

# ONE



## CINDERELLA

**B**efore she became a dragon, the night had been a dream. Cinderella traveled through the woods as darkness fell. She leaned out the carriage window and inhaled the scent of loam and nocturnal flowers. Stars glittered above, a handful of diamonds scattered across the black velvet sky. Even without a coachman, the dappled gray horse knew its way. Part of the enchantment, she supposed.

Tonight, Prince Benedict Charming would hear her confession.

No matter how much the carriage jostled over ruts in the road, the thought couldn't be knocked from her mind. She tugged at her white gloves, which came to her elbows, and wished she would stop sweating. Best not to dampen the prince.

Knightsend Castle perched high on a cliff. Golden light spilled from hundreds of windows, shimmering in the waterfall that plunged into a ravine. Mist cloaked the lake below and chilled the air. Cinderella shivered and hugged herself. The Fairy Godmother hadn't given her anything as practical as a cloak.

The dappled gray horse trotted higher on the zigzagging road. As they neared the gates of Knightsend, snippets of music and laughter escaped into the night and punctuated the endless rush of the waterfall over the cliff.

When they stopped, she quite forgot how to breathe.

The carriage door opened, no footman required, and she peered up at Knightsend. Towers of pale granite soared heavenward. The castle rivaled any cathedral in grandeur and majesty, flaunting the royal family's wealth.

What if Prince Benedict didn't recognize her? After all, she had deceived him when they first met. He knew her only as Cinderella, the servant girl from Umberwood Manor, and not as the rightful heiress to her childhood home.

What if her stepsisters discovered her? Worse, her stepmother?

She shrank away from the castle, the memory of rags clinging to her skin despite her marvelous gown, shimmering in starlight blue. It wasn't too late to turn back. Remembering to breathe, Cinderella picked up her skirts and stepped delicately from the carriage. Her ankles wobbled in her crystal slippers until the enchantment steadied her step.

Guards opened a groaning door. Red-coated footmen ushered her into the ballroom.

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She needed no invitation, which meant that Prince Benedict truly had invited all the maidens in the land tonight.

Would he even care that she had come?

Mirrors reflected a kaleidoscopic whirl of gowns, chandeliers, and gilded candelabra. Ladies and gentlemen waltzed under a ceiling of celestial blue. My, how beautiful they were! Envy twisted her stomach. She could never dream of affording such glours: magic to make skin as smooth as alabaster, and hair outshine gold.

Then she saw him.

Prince Benedict Charming strode across the ballroom with the easy confidence of someone who had never been poor or ugly. Someone who knew the world adored him and bent to his will. His wheat-blond hair glinted under the glow of the chandeliers. His blue eyes outranked the clearest summer sky.

The prince needed no enchantments to look so stunningly handsome.

“Benedict,” she whispered.

Their stares met.

Her heart fluttered in her chest, a caged bird, as she waited for him.

Benedict’s gaze traveled from her hair down to her slippers. A slow smile brightened his face. “You look better.”

A blush scorched her cheeks. “Thank you.” Surely he meant it as a compliment.

“Dance with me.”

She followed his lead to the dance floor. He held her close, one of his strong hands clasping hers, the other resting at the curve of

her spine. This close, it was impossible to ignore how tall he was, or the way his eyes sparkled.

Were princes ever born less than perfect?

“Lost in thought?” Prince Benedict said.

“A little,” she admitted. She had to tell him who she was, and what had been stolen from her. “Your Royal Highness?”

“Please, call me Benedict.”

“Benedict?”

“That’s better.”

“You don’t know why I’m truly here.”

“Oh?” He smirked. “Not to win my heart?”

The musicians launched into a polka, a rather unromantic dance that left her panting and laughing. She clung to Benedict’s shoulders, lightheaded, and fought to catch her breath. Her corset restricted her allowance of air.

“Goodness,” she managed. “I feel as if I might swoon.”

