miserable remains of all her hard work and the dashed pieces of her dream for a wonderful night. A night she had waited ten years for. A night when she could finally feel like a princess again. Once the shock had passed, though, she couldn't say she was very surprised that her hopes had been shattered once again. She just thought maybe, for once, she could have been given a slight reprieve.

"Oh my dear," Cordelia said, hardly hiding a smile beneath a façade of sympathy. "It's just too bad you don't have time to repair all of this before we leave." The chimes of the grandfather clock sounded their ominous tone as the hour of departure was struck. The eyes on the clock's face glanced maniacally back and forth, above a toothy grin, keeping time with the tireless swinging of the pendulum in the cabinet below. "Come, girls," she said, ushering them toward the door." Then she turned to Cinderella, who was staring down at the floor, and said, "I truly am sorry, darling. Perhaps next time." Without another word, she and the twins had slammed the doors behind them and all was silent except for the muffled sound of hoof beats as their coach drove away from the manor.

Cinderella was all alone now in the dim of the mansion and her loneliness afforded her the respite she had always wished from her family. Their cruel taunts and mocking laughter were far away now but she could find no solace; no peace in the dark house. Instead she screamed as loudly as her little lungs could manage. She screamed and beat her fists against the door. She thrashed the shredded remnants of her dress across the room and, when she could stand it no more, she dropped to her knees and wept without restraint. She sprawled herself out upon the floor and, in front of the blazing light of the hearth, cried herself to sleep.

She was roused out of her slumber by the clock's chimes, tolling six times to mark the hour. She slowly opened her eyes, which were almost glued shut from her tears, and thought she saw someone standing at the opposite end of the room. Her vision was muddled but she could just barely make out a flowing gown of autumn leaves and a pair of yellow and orange wings. However, once she was able to fully open her eyes, the mysterious stranger was gone and Cinderella concluded that it must have been the remnant of a forgotten dream.

The girl drew herself up from the floor and gazed up at the clock. There was a sudden chill in the air and she moved to the door to make certain it wasn't ajar. Strangely, the bolt was tight and there wasn't a crack to be found. She could hear the late October wind as it hurled dry, scratching leaves against the windowpanes and she began to almost miss the constant derision of her stepmother and sisters. Being alone tonight put her ill at ease.

She moved closer to the fire in the hopes of finding some warmth but an icy gust of wind, from someplace unknown, swept through the parlor and snuffed all the candles in the room. The fireplace went black and the faces of the grinning Jack-O-Lanterns disappeared into the darkness. Cinderella was very frightened now but she stood quite

still and maintained calm for she was sure a perfectly logical reason for this would present itself. In a few moments, the candles inside the Jack-O-Lanterns sprung to life again and the smoldering embers on the hearth gradually swelled into a small but healthy flame.

The light was dimmer than before but one thing was perfectly clear to Cinderella; she was no longer alone. Before the grandfather clock stood the tall, gaunt figure of a man dressed in a fine silk suit and coat. There was an eerie bluish green light about him and the edges of his form were hazy. He turned slowly toward her and stepped with the awful sound of rattling bones. He had a drooping white moustache that hung sadly from the sides of his upper lip. His face was pale and his eyes empty but, through the ghastly skeletal visage of this specter, Cinderella could find no malice or terror, for within she discerned the face of her loving father.

The ghost halted before her and gazed tenderly into her face. "How I've missed you," it said in a hollow voice. "my beautiful little Principella." There could be no doubt in her mind now and Cinderella threw her arms around the apparition, laying her head against the front of his phantom coat. "There there, Principella. Don't cry. I have been watching you and waiting for this night for a long time, my precious one."

"Why, Papa? What is tonight?"

"Tonight is the Eve of All Saints, Principella; All Hallow's Eve. On this night the souls of the departed and displaced are given leave to appear to the living and, this year, I have been given leave to appear to you at last." The tone of his voice seemed to sink deeper into the echoing abyss. "I can never forgive myself for leaving you with those wretched women!"

"It was not your fault, Papa. I know that."

"Even still," the Count's ghost continued. "I must make amends for this and bring my princess all the happiness she deserves; ten years' worth, at least."

"What do you mean?"

"The Autumn Fairy has agreed to send you to the Prince's ball tonight and, by her magical grace, you shall be the fairest and most stunning guest in attendance." Cinderella wasn't sure if she was dreaming or not but, from being reunited with her father to having her one night of revelry restored to her, all of the girl's dreams seemed to be coming true at once. "But," the Count continued, stepping back. "First I must teach my daughter to dance." His wiry form bowed gracefully before her and he took her hands into his, leading her into a waltz. She remembered how they used to dance like this when she was very young, but she had not done so at all since Cordelia and the twins entered her life.

The Count taught Cinderella all kinds of steps and she became confident she would be quite the accomplished dancer by the end of the night. With the lesson ended, her father bowed once more and placed a hand on her shoulder. "I know you have been long without hope since last you saw me, but I promise that you will find the joy you have been waiting for these many years." She closed her teary eyes as he leaned forward and placed an icy kiss on her forehead. "I'll never leave you, my Principella. Though you may not see or hear me, I shall always be right here watching over you." When she opened them, he was gone but she was not quite alone.

