



5-10-2016

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## Recommended Citation

Bradley, Caitlin Rose. (2016). Fairy Tales Rewritten: Reclaiming Womanhood for Women. In *BSU Honors Program Theses and Projects*. Item 171. Available at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/honors\\_proj/171](http://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj/171)  
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Fairy Tales Rewritten: Reclaiming Womanhood for Women

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirement for Commonwealth Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

May 10, 2016

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During the summer of 2016, I completed a research project funded by the Adrian Tinsley Program Grant. This project examined the basic structures of storytelling, particularly as described by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, and investigated the roles of women in literature, extending to how these roles affect women in our world, as explained in Maureen Murdock's *The Heroine's Journey*. Over the course of this project, I realized that the ways in which women are portrayed on paper inform how they are perceived and how they perceive themselves in real life. These perceptions influence their behavior and the behaviors of those around them, which are then observed and reflected in texts-- novels, trilogies, fairy tales. This is a positive feedback loop; if we continue to write stories about women who look to men to support, guide or rescue them, how can we expect women to behave otherwise? And if we continue to tell women that they should refrain from certain actions because "we need strong boys to lift these tables" or "it's not polite for a lady to be so opinionated," this is how stories will be written.

My primary objective with this project is to chip away at this positive feedback loop, and I hope that others will join me. By creating female characters who do not rely entirely on men, and by satirizing examples of sexism in the fairy tale genre, I aim to draw attention to the ridiculousness of the genre, to raise awareness of this social issue and to begin to break down the social constructs that tell me and "people like me," even "people not like me," that we cannot or should not act in certain ways because society frowns upon it. I believe that each individual should have the authority to decide for themselves which human behaviors are appropriate for them.

Each of the three following stories shows a different approach to storytelling. In "From Spun Yarn," Briar Rose takes an emotional journey of self-discovery. In "Case File: Ella

Merchant," Ella takes a physical as well as an emotional journey. For both of these stories, I began with Joseph Campbell's outline for the Journey of the Hero, which can be found in his book, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*. I took a different approach to "Goldi, Locks and Red's Dead Grandma." For this story, I ignored Campbell's Hero's Journey and integrated themes of womanhood found in Maureen Murdock's *The Heroine's Journey*. These themes are especially important because they shape how women are expected to behave, and women are often belittled, as Murdock points out, if they do not meet these expectations, which are, as Mrs. Bere discovers, usually impossible.

While the female heroes in these stories are recognizable, they are not the same as the models from which they were created. Especially by the end of the story, these women are more developed as characters; they have become less foolish and more independent. The moments in these stories that portray these characters as their originals are the moments that feel particularly ridiculous. I hope that those who read these stories will realize how the portrayals of women as damsels in distress are counterproductive in a world that tells women to be self-actualized and productive members of society, "just like men." If women and men are expected to be equal, they should be portrayed equally in stories.

"From Spun Yarn" begins at the climax of the "Sleeping Beauty" story. Briar Rose, awakened by a kiss from a stranger only moments earlier, is pressured into marriage by this young man and her own parents. As she struggles with herself over whether she owes this prince anything for rescuing her, she completes an emotional journey which encourages her to be independent. She begins to rescue herself and reject the path that has been chosen for her in favor of one on which she makes her own decisions. Briar Rose's journey follows Campbell's format of Separation, Initiation and Return. In the Separation stage, she wakes up to discover that actions

are being taken against her, and she must, for the first time in her fairy tale-driven life, take action in return. She crosses the physical and metaphorical threshold when she makes her first real decision in the story, entering her enemies' room to retrieve evidence. This begins her Initiation stage, as she struggles to escape and decide whether to marry the prince or take the throne. Because she has not entirely broken free of her genre, she is unable to rescue herself; though she is very close to freedom, Michael has to help her complete the escape. Once this initiation is complete, she is no longer the passive fairy tale princess that she used to be. She cannot return to that state of submission, where her life is lived for her. She has become independent and confident in her abilities, just like the male heroes who are seen so often throughout literature. This is why she wants to leave the kingdom; however she has obligations which require her to continue fighting for her independence without running away from her home.

"Sleeping Beauty" is known for nothing other than sleeping and being beautiful. This Briar Rose, while she is woken with a kiss and is beautiful, is more importantly clever and self-reliant; one of the major issues facing women today is that they are evaluated on their appearances first, rather than their abilities. The people in the room with her when she wakes up fail to see her as an independent person. They decide that she will marry the prince, and they expect her to comply. The prince also views Briar Rose as his property, and Briar Rose is not sure that this is false. Briar Rose feels indebted to him for saving her, a feeling often mirrored in real relationships. Though she eventually realizes that she does not owe him anything, real women, deprived of examples in literature or their surrounding environment, often go out of their way to please other people or show their gratitude, or even merely to prevent the possibility of upsetting someone else. Briar Rose is a model of someone who refuses to live her life the way

other people want her to, not because she is selfish, but because she is an individual who deserves her own freedom.

Though Michael, Briar Rose's companion and confidant, is male, his purpose in this story is not merely to be another male character who tries to control Briar Rose or tell her what to do. Michael and Briar Rose have been friends for so long that he understands her and can give voice to the concerns that she already has; he does not tell her anything that she was not already thinking. Yet although he wants Briar Rose to make her own choices, he acts as a voice of reason and as a reminder to Briar Rose of both her duties to her people and to herself. The purpose of this story is not to assert that we should not fulfill our responsibilities, but rather that we should take a closer look at which "obligations" are actually our duty to perform and which ones are not. Michael is a reminder to Briar Rose of the obligations she has as well as encouragement to her to discover her potential and act independently. He is not, however, just another male character for Briar Rose to rely on for everything; part of life is having friends and family for support, to consult with about life decisions before coming to a conclusion, and Michael functions as one of these friends, not to make decisions for her, but to help her to consider the various angles of the situation. This fairy tale heroine does not end her story with a wedding or plans for a wedding with another person, but rather makes a decision by herself to live freely as she pleases and to focus on her career first.

Though "Case File: Ella Merchant" is a Cinderella story, Ella's life is viewed through the lens of her fairy godmother. In this story, Cinderella takes a journey that is both physical and emotional, but again based on Joseph Campbell's model journey. Ella believes that she is living in a fairy tale, which is problematic because she is not. Her prince charming is not charming and she will not live happily ever after following true love's kiss. She eventually takes her fairy

godmother's advice and physically leaves her home in search of a better life. While she is gone, she learns that she will have to work hard for her happily ever after. She stops relying on others to save her and begins to work for a happy life for herself, as her fairy godmother does. Ella learns how to live in a world where she has to take care of herself, and Ella and her fairy godmother gain an appreciation for one another once the fairy godmother finds reason to respect her and Ella matures. This touches upon the Mother/Daughter Split and "matrophobia," which Murdock describes. Murdock explains how girls have more opportunities than their mothers did at their age due to the progression of time. As a result, the daughter does not understand the relative ease of her circumstance and is angry that her mother accepts her own fate. The daughter is terrified of becoming like her mother. Meanwhile, the mother is jealous of her daughter's seemingly endless opportunities, and tries to stifle her daughter. The mother simultaneously wants her daughter to grow up to be successful, but feels inadequate if her daughter passes her in education or profession. Though the fairy godmother and Ella are in slightly different positions than parent and child, much of this is still applicable; the fairy godmother wants Ella to succeed, and is frustrated that Ella is not taking advantage of the opportunities with which she is providing Ella. Ella, on the other hand, believes that she is living in a fairy tale and does not need to be hardworking like her fairy godmother.