“My apologies.” He winked. “I didn’t mean to be so breathtaking.”

She lowered her gaze. The crown prince was altogether too charming for her. She had so little experience with flirtation.

“May we sit?” she said.

“Of course.”

Benedict led her onto a balcony perched over the waterfall, which muted the music. Red roses clambered over the castle. He twisted one from its vine, knocking a few petals loose, and presented it to her. She took it with a polite smile. When a thorn

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pricked her thumb through her glove, a tiny dot of blood stained the white.

Hopefully, it wasn't a bad omen.

"Please," Benedict said, "rest your feet."

Her heartbeat still hammered against her corset. She gathered her skirts and lowered herself onto a granite bench, which was less comfortable than it could have been. Were cushions not majestic enough for the castle?

"Benedict." She sucked in air. "I haven't been entirely honest with you."

The corner of his mouth quirked in a smile. "How intriguing. You lied to me?"

"No! Well, yes." She fidgeted, the granite hard beneath her derriere. "When we first met, I told you my name was Cinderella."

"I thought it was unusual."

"No more than a nickname." An inescapable one, from her step-sisters. "My name was once Ginevra Darlington."

Benedict blinked a few times. "Darlington?"

"Yes. I'm the last of the Darlings. The true heiress to Umberwood Manor." She struggled not to sound bitter, since that would, of course, be unladylike. "You know of Umberwood, don't you? Of its history?"

The prince tilted his head, a few strands of his wheat-colored hair slipping over his face. "If I remember correctly, it was a gift."

"To my mother, Lady Vivendel Darlington, for a great service to the Queen of Viridia."

Benedict frowned. "I can't recall why."

“My mother never told me before she...” She swallowed past the ache in her throat. It had been years, but it still hurt.

“I’m sorry for your loss.” His blue eyes glimmered, luminous in the moonlight.

Cinderella twisted her fingers in her lap. “My father remarried before he passed away. My stepmother claimed the title of Lady Darlington and squandered the family fortune. She spent it all on gowns and glammers.”

Benedict’s frown deepened. “You were wearing rags when you found me in the forest.”

“Not *rags*, exactly.”

“I meant no offense.”

“My wardrobe is the least of my concerns.” She picked at a loose thread on her gloves. “We are on the brink of losing Umberwood.”

Benedict gazed at the eternal plunge of the waterfall. “What a shame.”

Lord, how direct could she be while maintaining some semblance of modesty?

“Long ago, your mother gifted mine Umberwood,” she said. “I would hate to lose such a precious gift from the royal family. I came to the ball tonight, Benedict, in the hopes that you might help me save my childhood home.”

“Might I suggest marriage for a lady of ambition such as yourself?”

Her lips parted in surprise. “Marriage?”

When he turned to her, a smile shadowed his mouth. “Why come to Knightsend tonight, and not any other night?”

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“Because the royal family doesn’t grant audiences to girls dressed in rags.”

He laughed, the sparkle back in his eyes. “But I invited you to the castle. Even when you hid your identity from me.”

“You invited all the maidens in the land.”

“Ah, but you are the fairest of them all.”

Heat scalded her cheeks. “Even in rags?”

“They can’t disguise your beauty.”

“Such flattery!” She waved her hand as if shooing away his compliments. “My stepsisters dream of marrying royalty.”

“And you?”

Never had she dreamed of Prince Benedict Charming. What a lie that would be! Especially after she had found him utterly naked, swimming in a pond, a memory so scandalous that she willed herself not to stare at him now.

She glanced at him through her eyelashes. “It depends if you believe in love at first sight. Your future bride might be at this very ball. Heaven knows how you will find her, though, if you don’t dance with all the maidens in the land first.”

Benedict smirked. “An impossibility.”

Should she ask him about Umberwood Manor again? But no, that might seem as though she was begging for royal gold.

Was marrying rich much better?

“I hear the hors d’oeuvres are delicious.” He held out his hand. “Shall we investigate?”