She turned about and standing in front of her was the mysterious girl she had seen before. Her gown was sewn together out of leaves; all brown with tints of red and yellow and orange. Her skin had a golden hue to it and her eyes were orange. She had wings sprouting from her back, translucent hues of reds and yellows, and shaped with pointed edges like maple leaves. Her hair was ruddy and fell, straight and slick, down her back. In her hand was a wand made from the branch of an oak tree.

“Are you the Autumn Fairy?”

The lovely sprite nodded. “It is nearly time for you to depart, dear Ella, so we must make you ready.” She looked over the girl’s shredded gown and said, “That will never do for a princess’ attire.” With a wave of her wand a green vine came sprouting out from around Cinderella’s waist. It twisted itself and grew all around her midsection and shoulders. The vines formed the trim and, between them there appeared a dress of sheer fabric that shone, as she moved, with every hue of orange visible to the eye. The bottom bloomed outward from her waist and fell, like the top half of a pumpkin, to the floor. Lastly, a black mask appeared around her eyes and she found a pair of sparkling glass shoes on her feet.

Cinderella could scarcely believe that she would be attending a royal ball in so majestic a dress, so she ran to the mirror to see it in full. To her shock her skin, usually pale from being shut in the cellar, was radiant and glowing with health and her hair had been arranged immaculately, ending with gorgeous twisting curls. On her head was a glittering crown set with rubies, topazes and sunstones. She was certain she was seeing the image of someone else. But when she moved a hand to her face and the princess in the mirror did the same, she became convinced that her dream really had come true, impossible as it seemed.

“I am sorry to say that the enchantment will not last forever. It will only last until midnight, at which point everything I have given you must go back to the way it was. All except for the glass slippers on your feet, for they are my gift to you. Now you must be on your way, Ella, for the night is growing late enough as it is.”

“But how am I to reach the palace in time without a coach?” asked Cinderella.

“Fear not,” replied the Autumn Fairy. “Go out to the patch behind the house, fetch a healthy pumpkin and bring it around to the front.” Cinderella did as she was told and she placed the pumpkin upon the dirt drive in front of the mansion. With a wave of her wand, the Autumn Fairy transformed it into a regal coach with black wheels inlaid with gold and silver.

“But how will it get anywhere without horses?” the girl inquired.

“Fear not,” replied the Autumn Fairy. “Fetch me six mice from the cellar.” Cinderella did as she was told and led the mice to the front of the house with some leftover bits of cake. With a wave of her wand the Fairy transformed them into a fine team of horses all dressed in luxurious mantles of orange.

“Now I have a coach and steeds to draw it, but how am I to get anywhere without a driver?”

“Fear not,” said the Fairy. “Fetch me two crickets from the lawn.” Cinderella once again did as she was instructed and returned with the little insects cupped within her

hands. With a final wave of her wand, the Autumn Fairy transformed them into a driver and a footman, dressed in slick black coats embroidered with silver and gold stitching. “Now you are ready for the ball but make haste. Hark, for, already the clock is chiming seven and you must remember to leave the palace before midnight!” Cinderella nodded and entered the coach, gratefully waving goodbye to the fairy as her enchanted horses drew her up the road to the King’s grand palace. They raced with otherworldly swiftness to speed the joyous girl to her destination.

The Autumn Fairy was alone now in the cold October air and she heard no sound except the swirling of dead leaves caught up by the wind.

“You are very kind, Sister,” came a proud voice from beside her. “to grant this wretched creature a few hours of happiness.” Autumn turned and, standing beside her was another fairy, dressed in a black gown with silver webs stretching across it. Her wings had thorny points and there were ebony antlers sprouting out from her stark white forehead. Her eyes were yellow and, though her face was beautiful, it hid a hundred years of wickedness behind it.

“What would you know of kindness, Carabosse?” asked Autumn. “It has been long since you have felt any, yourself.” She gazed at her sister with sad eyes and asked, “Why have you broken our hearts so? Were we not once a happy family? Ever since Aurora’s birth you have done all you can to destroy our good works. For over a hundred years now you have done nothing but ill deeds and inspired others to evil as well. Can you not repent of your ways and return to us?”

Carabosse would not answer her gentle sister, but strode regally away from her. “This is not a good night to be doing generous deeds, Autumn. This is my night and the spirits have a way of causing mischief.” She tapped her skull-headed cane against the ground and, in moments, a host of ghastly specters appeared. The phantasms waltzed in a dreadful circle around the Black Fairy.

“Carabosse!” The Autumn Fairy commanded. “You will not harm that girl! Not this night or any other!”

“Of course I shan’t harm her,” the Black Fairy responded. The ghosts danced into the air and vanished, leaving the fairy sisters alone again. “But you cannot fix a broken world by giving a girl a new dress or a prince or by plucking her from a tower. The world is a garden filled with wilted flowers and neither water nor sunlight can revive what is already dead.” Then, with a cacophony of flapping batwings and buzzing mosquitoes, Carabosse disappeared and left the Autumn Fairy alone to contemplate her sister’s dire words. But whatever her efforts achieved in the grand scheme, even giving a few hours of happiness to a poor girl like Ella was worth everything in the world. Carabosse did not understand that, but *she* did.