This split is even more significant in "Goldi, Locks and Red's Dead Grandma," which takes place long after the previous two stories. For this story, I abandoned Campbell's journey model(though these elements can undoubtedly still be found) and focused on Maureen Murdock's assertions. This Mother/Daughter Split appears in the relationship between Grandma Greene and Mrs. Bere, and again between Locks and her mother. Mrs. Bere explains how this split manifested itself in her relationship with her mother, and Locks sees it paralleled in her own

life, and decides to attempt to heal this split and reform the broken relationship. Also in this story, William tries to protect Rachel because he sees her as a younger, weaker being, even though her profession involves dealing with dead bodies. Murdock insists that women are often viewed as the weaker sex, because they are seen as emotional beings and showing emotion is considered to be a sign of weakness. This is why it is important that Rachel is allowed to cry at the end of the story. She is a strong character, and crying does not show weakness in her; rather, she demonstrates that crying is an acceptable response to her situation. As William protects Rachel, Goldi feels a need to protect Locks, though both Rachel and Locks are capable of taking care of themselves. Locks and Rachel are part of a team, which makes their bond tighter than it would be otherwise, but they also share in Murdock's circle of womanhood, which means that they form a community of women who look out for one another; they each try to take the burden off of one another, going out of their way, as I mentioned earlier, to take care of one another and keep one another happy. They give one another the support that they both need and offer one another a safe place to share their feelings and to strengthen the bond between them.

This project aims to break down stereotypes by satirizing them, and to open a dialogue about the roles of women in literature and the effects they have on societal views of gender. This conversation will draw attention to the double standards attached to gender, hopefully sparking interest in creating new literature that will more accurately reflect the gender equality that we as a society strive for. New perspectives created in literature will inform the subconscious opinions that shape our world, inspiring true equality rather than the current system of mere expectations which are impossible due to our deeply-rooted subliminal prejudices.

## From Spun Yarn

Briar Rose's eyelids fluttered open. She stared straight into piercing blue eyes. Standing over her was a stranger whom she had never seen before. How did he get in her room? How did *she* get in her room? She tried to remember the night before, but the last thing she could remember was sitting down at her brand new spinning wheel, a present for her sixteenth birthday.

"Good morning, Princess," cooed the stranger. "Did you get enough beauty rest?"

Briar Rose sat up and looked around the room. Her parents stood in the doorway, appearing relieved. She could tell that worried expressions had just drained from their faces; this gave her the feeling that she had been comatose for quite some time.

"I am Prince Robert. I have travelled from my kingdom of Eloria to wake you. You have been under a terrible curse for two weeks."

Briar Rose nodded slowly, taking in his words. "Thank you for waking me," she began. "I'm sorry you went through all that trouble to--"

"No trouble at all, my princess," he whispered. "I am glad that you are well again. And you are every bit as beautiful and graceful as they say."

"Thank you. Again, I appreciate the effort you went through to wake me. Now, if you don't mind--"

"Of course, you'll want some time to adjust to being awake again. I will wait for you downstairs, and then we can discuss the wedding arrangements."

"Wedding arrangements? Who is getting married?"

"Why, we are, my love!" Prince Robert brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. "And it will be a fabulous wedding, the one you've always dreamed of."

"We're so happy for you, sweetheart," beamed her father. "We will be in the dining room when you are ready." After flashing a dazzling smile at her, the prince exited the room with Briar Rose's parents, leaving her bewildered and feeling rather imposed upon.

Briar Rose slid her feet to the floor and stood up too quickly. She steadied herself on the bed. She was suddenly very hungry. When she regained her balance, she shuffled across the plush gold carpet to her closet for a dress and some shoes. As she dressed, she contemplated her position.

Clearly this prince had travelled quite a distance to rescue her. And she was grateful to him, because while she could not recall being asleep, she imagined it must have been a dreadful experience for her parents and her kingdom, Avenalia. She found her brush where she had left it the morning of her birthday, on her dresser. She sat on the delicate maroon chair in front of the mirror and frowned at her reflection as she brushed out the tangles in her long, golden hair.

Though she was happy she was awake again, and she figured that she was probably indebted to Prince Robert in some way, she was not sure that marriage was in order. Of course, she knew it had to happen soon, but to this stranger who woke her by-- a kiss? She could feel the remnants of the unsolicited resuscitation lingering on her lips. She frowned again and opened her drawer, pulling out a tube of light pink shimmering lipstick.

Was marrying this prince really the correct way to repay him for his bravery and kindness? How brave did he have to be, anyway? The roads between kingdoms were much safer after the end of The Troll Wars a few years ago. And honestly, she couldn't defend against his attack because, well, she was unconscious. Unconscious girls can't see how long it takes to work up the courage to plant the kiss, and Briar Rose certainly had no memory of the act, so if he made a mistake, she wouldn't know the difference! She did not know anything about him; surely

getting married would be a mistake. Besides, there was something about him, the way he spoke to her and touched her that she didn't quite like. "My princess." She wasn't his princess. Was she? Her parents seemed to think so. Her father had always been very protective of her; if he sanctioned this marriage, then perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad thing. Briar Rose didn't like the idea very much, but as she replaced her tiara on her head, she knew that she didn't have many reasons to object to the marriage. She had always been told that she would marry a prince one day. Why not this prince? She tucked a golden strand of hair out of her eyes and turned away from the mirror, ready to descend the stairs with her usual grace and poise.

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Briar Rose ascended the stairs toward her room in utter shock. Tomorrow? The wedding is tomorrow? *That's not enough time even to acquire a wedding dress!* she had insisted. But it seemed that all the details of her wedding had been worked out already: the dress would arrive in the morning, the guests were already in the castle and the soon-to-be sixteen-layered cake was in the oven. Even the rings would be in the throne room by early afternoon. Briar Rose wished she could have at least planned the ceremony herself; she had been sketching wedding dresses since she was five years old. But tomorrow evening she would be Mrs. Prince Robert, and there was nothing she could do about it. She was assured that the wedding should not be postponed, that everything would be perfect and she was so lucky that Prince Robert had rescued her. Her father was thrilled with her fiancé, but to Briar Rose he seemed pushy, egotistical and--

"Self-entitled!" Briar Rose jumped as she heard her thoughts spoken aloud. Or, rather, shrieked.

"Self-entitled!" shrilled the voice. "I'll bet that princess thinks *she'll* be running the merged kingdoms when she marries our son!"

"Hush, dear," came a deeper voice. "Please. Someone will hear you." A door nearby closed quickly. Cautiously, Briar Rose slipped off her heels and inched towards the voices, which continued, naturally hushed by the door.

"It's obvious," said the first voice, "that she doesn't want to marry him. She wants to rule her own kingdom. She won't let Robert take control. What a waste of potion! We shouldn't have given her the antidote! There are no other heirs. We could have been patient and waited for that old king to die! His wife couldn't have stopped us from taking the throne by force without him."