“Yes, Your Royal Highness. I’m famished.”

Her stepsisters would never dream of expressing a bodily need such as hunger, especially not around an eligible bachelor. How unrefined to want food rather than subsisting on pretty little dreams. But Cinderella often wanted too much.

She followed Benedict into a dining room laid with a grand buffet. Tables bristled with candlesticks and centerpieces of exotic fruits. A thief would be rich from a few pocketfuls of cutlery in silver and gold—she was just poor enough for the thought to occur to her. And the food beggared belief: deviled eggs, smoked ham, lobster salad, liver pâté, sugared grapes, crystal bowls of punch, and tiny pink cakes iced with roses.

Benedict stabbed a cake with a fork and wolfed it down whole. He knocked back a flute of champagne. “Delicious.”

“Heavens!” Cinderella touched her fingertips to her mouth.

His grin looked feral, as if he would lose more of his manners after drinking more champagne. Attempting to be dainty, she nudged a deviled egg onto a silver plate big enough for a dollhouse. Likely worth only half of a commoner’s income. Benedict wasn’t paying attention, his gaze fixed somewhere over her shoulder.

“Excuse me for a moment,” he said.

He disappeared into the crowd. Cinderella nibbled the egg with significantly more decorum than he had devoured the tiny pink cake. If all royal cuisine tasted this good, she might not terribly mind living here.

On a fireplace mantle, a gilded clock chimed half past ten.

Cinderella finished the deviled egg. Less than two hours of the enchantment remained. Her Fairy Godmother had warned her the



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spell would break at the stroke of midnight. She would return to nothing more than a girl in rags.

This could be her only chance to save Umberwood Manor.

Her mouth went dry. Swallowing hard, she helped herself to a cake, which left her mouth sticky-sweet. She washed it down with a swig of punch. Rum scorched her throat all the way down. Good lord, that was strong. She had only ever been tipsy once before.

Perhaps she was a fool for believing Prince Benedict would help her without repayment. Marrying the Crown Prince of Viridia would save her from her stepmother, but she doubted he would choose her for his bride. Princes like him had a reputation for deflowering pretty girls before marrying a more acceptable lady.

Could she barter her virginity to save Umberwood Manor?

Such a shameful thought. She banished it from her mind, even though she knew she had little else of worth to the prince.

Maybe that was all he wanted.

The rest of the night passed in a blur.

Benedict found her, danced with her, told her things to make her laugh. He flirted and flattered her until she hoped for more. She sampled the lobster salad, smoked ham, and a single sugared grape, since her corset wouldn't allow her to indulge. When she drank more punch, the rum left a pleasant heat in her belly.

By the buffet, Prince Benedict looked at her as if he had told another joke, one she had missed. She forced herself to laugh again.

"Are you quite all right?" he said.

"Pardon me. I would like to powder my nose."

She slipped away from the hubbub of the ball and entered a cool hallway. Mirrors, suits of armor, paintings of royalty with smug smiles and bored eyes. Where was the bloody lavatory? She giggled, since she would never say such vulgarity out loud.

Finally, a footman trotted down the hallway. “May I help you, milady?”

“I’m trying to powder my nose,” she whispered.

“Of course.” He had a placid demeanor. “Down the hallway, the first door on your left.”

“Thank you.”

Hadn’t she already tried that door? Perhaps this was a test devised by Prince Benedict. Whichever maidens could find the lavatory in this labyrinth of a castle were worthy of his affection. The rest simply perished.

When she found the door unlocked, she swept inside with a sigh of relief. Her ball gown hadn’t been designed for this inconvenience. Perhaps Fairy Godmothers never powdered their noses, so to speak. That must be awfully nice.

Someone rapped on the door.

“One moment!” She hurried to wash her hands.

When she stepped from the lavatory, she stifled a gasp.

Eulalia.

Her stepsister regarded her with a poisonous glare. “Cinderella.”