The floor of the grand ballroom was a sea of revolving colors as the courtiers danced in lavish costumes whose appearances ranged from the grotesque to the divine. The dresses were rich in design and, no doubt, costly in every sense of the word. Some evoked the images of animals; birds and beasts and creatures of the sea. Others were inspired by figures of myth and legend from the ancient times. Still others were the stuff

of pure imagination. Both men and women were masked somehow or another, adding to the overall mystique of each outfit.

Cordelia stood beside a long table laid with food and drink; sweets of every kind were arranged sumptuously around a large silver bowl of punch. She fanned herself rapidly for she had quickly grown frustrated in her search for potential suitors, for either her daughters or for herself. Not a single opportunity seemed to present itself since they arrived and the twins were not making the task any easier on her. Lavinia and Lenora were still shoveling cakes and tarts into their mouths, heedless of the humiliation they were visiting upon their mother.

“Girls! You will not want to be in such a state when the Prince makes his appearance!” Beyond all of Cordelia’s expectations, the twins halted their feasting for a moment and stared at her. “You know that he has no Princess as of yet,” she informed them. “He may very well choose one tonight so gather your dignity if you can!” They peered at each other in aggravation and finished the last of their sweets, each placing a handful of them into some pocket of their dresses in case they became hungry again later. Their mother rolled her eyes with a huff and kept her gaze fixed on the grand staircase.

It wasn’t much longer before the great golden doors parted and the Prince, himself, appeared at the top of the stairs. His name was Angelo but most people in the kingdom (particularly the women) were in the habit of calling him Prince Charming for he *was* in every way. He was handsome and noble and, in addition to being wealthy and powerful, was a model of nobility and admiration. He was wise and temperate and provided a shining example for what all men of honor should strive to be.

His father had not been well as of late and had shrunk from the public eye. Therefore, Angelo had thrown this ball in the hope of showing his subjects that the ruling family was still as invested in their lives as it had always been. That was the *official* reason but, personally, Angelo was hoping to find a worthy lady he could share his life and his throne with. His royal duties confined him mostly to the palace and, despite his reputation and position, he had few opportunities to meet people.

He was dressed like a cavalier, with a royal blue coat and a matching cape; a black mask around his eyes and a gleaming saber strapped to his belt. As he descended the steps and joined his many guests, Cordelia approached with Lenora and Lavinia close behind.

“Your majesty,” she began in a melodious voice, bowing low before the Prince. “I am the Countess DeSalvo. Have you met my twin daughters, Lavinia and Lenora?” Angelo’s interest was piqued by her words and felt his spirits lift for a moment. But when she stepped aside and he saw them, his hopes faded all at once. It would not be fair to say that Lenora and Lavinia were ugly, for they had a beauty of a kind, despite one having perhaps too much flesh and the other having too little. But their absolutely miserable personalities made it difficult for anyone to find them truly attractive. At any rate, it was apparent to Angelo that they possessed none of the qualities he respected in a woman.

A chubby and bony hand were each thrust at him, which he reluctantly accepted, and both girls offered a pleasant, “How do you do?” He was about to excuse himself from his new acquaintances when his attention was caught by something behind them. There

was a long straight stair leading up to the arched entryway and his gaze was now fixed here. Something within held him motionless and silent; a thing he had never felt before.

Cinderella stood at the top of the staircase, staring down at the strangely dressed people below. She peered around at the grand hall, adorned with pumpkins and festive decorations in honor of the Eve of All Saints. There was long table of refreshments and a tall grandfather clock, similar to the one at home, resting against the opposite wall. She closed her eyes a moment and took a deep breath for courage.

As eager as she had been about attending this party she still had reservations in her timid heart. She still could not shake the feeling that she did not belong there. She was not a princess. What she was wearing was an All Hallow's Eve disguise to fool everyone, for a night, into thinking she was nobility; to fool herself. But she remembered how hard her father and the Autumn Fairy had worked to give her this chance and she steeled herself.

Slowly she descended the steps, her glass shoes echoing coldly against the marble, and peered fearfully into the masked faces of those gathered before her. Some of their appearances frightened her but, still, she continued. She may have been afraid for many reasons but she knew she could pretend, just for one night, that she wasn't afraid of anything.

Her arrival had not been announced, for she was not on the guest list and none knew who she was. Therefore, the guards attempted to halt her advance before she got halfway down the stairs. The Prince, however, ordered them not to accost her and he, himself, met her at the base of the steps. Cinderella's heart caught in her throat when she realized that Prince Angelo was standing before her and the urge to turn and flee was close upon her. But he humbly bowed to the girl and she was put at ease long enough to offer her hand. He accepted it gratefully and planted a gentle kiss upon it; his eyes never roving from the beauteous curves of her face.

Without a word, he guided her to the center of the floor and led her into a waltz with the astonished eyes of everyone present falling on the pair. Whispers rippled through the crowd, asking who the young lady was. No one knew but they marveled at her beauty and refinement and remarked on how her dress shimmered brilliantly as she danced, almost like magic.