"But Minerva, darling, you know we can't afford to wait that long. We're nearly out of money as it is. Merging the kingdoms is our only option. And Robert can be... well, we know from experience that he's not the best at wooing young princesses. If only he had known that the young lady was about to inherit, he wouldn't have insulted her. But he treated her so badly that she fled the kingdom just to get away from him! I've never known a suitor as abysmal as our son! This potion was our best chance, and putting the antidote on our son's lips was your greatest plan. Her parents, at least, are grateful. She'll come around, in time."

"If she doesn't, she'll find herself in a more permanent sleep. Where is my fan? We should go see about the wedding arrangements. They had better import the food that I suggested. It would be dreadful if we had to eat anything from this lousy kingdom. At least it has money. And don't forget to dispose of that bottle, George! I cannot believe you brought it with you. The last thing we need is for anyone to find it."

Briar Rose felt sick. She had heard enough, and wanted to forget everything she had heard. She was about to continue to her room when she heard the door open. She quickly ducked behind a nearby suit of armor and held her breath as her future mother-in-law strutted by, with her future father-in-law trailing behind her. She waited until they were safely down the stairs.

Then she scrambled out from her hiding place and dashed past the door she had listened at moments earlier. As soon as she passed it, she paused. The door was not shut entirely. She retreated a few steps and pulled it shut, but after a moment, it opened again. *It must be broken,* she thought. *I wonder if Michael can fix it?* Just as she was turning away from the door, her eyes fixed on the small garbage pail inside the room.

Briar Rose pushed the door open wider and entered. Her heart was pounding. She tiptoed over to the garbage pail and looked inside. All she saw was crumpled paper. She picked up a wad and opened it. It was completely blank. Something slipped to the floor. She stooped and picked it up. It was a needle, and the very tip was green. Peering into the garbage pail again, she saw a small vial with a little green liquid still in it. Carefully she lifted it out, wrapped it and the needle in the piece of paper, tucked the parcel into her shoe and put both heels back on her feet. Then she sped for the door.

Just as she reached it, she found herself face-to-face with King George. The expression on his face was just as surprised as hers must have been. "Princess," he blurted anxiously, "what are you doing in my room?"

"Oh-- your room? Is it your room? I did not realize-- that is, I had no idea you were-- the door," she stammered. "The door was open, and I tried to shut it, but it would not shut, and then I thought I saw a robin outside the window, and robins are my favorite, so I went to get a closer look...." she babbled. "But then it flew away. So I was just leaving. Good day." Briar Rose stepped past him.

"George? Did you get rid of the potion?" Briar Rose froze. She felt Queen Minerva's eyes on the back of her head. "George," she said quietly. "Grab her."

King George circled around the young princess and stood in front of her. "Step into the room please, Princess." His words were arsenic brewed with honey.

"I really must be going, I have to-- change for dinner," Briar Rose tried desperately to sidestep King George, but to no avail. He gripped her arm and tugged her back through the open door. He briskly left and shut it behind him, holding the door closed.

"Minerva, can we talk about this?"

"We can't have her prancing about the castle now, " she hissed. "She knows too much."

"Can't we say it's a beauty potion or something? Keeping you so young and beautiful, darling."

"Don't try to flatter me," she snapped. "You'll fail miserably as always. Lock the door. We'll figure something out later."

Briar Rose heard the key turn in the lock and her in-laws' muffled footsteps shuffling away. She tried jiggling the doorknob, but the key had been effective. She knew she had to escape before they returned and realized the potion was missing. She searched the room frantically for another way out. Her eyes stopped when they reached the window. She forced them to keep moving, but she could no longer see anything else in the room. She walked over to the window; the room was on the third floor. *I can't jump, I'll die.* She turned and looked at the door again. She could pound on it and scream for help, but the thought of anyone finding her there, in distress twice in one day, was mortifying. She had an image to uphold; what would her subjects say if they knew their princess was constantly in need of rescue? Once was fine, charming even-- many of her fellow princesses had found themselves in similar positions. But she didn't want to push her luck-- if being poisoned by her future in-laws could be considered

lucky. Besides, King George and Queen Minerva could come back and take away her power of speech. Or movement. Or both.

She walked over to the door and tried jiggling the handle again. Then she had an idea; she removed the bobby pin holding her hair back and looked at it. She had heard about this trick. She stuck it in the lock and wiggled it around for a few minutes, turning it this way and that, trying the door handle again, leaning against the door. Eventually she gave up and returned to the window. *It's a long way down.* She had heard rumors of a girl who had escaped from a locked room using only her hair. She leaned out the window. The girl who did that must have had *really* long hair. *Hmm, close. If only my hair was just two and three-quarters floors longer.* There must not be any barbers in that girl's kingdom. Briar Rose made a mental note to send one-- if she ever got out of this room alive. She pulled her upper body back in the window.

Glancing around the room from her new vantage point, her eyes were drawn to her guests' bed. It had been freshly made by a maid. She walked over to the bed but quickly gave up that plan; she didn't fancy the idea of dangling out of a window relying on poorly tied bed sheets any more than she did with hair. She looked out the window again, this time straight down the side of her castle, and concluded that the wall was not perfectly flat; she could see enough stones protruding from the castle to convey her downward. She took a deep breath, opened the window, and thrust her head and arms out. Briar Rose grabbed the top of the window and hoisted her waist, legs and finally her feet out onto the ledge. She glanced down for a moment and suddenly felt very dizzy. *Okay, Rose. Slowly.* She looked down for her first foothold and lowered herself slowly onto it, shifting all her weight onto that stone. Then the next one, and the next, until she reached the second floor window. She glanced in the window and saw no one. *Thank goodness*

*no one will see me like this.* She was halfway through completing this thought when she heard a voice shout "Hey!" from below.

*Oh, thornbushes!* She called out, "Don't mind me, carry on."

"Princess? Princess, is that you?"

Briar Rose hazarded another glance to the ground. "Michael!" she sighed, relieved. "I'm so glad it's only you."

"Rose.... What are you doing up there?"

"Oh, you know, I thought I'd start training for the Kingdom Surveillance Agency."

"Well.... Do you need any help?"

"No, it's alright, I'm almost down." She continued descending until she reached the first floor, but the window was still a few feet above the ground, and she couldn't see any footholds close enough to reach from where she was. She looked around, unsure. "If I jump now, will I break my leg?"

"Don't worry, I'll catch you. Jump!" Briar Rose leapt from the ledge and felt Michael's arms catch her, one under her knees and the other behind her back.

"Thanks, Michael. I owe you one."

"No problem," Michael replied, "but will you tell me what you were doing up there?"

Briar Rose told her friend how she had overheard that she been put under a spell by Prince Robert's parents, how he had roused her with the antidote, that she was to be married to him tomorrow evening and finished by explaining that she had been caught and locked in the third floor bedroom. When she finished, he looked at her in shock.

"That's terrible! What are you going to do with the potion?"

"I don't know yet. I just thought I should grab it, because it was right there.... I don't think I'm going to do anything with it."

"But they poisoned you, Rose. This is a setup. And they locked you in a room," he continued. "You're not actually going to marry the guy, are you?"

"That 'guy' is Prince Robert. Don't let anyone catch you calling him anything else. I don't want you to get into trouble."

"Me? Trouble? Forget about me, Rose. *You* are in trouble. You don't know what these people-- what the King and Queen-- are capable of. Do you love Prince Robert?"

The princess hesitated. No one had asked her this, and she hadn't had time to contemplate it. "Love him? I don't know him."

"Well, do you *like* him? As a person. Is he anything like the List?" The List was a list of qualities Briar Rose had started when she was about nine and had edited every few years. The person who fit the description on the List was her ideal prince.

"Well, I'm not sure," she said slowly. "I mean, I don't really know him. We haven't really spoken at all. And I didn't very much like the way he touched my hair and called me his princess, as though I were already his.... But regardless of the fact that it was a setup, he *did* save me."

"Rose." Michael stared intensely into her eyes. He was the only person who looked at her this way-- like he cared what she thought, like he urgently needed her to listen to him. As though she would disregard what he said. She realized now that everyone took her good-natured attitude for granted. Her parents, her friends, everybody knew she was listening and obeying. She never resisted. But not Michael. Why was it that the only human being who treated her like a real person with thoughts, feelings and a will was a farmer's son? "It shouldn't matter that he saved you. You can be grateful, but you don't owe him anything. It's unfortunate that he was cursed

with terrible parents, but he doesn't own you, and he never will. Only *you* can own you. If you love him, I'm happy for you. But if you don't want to marry him, you definitely are not obligated to. Please, Rose. Don't let them push you into a marriage you'll regret." His eyes had softened. *He's right*, she thought. *Who does Prince Robert think he is, bursting in and demanding a wedding?*

"Thank you, Michael," Briar Rose smiled up at him. "I'll see you later. I need to go talk to him. I'm calling off the wedding."

"There you go," Michael grinned back. "Although it's a shame, really. I would have loved to see a royal wedding."

"You know you wouldn't have been invited."

"No?" he raised his eyebrows. "Then I'd have to crash it."

Briar Rose pictured him smashing a window in the ballroom and swinging through it on a rope. She laughed. "Perhaps someday you'll get that chance, Michael. Thanks again."

"Anytime, Princess." Michael bowed. "Tell Charming I wish him luck in finding any girl willing to marry a guy at first sight." He turned and walked away.

"That's *Prince* Charming, to you," she called after him. He grinned at her over his shoulder and jogged back toward his home.

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Briar Rose pulled open the front door of her castle and made her way through the great hall to the throne room. Since she had been unconscious for the duration of Prince Robert's stay in the castle, she needed to ask her father where in the castle Prince Robert was staying, or where he would most likely be in these hours of free time between lunch and dinner. She walked as swiftly as decorum would allow, anxious to find him as soon as possible. In fact, her feet were

moving so quickly that her foot began to hurt from rubbing against the bottle in her shoe. She slowed her pace and stopped. She lifted her foot and leaned over, one hand against a dining room chair to steady herself, reaching for her heel.

"Princess!" Briar Rose straightened quickly and turned around. "There you are, I've been looking for you."

"Prince Robert," Briar Rose exclaimed. "I was just looking for *you*. There's something I need to tell you--"

Prince Robert interrupted her speech. "My dear Briar Rose," he began, "I need to tell you something as well. Please," he continued, putting a finger to her lips when she parted them to speak, "allow me to go first." The stunned princess politely consented. "My princess, I must speak on behalf of my parents. They tell me there was an... incident this afternoon, and they asked me to clear it up for you. You see, my father has an excruciatingly painful condition in which his back does not permit him to sit or stand or walk or even lie down for more than a few minutes at a time. He takes a special potion for this pain, one acquired by a powerful, albeit dark, wizard. Recently, he has decided to try another method for the pain. We tried to keep the potion a secret, because nobody wants a weak king, and dealings with evil wizards are-- less than desirable. When they encountered you earlier, they panicked. They are dreadfully sorry for what happened, my love."

Briar Rose looked into Prince Robert's eyes. She was surprised to find that she was not surprised. *Of course*. Somehow, she had known all along. She smiled, perhaps a bit too brightly. "Oh, well if that is all. I knew there had to be an explanation."

"So we understand each other?" Prince Robert searched her eyes fiercely. "My parents are under the impression that you got the wrong idea earlier, and we do not want any... misunderstandings."

"Of course, my prince," Briar Rose replied sweetly. "I wouldn't want any misunderstandings to prevent our marriage tomorrow. I understand you perfectly."

"Good." Prince Robert seemed to release tension from his entire body. "Then I will see you at dinner, Princess."

"Or sooner," Briar Rose beamed.

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Robert entered the throne room. His bride and her father were late to dinner. He hoped everything was in order.

"... a very wise decision, Briar Rose," the king was saying to her.

"Your Majesty, the queen is awaiting your presence at the table."

"Of course, Robert. The princess here was just announcing her decision to meet you at the altar tomorrow evening."

"Announcing her decision?" Robert almost choked. "I thought the wedding was set?"

"Naturally, the final choice in the matter rests with the bride and groom. Princess Briar Rose has expressed how eager she is for tomorrow night."

"Yes. After tomorrow night, I know I will be happy for the rest of my life."

"Well," said Robert, who was very pleased with this declaration, "I, too, will be very happy. For I will have acquired the most beautiful rose in the garden." He took her hand in his and bowed, kissing it gently. This was his signature move. The ladies loved it.

"Well, I don't know about *that*," said the ever humble princess.

"Trust me, daughter," said the king, "you are exceedingly beautiful, but more importantly, you have made your own brave decision, and your mother and I are exceedingly proud."

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The golden hall was beautiful, decorated tastefully with pink and white roses, in moderation. The guests, all nobility, were absolutely stunning, from Lord Grimm and his brother to the foreign dignitaries King Leon and Queen Ariana. But the bride, in her ballet slipper pink dress with golden accents, outshone them all. She walked down the aisle to the rhythm of the organ music with dignity and poise. When she reached the makeshift altar, however, she turned suddenly to the guests and spoke.

"My dear people," she began, "you have gathered here today to witness a wedding. The wedding of your princess and her savior, the handsome young prince who is expected to join his kingdom with mine, and rule them both together. The handsome young prince who woke the sleeping beauty from a dreadful, cursed, deathlike sleep." She paused. "I am sorry to disappoint you." Prince Robert's smile began to melt into an open-lipped line, then a frown. "The deathlike sleep was a trap, and the handsome young prince--" she shot him a look "the hunter."

The hall was dead silent for a moment, until the princess spoke again. "I present to you the evidence--" the priest handed the vial and needle to the princess "that Prince Robert's parents poisoned me with a potion. The antidote was administered to me through the lips of the deceitful young prince who stands before you." Four guards escorted King George and Queen Minerva to where their son stood. All eyes in the room were now on the foreign family. "King George, Queen Minerva and Prince Robert," she continued, "I hereby banish you from all the lands of this kingdom, from now until the end of time," she pulled the white rose from his suit and

snapped it in half, letting the pieces flutter through her fingers to the ground. "I reject your proposal of marriage," the trio was escorted from the room. She looked at her father, who was beaming at her, and delivered her last line directly to him. "And I will not marry and take the throne." With that, the princess walked back down the aisle in the silence of the grand hall, pushed open the door and left, leaving her surprised subjects alone with her no longer smiling father, his face blank with shock.