Cordelia eyed the girl thoroughly, hoping to discern the identity of the Prince's new favorite but, although there was something familiar about her, she had to admit she had never seen her before. For a moment, the countess thought, 'she does have Cinderella's eyes, but it's impossible. Cinderella is a pale, clumsy ragamuffin and this woman's dress and mannerisms surely mark her as royalty from some far off land.' Therefore, the idea was dismissed. Lavinia and Lenora were awestruck by the maiden's unearthly grace and seeing her dance with the Prince made them almost ashamed to even be present for they felt like street urchins by comparison.

The room was spinning but Cinderella hardly noticed it while her eyes were fixed on Angelo. She and the Prince were such a sight that the entire gathering joined them in the waltz and they became the centerpiece of a grand revolving spectacle; a moving painting, alive with every color and hue of the rainbow.

With eight ominous chimes, the clock announced the hour; its eyes clicking back and forth with a manic grin. Cinderella was delighted that the night was still so young, but she sternly reminded herself that she must leave at half past eleven so as to be gone before midnight. If not, her dress would go back to being a tattered mess and she would return to her normal, shameful self. She could not let anyone see who she really was and she was determined to avoid that at all costs.

It was time now for some refreshments and Angelo escorted Cinderella to the table for a glass of punch. While there, she noticed her stepmother and stepsisters standing nearby with their eyes fixated upon her. She approached Lavinia and Lenora and, with a beaming smile, handed them each a bright orange from the bowl of fruit beside her. Then she bowed respectfully to Cordelia who inquired her name. Cinderella thought for a few moments and replied, "Ashputtel."

"Where is it you come from Ashputtel? I don't believe I have ever seen you in this kingdom."

"My father is an ambassador from Germany." The woman was about to put forth another series of prying questions that Cinderella was not prepared to answer, but Angelo returned to her and, begging Cordelia's leave, led the girl toward the terrace doors. She was much relieved to be away from her stepmother's suspicious eyes and even more to be alone with the Prince. They stood together overlooking the palace garden; as lovely bathed in moonlight as it was during the day.

"Did I hear correctly?" Angelo asked. "Your name is Ashputtel?" She nodded with a bit of hesitation. "I don't believe I have met your father yet. Is he here?"

"I'm sure he must be somewhere nearby," she replied, becoming more comfortable with playing her role believably. "The King must have invited us."

"More likely Baron Fanucci. Father appointed *him* to compile the guest list for *my* party. Truth be told, there are still many decisions I am not fully involved in. There are a great many ministers whose job it is to tell me who I'm to meet with and what I'm to wear. Fortunately, they cannot tell me who to dance with or, if they can, I wouldn't care much for their opinion."

Cinderella chuckled, her eyes sparkling gaily from behind her black mask. "What, may I ask, made you dance with me?"

"I'm not certain but something told me that I would be a fool if I didn't. Something told me I wouldn't have a second chance if I passed up the opportunity to meet you tonight."

The girl's face became somber in the shadows of the autumn night as her mind lingered solemnly on his words. "Yes," she said finally. "I believe you are right." She didn't look at him for a while; she seemed absorbed by her thoughts. But he placed a gentle hand upon the side of her face and brought his lips to hers and all of her worries melted away. "Your majesty," she said in a low voice.

"Please call me Angelo."

"Angelo... tomorrow I may not... what I mean is... you may find that..." She just didn't know how to tell him that the girl he was so enamored with would no longer exist. She didn't even know how to tell herself that.

“Do not worry about tomorrow. All that matters is that we’ve found each other tonight and, if there is any mercy in Heaven, tonight will never end.”

“If only that were true,” she said as the sound of the clock resounded from within the ballroom. It marked the hour with nine chimes and Cinderella sighed. ‘I must be mindful of the time,’ she thought once again. ‘If only this hour could last forever.’ Despite dreading the shadow of midnight, she knew the evening was still young and Angelo was right. All that mattered was that they were together and there was much fun yet to be had before Ashputtel disappeared forever.

She danced like she had never known anything else in her life; like the pain and humiliation she had endured for the last ten years was nothing but a bad dream from which she awoke to an existence of unending bliss, and she was so thankful to be alive. Dancing with the Prince was the realization of Cinderella’s dream and yet Angelo seemed even more thrilled to be with her than she was with him. Whenever another man asked to dance with her, the Prince kindly bowed and replied, “The lady is with me this evening.” And she would not be parted from him for the world for, if a countess or duchess asked to dance with the Prince, she would respond, “But this is our dance.” Of course, as a result, every dance was theirs.

“Tell me more about yourself,” Angelo said as they whirled about the floor.

“What more is there to tell?” She replied. In truth, there was no more to tell. Nothing she wished for him to know anyway.

“Tell me of your family, your childhood. I want to know everything.” She attempted to change the subject by asking him a great deal about the other guests but he responded with, “They are all very important political and social personages and, as such, are of little interest to me. You and you alone interest me, dear lady.” She then attempted to ask about his own upbringing and the life of royalty but, again, he set the matter aside saying, “My own life has been quite uneventful and free of intrigue of any kind. You alone fascinate me, dear lady.”