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The door to the barn opened, and Michael stood in the doorway. "Really classy, Rose," he called out.

"How did you know I would be in here?"

"Honestly? You're pretty predictable."

"I guess word travels quickly here."

"Not usually. But a princess running out on her own wedding after banishing the groom and renouncing the throne-- a story like that only comes around once in a lifetime. Maybe more, if it's your lifetime we're talking about."

"And you disapprove?"

"Not at all. On the contrary, I think shoving the cake in his face was a nice touch. I only wish I could have joined you."

Briar Rose laughed. "I guess they didn't get all the details right."

"Is it true, then? You gave up the kingdom?"

"Yeah. I'm getting out of here. I'm not going to let them push me into another marriage. And maybe I'll never get married at all. But I won't stick around here to give them the chance to dictate my life anymore. I'm writing my own story."

"But, Rose," Michael postulated, "you're still the princess. And the people need you, regardless of your marital status. You're the sole heir to the throne. Think of all the effort that was put into building this glorious kingdom. Think of the chaos that will ensue if you abdicate. Do you really want to bring that on your people? On me?"

"Oh, you'll rise up, quell the masses and be king yourself."

Michael stared at her for a moment, looking for a smile, but he found none. He shook his head. "They don't want a farmer's son for a king. They want their brave, daring princess on the throne. The princess who stood up for them and herself against an outside threat at the youthful age of sixteen. You proved to everyone in only two days that you can take care of yourself and keep this kingdom safe. You can also climb out of a window and down the side of the castle, and I bet you five of your best horses that no ruler has ever done *that* before. You're unique, and very capable. Your people need you, and they want you," Michael said. "So what do you say? Do you want to make this a princessdom?"

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Princess Briar Rose looked out at the crowd of people before her. Her people. She smiled as she felt the weight of the crown on her head. This coronation ceremony was her wedding. This-- princessdom was her partner. It was her future, and it was all she needed for now. She would care for the land and the people who lived there. Her parents had consented, her people had consented, and she had consented. With her new responsibilities, she would most likely have little time for her new spinning wheel, but she would soon burn it anyway. She would have less time to spend with Michael, as well; at least, they would have less time together to carelessly make trouble for everyone else, as they had in childhood. But for all the freedoms she forfeited by accepting her new role as protector, she would gain many more; even foreign powers would,

in time, recognize and respect her capability and control, not only over her land, but over herself.

For the first time in her life, she felt awake.

Case File: Ella Merchant

I arrived at work on Monday morning to find the following papers in a folder on my desk:

Name: Ella Merchant

Nickname(s): Cinderella

Age: 23

Location: Merchant Manor, King Frederick Avenue, Eloria

Family: Living: Stepmother, Evelyn; Stepsister, Annelise; Stepsister, Isabelle

Deceased: Father, John; Mother, Emmeline; Brother, William

Friends: None

Occupation: Servant

Notes: Ella Merchant has been a servant in her own home since the day her father, John, perished in an accident on the road four years ago. Ella's mother, Emmeline, and younger brother, William, died tragically in a bakery fire in the village square seven years prior. Her father remarried Evelyn, a widowed mother of two. Evelyn holds Ella prisoner on the mansion grounds.

Plan of Action: \_\_\_\_\_

This was my boss's not-so-subtle way of telling me that the proper time had arrived to start working on this case. Attached to it was a note in her unmistakable hand which read

*Fall Ball*

I pulled out my crystal ball from my bottom desk drawer and wiped it gently with its cloth as I set it down. I gazed into it for a few moments, seeing the beautifully clad men and women at King George's annual ball. Really it was Queen Minerva who wanted the ball each year, but everyone ignored this small detail.

Plan of Action: Evelyn Merchant and her daughters will be attending the Fall Ball. This opportunity of isolation will be used to procure an escape and relocation for Ella.

After finishing the form, I waved my hand over the paper to duplicate it, and tapped it twice with the tip of my wand. The copy vanished, instantly on its way to my boss's desk. The

Fall Ball was three days later, so I had some time to prepare a more detailed plan. But this brief summary would be enough to satisfy Queen Mab-- she's my boss.

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The day of the Fall Ball arrived, and I spent the morning reviewing my plan and my notes on Miss Ella Merchant. Queen Mab had assigned Ella's case to me when Evelyn married John and moved into the house; right away our scouts suspected that Ella would need us in the future. It turned out worse than we had expected when John died, and my boss almost took the case away to give it to someone more experienced. Fortunately for me (and hopefully for Ella), the Blue Fairy couldn't afford to take on another human godchild, so I was allowed to keep the case. I needed it to prove myself; it would be my first major case, and hopefully would be my key to more cases. I love being a fairy godmother, but most of the time I feel as though I'm not doing much to help. Until I could prove myself with a real case, I was responsible for keeping track of the other fairy godparents' cases. My official job was to file reports on magic used on the job, identify children in need of a fairy godparent, and take inventory on fairy dust (fairy dust is very precious. A little goes a long way, but we can't do magic without it). But unofficially, I tracked each child's needs and what fairies did to help them. Ella Merchant was in desperate need of assistance, and I wanted to be as prepared as possible when it came time to act.

That evening, I watched Evelyn, Annelise and Isabelle ride away from the manor in their carriage through my crystal ball. As soon as they turned the corner off of King Frederick Avenue, I put my crystal away and transported to Ella's front yard and knocked on the door. Twice. Three times. *Oh, pixie sticks!* I thought. I should have looked in the crystal ball to see where she was. I'd made a huge mistake and I'd only just arrived! I walked around the manor to the gardens in the back. There she was, sitting at the fountain, gazing into the pool, tears splashing drop by drop, merging with the fountain water. She was quite a picturesque sight, very beautiful, very dramatic, and I was thrilled. I glided over to Ella and prepared my most fairy godmother-y voice. I knew I was making history-- my big moment, the start of my great career.

"Hello, Ella," I said softly, gently, like the delicate flutter of butterfly wings. "I'm your fairy godmother. I'm here to help you."

Ella's tears disappeared and she looked up at me. "I knew it!" she stood up for a better look at me. "My very own fairy godmother! I hoped you would come to me tonight, and now you're here."

This was an unexpected reaction, but I supposed fairy godmother activity *had* increased this generation, so I shouldn't be surprised that my arrival wasn't... well, a surprise. I turned to her garden and waved my wand over the most perfect-looking pumpkin I could find. Then I transformed the four mice which I had brought with me (making mice would have been a waste of dust) into four strong horses, and found a salamander in the garden to drive them. He still had the inclination to crawl away after he had been changed, but I coaxed him out from between the rows of cabbages and showed him that he could stand upright. Then I turned to Ella. She was looking at me expectantly, and I would soon find out why.

"Thank you so much, Fairy Godmother! It's beautiful!"

"Now you'd better be on your way! You have so many exciting adventures waiting for you."

"Oh, yes! But I can't possibly go to the Fall Ball in this dress."

"Fall Ball?"

"Mmhm. Perhaps a golden dress. That would catch Prince Robert's eye."

"Prince Robert?"

"You *can* make the dress gold, can't you, Fairy Godmother?"

"I... I..." I stuttered.

"Oh. Well, how about a blue one then? With matching shoes?"

"No no, I can make gold dresses," I began. "But... you don't understand, my dear Ella. I'm not here to help you go to the Fall Ball."

"You-- you aren't?"

"Oh, no. I'm here to help you escape. You can start a new life anywhere you want! You won't have to work for your stepmother or stepsisters anymore." Ella did not look enthused. At all. *Oh, pixie sticks.* It wasn't supposed to be this difficult.

"But I'd really like to go to the Fall Ball."

"If you went to the ball, how would you get away? Your stepmother and stepsisters would see you and--"

"Can't you make a spell so that they won't recognize me?"

"Well, yes, but--"

"Then everything will be fine! They won't know it's me, I'll meet the prince and we'll live happily ever after!"

"But, Ella, you don't know Prince Robert."

"He's a prince. He must be so wonderful!" I couldn't even bear to look at the dreamy, glossy looks that covered her face.

"Ella, I'm giving you a real opportunity to change your life."

"But I just want to go to the Fall Ball. Even if nothing changes after tonight, I just want this one night to remember forever. Can't you understand? Won't you help me?"

I looked at her doubtfully for a minute. I chewed on the tip of my wand. I glanced at the pumpkin carriage with the mice horses and the salamander man. All this work so that this silly girl could have one night off? I'd used so much dust already, and a masking spell would double

what I'd used. Then there's the fancy dress and shoes and hair and jewelry.... I mean, I couldn't send her there half-finished. I sighed.

"Fine," I submitted, "if you're certain this is what you want?"

"Oh, yes!" Her eyes shone again. "This is all I want, thank you! So then, a golden dress?"

I rolled my eyes. "Sure." I waved my wand over her dress, and it turned into a pretty decent ball gown. I'm no fashion designer, but it was still beautiful.

"And glass slippers."

"Definitely not. Glass slippers will dig into your feet or the heels will break off-- too many problems. You can have matching gold slippers." I gave her a pair of well-fitting shoes that were soft and the same shade as her new dress.

"Now I'm ready! Oh, but wait. Do the spell so that my stepfamily won't know it's me."

"That's very powerful magic," I cautioned her. "I can't make it last for very long. In fact, it's usually done by multiple fairies together, and only in cases where there isn't an alternative, like during escape plans. But--" I checked the time on my wand. "It's just after seven o'clock now, so this spell should last until midnight. Make sure you get out of there by midnight, or else Evelyn will make your life harder than it already is."

"I will, I definitely will! Thank you so much!"

I cast the spell. It was a lot more effort than even I had predicted, and I was pretty tired from all the exertion. I started making plans to take the next day off, which wouldn't be a big deal as long as I sent in my paperwork, because I'd be finished with the case. "I guess this is it then. You're sure this is what you want? You'll go to the Fall Ball and then return to your life here?"

"Unless Prince Robert has anything to say about it," she giggled.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes again. "Alright, dear," I said, reviving my fairy godmother-y voice. "Goodbye. Have a wonderful night at the ball." I waved my wand and returned home. That couldn't have been worse. I was exhausted, and I hadn't even rescued Ella. I was *so* going to lose my job over that girl.

\*\*\*

I took the next day off from work because honestly, I needed it. I even slept in. I woke up about an hour before lunch, and I floated downstairs to fix myself some food. Honey on toast, because I certainly deserved it this week. As I ate my breakfast, a figure appeared in front of me in a flash of light. If I were at work, I'd be honored that Queen Mab had made the trip personally to see me, but because of the events of last night, my boss was the last person I wanted to see. Why couldn't I have been born human? Humans don't have this problem of bosses popping up in their living rooms on their days off.

I didn't have time to be embarrassed that she had caught me in my pajamas before Queen Mab shoved a piece of paper into my face without so much as a "Good morning."

"Read this," she ordered. I looked at the piece of paper. "Out loud," she insisted.

I took the paper and read it while I dumped last night's takeout in the trash. I'd been much too tired to take care of it last night, and now Queen Mab would think I was a slob. "Plan of Action: Evelyn Merchant and her daughters will be attending the Fall Ball. This opportunity of isolation will be used to procure an escape and relocation for Ella."

"*Escape and relocation*," she quoted back to me. "What part of that was so complicated for you? This was *your plan*, Aleila. How could you mess it up this badly?"

"Your Majesty, it wasn't my fault. Miss Merchant refused to relocate. She just wanted to go to that dumb ball." I averted her eyes as I sat down again. There was nothing I could have done to change Ella's mind, and I really hoped I wasn't going to be fired before my real work began.

"That girl is miserable. You need to fix this."

"Your Majesty--" I waved my hand over another slice of bread, toasting it, and spread honey over the top. "I did my best. She wouldn't be convinced! Aren't we in the wish-granting business? I granted her wish. It isn't my fault if she was wrong about what she wanted-- or needed."

"It is your job to teach her what she needs, and of course she has to learn it for herself, so I don't fault you for sending her to the ball. What you've done so far is fine, and I'm impressed. I'm not even upset about all the dust you used last night" -- I cringed visibly-- "because I can understand why you needed it. But not showing up to work today was a mistake. Now that it's over, and she realizes that it hasn't made her happy, you need to help her find herself and whatever she needs to do to get to where she wants to go. She needs you *today. Now*. So get back to her house and fix it!"

"But--" some honey slipped off the toast and onto my finger. "Pixie sticks! Sorry," I said quickly, wiping it away. "But her Steps are home now. How am I supposed to fix it with them there?"

"This is your case," she said. "You want to prove yourself, don't you? Prove it to yourself first. You can figure it out." She vanished as quickly as she'd appeared. I kicked the table leg. "*You can figure it out?*" *Thanks a lot, you've been so helpful*. At least she was trying to be encouraging. Why did my first case have to be so difficult?

\*\*\*

I appeared to Ella later that afternoon, in my Shrink Size. When I'm in my Shrink Size, I'm two inches tall, which is convenient for not being discovered by unwanted Steps. I had remembered to check my crystal this time, so I knew I'd find Ella sweeping the kitchen floor. I

landed softly on her broom and looked up at her. She had been crying again, and I had the feeling that she wouldn't expect a fancy dress to solve her problems this time.

"Oh, Fairy Godmother!" she whispered tearfully. "I'm so unhappy. Prince Robert was nothing like I thought he'd be! I thought we were in love, but when I told him I wasn't a princess, he walked away. He left me alone in the middle of the dance floor. I was so embarrassed!"

I couldn't help it, I felt a little bad for Ella. Sure, she was obnoxious and silly and hadn't listened to me at all, but what Prince Robert did to her was very rude. I made a mental note to arrange something extra special for him later.

"You were right, Fairy Godmother. I should have left last night. Now I'm here in this same old house with my same old life, but now it's even worse, because I know that there's no hope for me. I ruined my chance with my fairy godmother and now I know that the prince doesn't want me!" She burst into fresh tears. The thing I said earlier about feeling bad for her? Yeah, just forget that I said that.