“You are mistaken, Angelo, for yesterday I did not exist and tomorrow I will exist no more. Therefore, I would prefer to dwell only on the present for only it is real.”

“As you wish, my beloved Ashputtel. As you wish.”

Every step Cinderella took with the Prince was watched carefully by Cordelia, who did not trust the strange woman at all and was haunted by her familiar eyes. Two hours ago Lavinia and Lenora had gotten over their disappointment at not winning Angelo’s heart. One hour ago they got over their disappointment at not winning anyone’s heart. Now they were just tired and wanted to leave but their mother would not have them embarrass her by disappearing in the middle of the ball. So they were forced to amuse themselves in other ways, most of which involved quarreling over which of them would get the last pumpkin tart.

The face of the clock lit up again, its roving eyes darting from side to side, as nine chimes rang out. Cinderella listened carefully and with a certain amount of surprise for she was sure nine o’clock had already passed. Perhaps she was just enjoying herself so much she had lost track. At any rate, it was apparently earlier than she thought and that pleased her very much. What Cinderella did not know was that the spirits had been

playing tricks on her. At the toll of every hour, the mischievous ghosts reached their claw-like hands inside the clock to silence the chimes so that they only rang nine times. Then they would push the hands back into place so that the face read only nine o'clock each time. And each time, Cinderella was too pleased at her good fortune to notice that there was something very wrong. For a while she actually began to think the her wish had come true yet again; that the hour truly was lasting forever.

She could not have been more wrong. The ghosts were full of wickedness and danced, unseen, amongst the revelers, leaping from jack-o-lanterns and crawling across the ballroom floor. Some swung from the chandelier and others mockingly imitated the movements of the costumed dancers. Playing in the mortal world amused these gruesome tricksters but, this night, Cinderella was all they cared about. Tonight they most enjoyed playing with *her* for she was gentle and innocent and, most of all, because she had invested a terrible amount of happiness in this night. She was dressed from head to foot in all of her purest hopes and dreams and that made the game that much more entertaining.

After marking the ninth hour three times, the spirits let the clock go about its business at last, for they'd had their fun and the night was about to come to a dramatic close. Cinderella had danced every step she knew and conversed with everyone present by the time the chimes rang out again. This time they sounded different, though; louder and angrier. Nine times, they rang and Cinderella waited. They rang a tenth time and she was much relieved. It was finally what she had expected, just when she was beginning to doubt her senses.

Then an eleventh bell rang and she was a bit confused. She looked at the clock and her eyes went wide with horror as the twelfth chime echoed throughout the palace, mercilessly assaulting her ears. It was midnight and she was seized with a terror like she had never known. She took one last look at Prince Angelo, who was greatly troubled by this sudden shift in her humor. "Ashputtel! What's wrong?" he asked, moving to hold her. She stepped away, trembling. Cordelia and the twins also took notice of this abrupt change and watched with intrigue.

Cinderella said nothing, but turned away from Angelo and dashed across the floor to the great stair. She looked at no one but, out of the corners of her eyes, she was certain they were staring at her. They must have seen her dress deteriorating before their eyes and glimpsed the shameful thing she truly was for she heard a chorus of laughter all around her and she just couldn't seem to run fast enough to escape it. She tripped on her way up the stairs and felt one of her glass shoes slip off with a shrill clatter, but she knew she could not stop to recover it. She just kept running and, all the while, the dreadful chimes and the diabolical laughter of her ghostly tormentors seemed to drone on and on.

She dashed out of the palace and down the road, for her coach was not there waiting. All she saw were pumpkins, mice and crickets. She fled into the woods with tears streaming from her eyes. She could feel her lovely orange dress falling away with every step and her hair tumbling down into the knotty clumps she was so accustomed to. She was certain they had all seen her; that the veil of her disguise had been lifted and she had been exposed to the Prince and all the kingdom as a common servant girl, unworthy

of their company. She halted suddenly and fell to her knees, sobbing piteously until her eyes closed in darkness and she slipped into a deep sleep from which she hoped never to awaken.

“Cinderella!” A shrill cry pierced the darkness of her slumber. A cry she knew only too well. In waking the memories of Cinderella’s hours at the ball and her flight through the woods melted into each other until they faded altogether, like the remnants of a dream, and her eyes opened to the morning light. She looked about and found that she was lying upon the parlor floor, right where she had fallen asleep the night before. She was wearing her old, shredded blue dress and could still feel the dried tears she had shed when her family left for the ball. “That was the strangest dream I think I’ve ever had.”

She peered around the room as the pale sunlight fell upon the cold fireplace and the grandfather clock and the portrait of the Count above the mantle. “That was where Papa’s ghost appeared to me, and over by the stairs is where I met the Autumn Fairy.” The memory of her fantasy with the Prince existed now only in flashes; the sights and sounds returning to her bit by blissful bit. “It was rather a nice dream.” Her dance with Angelo came to her now; every step and every note of music so vivid that she felt as if she were living it all over again.