"Look, Ella," I began, "if you hate it here so much, just leave. Get back in your pumpkin carriage and go somewhere."

"But... where will I go?"

"Anywhere you want! Leave this county, though, because you don't want your stepmother to find you. Perhaps even leave the kingdom. Actually, Avenalia is a beautiful, stable kingdom. I'm sure you would do very well there."

"Alright then, to Avenalia!" she cried. "But how will I get past my stepmother?"

"Leave Evelyn to me," I winked at her.

Five minutes later, while Evelyn tried to calm Annelise and Isabelle, each of whom insisted that the other had pulled her hair first(for the record, I pulled Isabelle's hair first), Ella hurried out the front door and down the road to her pumpkin carriage and on to Avenalia.

\*\*\*

Name: Ella Merchant

Nickname(s): That Beggar Girl on Thorn Street

Age: 23

Location: Thorn Street, Avenalia

Family: Living: None worth mentioning

Deceased: Father, John; Mother, Emmeline; Brother, William

Friends: None

Occupation: None

Notes: It has been nine days since Ella arrived in Avenalia and she still has not attempted to acquire a job. She spends the day begging for food and sleeps on the streets at night.

Plan of Action: Quit Fairy Godmothers Inc. ASAP.

"Useless. That girl is absolutely useless. She won't do anything for herself. Does she want me to apply for jobs for her? Or better yet, maybe she expects me to magically conjure money out of thin air!"

"Do you want me to assign her case to someone else?" Queen Mab asked me.

"Yes, please!" I was so relieved. For a second.

"That's too bad. You've already introduced yourself to her. It's too late now, she's your case."

"She won't help herself! What do you expect me to do for her?"

"This is your case," she said. "You can figure it out. But you might want to try giving her what she wants. It worked last time, didn't it?" She flicked her wand toward the door in the manner that closes the discussion. I had no choice but to leave her office.

Plan of Action:

I stared at the words for a full hour before I could come up with anything at all. Finally, a breakthrough-- perhaps.

Plan of Action: Make Ella a new dress.

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Field Report: Day Ten. Gave Ella a new dress. Old one was tattered. Told her to get job. Left. Ella began searching for work. No job yet; not giving up.

Field Report: Day Eleven. A visit from Prince Robert. Apparently the sneaky little toad tracked her here. He had planned to marry Annelise Merchant. The truth came out while arranging paperwork: the entire estate belongs to Ella, and Annelise has no property or wealth. Probably the cause of Prince Robert's sudden change of heart toward Ella. He has brought her golden slippers. Weirdo. She should probably have taken those when she ran away. Ella still

heartbroken; told Prince Robert to choke on pumpkin seeds. He will be staying in an inn for a few days to await her final answer.

Field Report: Day Twelve. Prince Robert has finally accepted Ella's "no" as an answer to his marriage proposal. He is returning home tonight. In the spirit of making her own way in the world, Ella has also rejected Merchant Manor and her fortune, except for enough to pay for room and board in an elderly woman's cottage. She has arranged for the manor to be converted into an orphanage. It will be supported by the rest of her inheritance. She has suffered through so much since leaving her home; she does not want to give up and go home now, nor does she want children to live as she has been living for the past two weeks.

Name: Ella Merchant

Nickname(s): Ella

Age: 23

Location: Castle, Avenalia

Family: Living: None

Deceased: Father, John; Mother, Emmeline; Brother, William

Friends: Many

Occupation: Maid

Notes: Ella has found a new job. She is the newest maid in the King of Avenalia's castle. No prince in Avenalia, so no ulterior motives for taking this job. Ella seems content. Her status is sustainable.

Name: Ella Merchant

Location: Castle Kitchen, Avenalia

Occupation: Chef

Notes: Ella's talents in cooking have been discovered. She has been promoted to kitchen staff and is an official chef in the castle, with room for promotion. She is happy, healthy and no longer needs a fairy godmother.

I finished the form and made a copy. Another case closed. It was a little sad, knowing I was done with Ella Merchant, probably forever. She didn't need me anymore, and I knew that. I opened my drawer and shoved the two copies inside.

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There she was, standing over the table, pouring ingredients into a large bowl, her apron covered in flour.

"Hello, Ella," I whispered.

Her face lit up. "Fairy Godmother, it's you!" She glanced around. The kitchen was empty for the moment, except for the two of us.

"I see you're busy."

"I'm making the cake for Princess Briar Rose's birthday," Ella beamed. "She's turning sixteen."

"Congratulations to her. And to you, too. You're happy now, aren't you, Ella?"

"I am. And it's all because of you."

"No, Ella. All I did was give you two dresses, transportation and a pair of gold shoes. You found this job by yourself, through hard work."

"But I wouldn't have looked for it if you hadn't encouraged me to, and I still have you to thank for telling me about Avenalia. It really is wonderful here."

"I'm glad you're doing well. I'm going to miss you, Miss Merchant. You've become so confident and successful."

"I'll miss you, too, Fairy Godmother." She smiled at me. "You'll always be watching out for me, right?"

"Of course," I assured her. "But you won't need me anymore. Goodbye, Ella." I raised my wand.

"Wait!" She paused. "Will you visit me again?"

I winked at her. "Perhaps. But hopefully just to visit. Take care of yourself, Ella."

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When I sat down at my desk, I noticed a new folder on the corner of my desk. Inside it was a single sheet of paper:

Name: Isabelle Seeva-Merchant

Nickname(s): None

Age: 21

Location: Eloria

Family: Living: Mother, Evelyn; Sister, Annelise

Deceased: Father, Matthew

Friends: None

Occupation: None

Notes: Recently lost all possessions. Former home converted to orphanage by stepsister.

Plan of Action: \_\_\_\_\_

I smiled. A new case. That meant I'd passed, and my position as a fairy godmother was solidified. Thanks to Ella. I sent the copy of my final report on Ella Merchant to Queen Mab's desk and slipped the original into Ella Merchant's folder. Thus concludes The Cinderella Case, and she has, through the present date, lived happily ever after.

May all your wishes be granted,

*Aleila*

Fairy Godmother

Fairy Godmothers Inc.

## Goldi, Locks and Red's Dead Grandma

"What big eyes you have, Grandma," she said.

"The better to see you with, my dear," said the imposter in the bed in a high, rough voice that sounded very fake and nothing like Grandma.

"And what big ears you have."

"The better to hear you with, my dear."

"What big hands you have."

"The better to bake cookies for you, my dear."

"And what big teeth you have!"

"The better to EAT the cookies with, my dear!"

"William Wendell Woolf, give up. I know you're not Grandma. Where is she?"

"What do you mean, my dear? It's me, Grandma!"

She looked around the room for anything out of place; it was a habit which she had brought home from work. Always vigilant, always looking for something out of the ordinary, someone who didn't belong. *Is the bathroom door usually closed?* She didn't think so. Grandma Greene had an open door policy-- open front door, open back door, all doors open in between. If she wasn't using the bathroom, it was open. She strode briskly to the door and knocked.

"Grandma Greene? Are you in there?"

"Don't go in!" shouted William Woolf. "Please, Rachel, don't go in, okay? Just come over here and sit down, and we'll have a talk--"

Rachel pulled open the door to the tiny bathroom and a hand landed on her foot. She stood perfectly still as she gazed down at Grandma Greene's tiny, lifeless body lying on the floor.