Then the stroke of midnight echoed in her mind and she shut her eyes. “The ending, though, was not so nice.” She rubbed the last vestiges of sleep from her eyes and these sounds and images disappeared once again, entirely slipping from her recollection. “Oh well,” she muttered, rising to her feet. “it was lovely while it lasted. Even if it was just my imagination.”

“Cinderella!” As the shout echoed through the house once again, Cinderella began to wish all the more that she could have remained in that dream forever.

“I’m coming!” she called back, knowing full well that it would do no good. “I’m coming...” She moved to answer her stepsisters’ summons but stopped short when her foot hit something hard. She bent down and her hand grasped a shoe made of clear glass. Her face went pale as she held it, sparkling, up to the light. “Then it wasn’t a dream.”

“What are you babbling about?” Her revelation was interrupted by Lavinia and she spun about quickly, hiding the slipper behind her back.

“Nothing, I was just talking to myself.”

“Didn’t you hear me calling you, you idle layabout? Lenora and I are starving and it’s high time you started breakfast!”

Cinderella nodded without a word and dashed into the kitchen. As she was cooking she asked her sister, “How was the ball last night?”

“Oh it was wonderful,” Lavinia replied with a coy smile. “Lenora and I danced with every man there, including the Prince!” As she listened Cinderella fought the urge to laugh out loud.

“Did you know everyone who was there?” she pried in a curious tone.

“Oh yes,” Lavinia continued. “Beatrice was there and Sofia and that upstart Amelia Bruzzio, you know, the baron’s daughter.”

“So you knew *all* of the guests?” Cinderella repeated.

“Well, there was this one girl I had never met before. Ashen-somethingorother. She was a very cheeky sort.”

“Really?” She was only glad her sister couldn’t see how her eyes were brimming with mirth.

“Oh yes. She was constantly trying to break up my dances with the Prince but he, of course, wouldn’t have it. Thankfully she left at midnight and we didn’t see her again after that.”

‘Maybe nobody saw what happened after all,’ she thought now. ‘Maybe they didn’t see me change back.’

“I think she was a foreigner and I’m just happy she’ll be going back to her own country. Hey!” She was yanked out of her thought by Lavinia’s shouting. “You’re burning it you stupid, witless girl!” She pulled the pan off of the fire as smoke billowed out of it. “Are you trying to burn my house down?” Cinderella narrowed her eyes at Lavinia.

“Your house?” she flared. “*Your* house!” She could feel her temper swelling.

“That’s right,” Lavinia spat back. “*My* house. Winter will be here before you know it and if you don’t want to be thrown out into the cold you’ll clean this mess up at once and start my breakfast over again.” Cinderella’s temper subsided once she realized how right her stepsister was. “And do it right this time!” Besides, her chance at liberation was last night. It was over now and it was high time she returned to reality.

“Yes, Lavinia. I’m sorry,” was all she said before returning to work. The rest of the morning was spent in ignoring, to the best of her abilities, the excited bragging of her family over how delightful the ball was, and how much fun she missed out on. Although she knew that *she* was not the one who missed out on the fun, their constant raving only bothered her because she knew that they would have another chance at such a night. Many chances, in fact, while Cinderella had but one.

Just before noon there was a heavy knock on the door. Cinderella was cleaning up the mess her stepmother and sisters had left in the kitchen while Cordelia answered the door. This was the one task they preferred Cinderella *not* to do for they disliked the idea of anyone seeing the haggard girl and associating her with their otherwise fine family. As she was sweeping the floor she heard a great commotion in the parlor and opened the kitchen door a crack just to see what the fuss was about.

“Get dressed, girls,” Cordelia commanded. “At once!”

“Why, Mama?” Lavinia asked.

“I don’t want to,” Lenora sulked. “I’m ready to go back to bed.”

“You certainly will not!” Cordelia shouted, grasping her by the braids. “A herald from the palace just came by. The Prince is looking for his bride today.”

“What?” they exclaimed in perfect unison.

“Last night his mystery girl left one of her glass slippers behind and he’s searching the whole kingdom for her.”

“So what?” Lenora huffed. “What has that got to do with us?”

“He doesn’t know who she is,” her mother explained. “Everyone was in disguise so his only way of identifying this girl is with her slipper.” The twins stared blankly as

they still could not grasp their roll in the matter. "Have you no sense at all? The Prince will marry whomever the shoe fits! All you need do is prove that the glass slipper is yours and you can be a princess!" After a brief pause of utter disbelief, the two girls leapt into action and fled to their rooms to prepare themselves.

Meanwhile Cinderella, who had been listening at the door, silently removed the glass slipper from the pocket of her apron and turned it over in her hands. She was deep in a fantasy when Cordelia threw the kitchen doors aside and glared at her.

"Eavesdropping now, are we?" Then her eyes moved down from Cinderella's terrified face to the glass shoe in her hand and a look of bewilderment came over her stepmother. "I knew that girl's eyes were familiar! You clever little witch! I don't know how you managed it but you can forget about what you just heard!" She snatched the shoe from Cinderella's hands and shoved it into a fold in her own dress. "You will not be making an appearance until after the Prince is long gone!" Then she slammed the doors and locked them, ignoring her stepdaughter's pleas and the banging of her fists.

All three women dressed themselves in finery; in luxurious silks and beautiful jewels. Their faces were made up with powders and vibrant lip rouges that caused their eye colors to stand out. Their hair was pulled up into the most fanciful styles and adorned with gemmed clips and sheer ribbons. Finally, they sprayed themselves from head to toe in fragrant scents of lavender and citrus and sweet honey so as to fascinate every one of the senses. And while they were preparing Cinderella was left to languish in the kitchen, lamenting how close she had been to escaping this life of torment, and yet how powerless she now was.

Meanwhile, Prince Angelo had worked tirelessly since his parting with Ashputtel for he was determined to find her somehow. He summoned the royal cobblers to the palace at once and brought the glass shoe before them so that they might examine it. They measured it and weighed it and pored over their books in an attempt to determine where it may have come from and who its owner might be. They searched far and wide for the German ambassador but there was none in the kingdom, nor was there any such woman named Ashputtel.

Unwilling to give up, Angelo decided he would find the mystery girl himself, even if he had to search every house in his kingdom and in the lands surrounding. With the glass slipper in hand his coach went throughout the city, stopping at every house containing a young lady, and presented the shoe to every such girl he met. He would slip it on her foot but, each time, it was either too large or too small and he was forced to move on to the next house.

Finally he reached the old mansion of the Count DeSalvo and he and his attendants appeared at the door. Cordelia greeted them warmly and gave a graceful bow, careful not to let the ties in her hair come undone. "Welcome, Your Majesty," she said with several more bows, each more extravagant and unnecessary than the last. "If you'll come right this way my daughters are waiting eagerly in the parlor."

Lavinia and Lenora stood proudly before him; arrayed beautifully and wearing tempting and enchanting smiles. But no amount of makeup and trinkets could hide the fact that they were the same girls who had failed to captivate Angelo before. He

recognized their haughty personalities even behind their ruby lips and shapely, beguiling eyes. He saw no more in them than he had the previous night. However, he had given his word to grant every girl the opportunity to try the shoe on.

After quarreling for a few minutes, it was decided that Lavinia would go first. Now, knowing what tiny feet she had, she quadrupled her stockings that morning so as to make her feet appear larger than they really were. Angelo knelt down in front of her and slipped the glass shoe on her foot. It fit and Lavinia was nearly as happy as Angelo was disappointed.

But knowing well her sister's wiles, Lenora said, "I wonder if it will fit as nicely with only one pair of stockings on instead of four!" Lavinia turned with an angry start and the slipper fell right off her foot and clattered to the floor. All the Prince's ministers agreed that Lavinia was not the true owner of the glass shoe. "Out of the way," Lenora said, shoving her sister. "It's my turn!"

She sat her excessive posterior in the chair and boldly presented her foot to the Prince. Now Lenora's foot, much like the rest of her, was large so she had practiced curling her toes all morning and was now trying as hard as she could to squeeze into the glass slipper. Although it would go no further than halfway, she kept saying, "Just push harder. It will fit. It's always a bit snug at first." Lavinia presented a pair of scissors to her sister and made the fine suggestion that she snip a few toes off but Lenora decided, rather, to surrender and removed the shoe.

"Have you no other daughters?" Angelo asked in a defeated tone.

"None," Cordelia replied with an equal amount of disappointment. Then there came a bang on the kitchen door; a sound which caught the Prince's attention.

"What was that?"

"Just the dog," Lavinia answered at the same time Lenora said, "Just the cat."

But now a voice accompanied the sounds. The voice of a girl. "That," Angelo said. "is like no dog or cat I have ever heard. Who is behind that door?"

"Nobody worth your attention, Your Majesty," Cordelia confidently offered. "Just the servant girl. No one you need concern your royal self with."

"I should like to see this servant girl," he said, rising with the shoe gripped tightly in his hand.

"Trust me, Your Highness, you would not. She is quite the shameful little thing. Hardly worth your time at all."

"Even still, I have given my word that every young lady shall be given the same test."

There was dreadful glow in Cordelia's eyes as she listened and, after a cold silence, smiled grimly and replied, "Very well," with a sharp exhale. "As His Majesty wishes." After giving the Prince one final fuming glare, she moved toward the kitchen doors and stepped brusquely in, shutting the doors swiftly behind her. Lavinia and Lenora exchanged fretting glances.

"Your Prince Charming would like to see you," Cordelia whispered to the sulking girl in the corner. "And you had best make certain he meets sad, pathetic Cinderella today and not his lovely Ashputtel, do you understand?" Cinderella turned her dewey eyes

toward her stepmother and nodded. "Just to make certain, I'll prepare you myself, just as I did for your sisters. Firstly, you must have makeup." She reached down and grabbed a clod of dirt, smearing it over the girl's face. "Your hair must be perfectly arranged." She took a fork from the counter and twisted Cinderella's hair into atrocious knots, leaving wild strands hanging this way and that like the edges of a fraying shawl.

"There," she said, stepping backward and admiring her handiwork. "Now you are ready to meet a Prince." Cinderella could say nothing in reply for her spirit had been broken now as well as her dreams. Cordelia forced her into the parlor and Angelo at once winced at the sight of her. But it was not shame he felt at seeing so wretched a creature. Rather it was pity for his heart was broken that any girl could be treated so abominably. He could scarcely see her face through the savage clumps of golden brown hair, but he caught a glimpse of her glossy eyes as she sat down in front of him, and he felt a deep pang in his heart.

No matter what she looked like, Cordelia knew all too well that Prince Angelo was going to marry Cinderella as soon as he saw that the glass slipper was hers. She knew that his cobblers and his ministers and his physicians would perform all sorts of tests to prove that the shoe was made for her foot and hers alone. But Cordelia was no fool. As Angelo moved the slipper toward the girl's foot, the wicked stepmother pretended to lose her balance and, with a kick, knocked the shoe out of the Prince's hand. Many fearful eyes watched intently as it sailed across the room and shattered against the floor.

The shock and devastation in Angelo's eyes could only be matched by Cinderella's own. Neither of them would ever be with the one they loved, although they stood just a hair's width away from each other. They may as well have been on opposite sides of the world now.

"I am dreadfully sorry, My Prince," Cordelia offered sadly. "Surely you have the shoe that matches it." She smiled.

"No," he responded, just barely above a hoarse whisper. "That one slipper was all I had and now I have nothing."

"That really is too bad," she continued, though none of her empty words of comfort reached his ears. "But surely such a charming Prince should have no trouble at all finding a suitable bride. My daughters are both fine and well-bred."

Her words were drowned in a sea of rage before they entered Cinderella's ears for the girl had been brought to the depths of anguish and could not even comprehend what she was feeling now. What horrid cruelties had she yet to endure before she was allowed to fade peacefully away? Could there be still days ahead of her more painful than this? She feared the answer more than she had feared anything in her life.

But while both she and Angelo were wrapped in their grief and Cordelia continued her senseless babbling, all the eyes in that room looked up in shock as something quite unbelievable happened. Lenora and Lavinia squealed and the Prince's ministers jumped in surprise as Cordelia suddenly lunged forward as if she had been shoved from behind by a tremendous force. Cinderella's glassy eyes were filled with a

terrible awe as she watched for she was certain, if just for a moment, that she saw the ghastly black silhouette of her father splashed against the wall.

The proud woman nearly hit the ground, grasping the arm of a chair to steady herself as her shins touched the floor, but the abrupt stop caused the second glass slipper to tumble out of the concealing fold in her dress. It slid safely across the floor and stopped. Once she realized what had happened, Cordelia ranted and raved and scrambled to retrieve it. But she was too late. Before she knew what was happening, the Prince was already slipping it onto Cinderella's dainty foot and all present marveled at how perfectly it fit.

With a gentle hand, Angelo brushed the knotted hair away from the young lady's face and knew for certain that he was staring into the eyes of the woman he wished to spend the rest of his life with. He drew toward her and their lips met for a passionate moment that seemed never to end.

"You cannot marry her!" Cordelia shouted, awkwardly attempting to recover her composure as her daughters crowded ineffectually around her. "She's a common servant! She's worth nothing! Look at her! She is a living dustbin!"

"You make a fair point," Angelo returned. Then he turned to two of his female attendants and said, "If you please, take this young lady upstairs." Cinderella looked silently up at him, attempting to read the thoughts in his heart for she still felt her stepmother had been justified in all she had said. "My bride will wish to be washed and pampered before we make for home." She could neither comprehend nor describe the awful sounds that her stepmother and stepsisters were making now but she was far too happy to care.

For some time, she feared she might wake up at any moment and find that it really had been just a dream. Even after their grand wedding and her moving into the palace with her Prince Charming, Cinderella still was in the habit of pinching herself from time to time just to make absolutely certain it was real life. But Angelo's constant love and devotion finally brought her to realize the truth and she was never more relieved in all her years. It did take some time, though, for her to get accustomed to being waited on. She was still in the habit of cooking and cleaning and washing and it took a great amount of effort on the part of her Prince and her handmaidens to convince her to allow *them* to care for *her*.

But whatever she was doing in the kitchen or in the palace garden, or leaning her head against Angelo's shoulder as they looked out upon the kingdom from the balcony, she was ever filled with a profound contentment. She would bear no ill will toward her loathsome family and extended an invitation to them at every ball. She had nothing to fear for she knew that they would never attend and, true to form, they never did for they were terribly proud. They had no power over her any longer, nor did any sense of dread or worry. For she knew that no matter what happened in her life now she would be glad for her life was wonderful.

As for her father, the Count, it is believed that he and the Autumn Fairy continued to watch over Cinderella or Principella, as Angelo was in the habit of calling her. Sometimes she thought she would see his tall, stately shadow when the morning's first

light poured into her chambers, or when the moon was full. Sometimes she would hear his voice or his steps, pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace. And every morning, on her birthday, she would awaken to the last of the summer oranges and the first of the autumn pumpkins beside her bed. Neither the servants nor Angelo nor anyone else knew how they got there every year but Cinderella knew and that was all that mattered.

THE END