"Rachel, I'm so sorry.... I don't know what happened! I came over to check on her and--"

Rachel checked for a pulse, though she had no hope. "Have you called the police?"

"I was about to, but then I heard you coming up the road. I didn't want you to have to see...."

Rachel took out her radio and pressed a few buttons. "I deal with dead bodies every day, William. I'm fine. You should have told me. Besides, you make a terrible Grandma Greene. Don't quit your day job. Hello, yes, it's Red Hood. I'm reporting a death. Grandma Greene. Mhm. Of course, I'll stay here, thank you." She put the radio back in her pocket. "You have to stay and tell the police your story."

"I showed up and found her body. That's all there is to tell."

"They'll need more than that, William. You're wearing her clothes. You know that makes you a suspect, right? You shouldn't have touched anything."

"Wait, you don't think I--?"

"No," said Red Hood, "But they will."

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The policeman frowned at William. "You say you were just coming over to check on Mrs. Greene?"

"Yeah, she's my neighbor. My mom always said neighbors gotta look out for each other. Plus Grandma Greene made the best cookies, man. I come over every few days to make sure she's alright and usually she's just taking out some fresh baked cookies."

"I see. And you were in her bed and wearing her clothes?"

"That was for lil' Rachel. She's like a sister to me, and I know she loved Grandma Greene. Rachel came over here every single day. I didn't want Rachel to see the body, so I panicked."

"Mmhm."

"What? You don't believe me?"

"I find it hard to believe that a punk like you just cares so much about old ladies and little girls."

"I'm twenty-four," said Rachel. "I'm not little anymore."

"Which makes me question why William here felt the need to don the deceased's clothing and get in her bed."

"I told you, Rachel's like my little sister. I was trying to protect her!"

"Tell it to the judge," said the officer, pulling out a pair of handcuffs.

"Is this really necessary?" Rachel asked.

"Yes, it is," said the policeman, "and if you weren't who you are, I'd be taking you in, too."

"Who I am?' You're ruling me out as a suspect because I'm a Kingdom Surveillance Agent?"

"No. I'm ruling you out as a suspect because I don't think young girls are capable of murder. Besides, I'm sure that if anyone killed Grandma Greene, it must have been Woolf. Only a punk like him would kill a sweet old lady."

\*\*\*

"Red Hood."

"Locks! What's up?"

"I need a favor. Let me take the lead on the Grandma Greene case."

Red Hood shook her head. "The princess gave me the case. I told her I wanted it."

"I know, but Red Hood, you'll work too hard. I already interrogated Woolf about your reaction to Grandma Greene's death. Have you even let yourself take a moment to pause and think about how you feel? To experience your emotions?"

"I'll experience emotions when we find out what happened to Grandma Greene."

"Red Hood, look. I know you want to help, but this isn't healthy. You have to take it easy, not step it up. You can't let this investigation distract you from your grief. I know you felt like she was your own grandmother. Please. I'll take the case, and you can take it back if I miss anything or you aren't happy with my work. It's not about credit for the case-- you can put your name on it anyway. I just can't justify letting all the weight fall on your shoulders."

Red Hood hesitated, but she realized Locks was right. "I guess I do need to take some time to process everything. I do want this investigation to be thorough and I don't want to make any mistakes because I can't focus. Thanks for doing this for me, Locks. I owe you one."

"No problem. You need to keep yourself at a distance right now. Let's just get the job done so you can let yourself let out your emotions. It isn't good to keep it all bottled up."

"But I want to be involved. I shouldn't be the main investigator right now, but I can still stand as your lookout."

"Talk to Goldi. If he's okay with it, I won't object. But I think you should sit this one out."

"I can't. Not until we find the truth."

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"Goldi to Locks, Goldi to Locks, come in, Locks! Are you there?" The voice came through to her ear piece for the third time.

"Locks to Goldi. Will you give me a minute? I can't hear the lock with you talking in my ear."

"Oh, sorry."

Locks stared at the lock again and rolled her shoulders a few times. She took a deep breath and leaned toward the door, inserting her pick into the hole. It was a device of her own creation, difficult to use, but she had mastered the skill. Her talent for lock picking had acquired for her the codename that served as her identity. *Click.*

"Got it."

"Great! Let's get this done."

"Who's watching the Bears?"

"Uhhh looks like Red Hood and the Bread Crumbs are on duty today, so you should have plenty of warning if the Bears start heading home." Red Hood and the twins, Bread and Crumb, were the best in the business. Such an important case warranted the most reliable agents available, and these five were certainly very good at what they did. Sweet elderly grandmothers were very important to the residents of Avenalia, and Princess Briar Rose would make sure that the cause of Grandma Greene's death was determined and undisputable.

Locks turned the doorknob and eased the door open, quickly stepped inside and shut the door behind her. The house was empty; she knew that, because Red Hood and the Bread Crumbs would never make the same mistakes as Butterfingers Blue. *Of course, if his nickname had been Butterfingers Blue, he wouldn't have been a Kingdom Surveillance Agent in the first place.* But Blue hadn't had a sleeping disorder until he started working overtime. In fact, it was Red Hood who found him asleep on the job. He'd taken out his earpiece to relieve his headache, and had dropped it when he fell asleep. Unfortunately for Locks, she was still inside the property she was investigating at the time. Red Hood sounded the alarm immediately; *The sheep's in the meadow!* Locks replied angrily, *The cow's in the corn! But where is the boy who looks after the sheep?*

The response came. *He's under a haystack, fast asleep.* Aww dead bolts! She headed for the door but the "sheep" reached it first. The suspect turned out to be innocent, and Locks wasn't hurt, but it cost the king a lot of money to keep the event quiet. And now she had trouble trusting even the best in the agency.

"What do you see, Locks?"

"Breakfast."

"Breakfast?"

"On the table."

"Who leaves breakfast on the table when they leave the house?"

"The Beres, apparently. What am I looking for?"

"The preliminary autopsy suggests asphyxia. Possibly an allergic reaction, but Grandma Greene's allergies are unknown. She was supposed to be visiting for the weekend, reportedly wasn't feeling well and went home early."

Locks was in the police station when Mama Bear came in to claim the body of her mother. There was nothing peculiar about the situation that Locks could detect, at least at first. Mama Bear was reasonably agitated. She wasn't surprised that Grandma Greene was dead, but Mama Bear said that her mother hadn't been feeling well, and she was quite old, so it took no stretch of the imagination to believe that it was simply her time. But upon investigation, it was discovered that the Bere family was low on funds, so when the coroner began to suspect asphyxiation, Princess Briar Rose took Goldi and Locks off the Prince Robert Case, brought them back from abroad where they had been watching him, and sent them after the Bears.

Locks examined the three untouched and abandoned bowls of food on the table. "It's porridge," Locks concluded. "Papa Bear's famous recipe, I assume."

"Well, check it for toxins."

Locks took a sample from the bowl closest to her and put it in a sealable test tube. She shook it for fifteen seconds, then looked at the monitor.

"Toxins: Negative," she read. She repeated the action for the other two bowls, just to be sure.

"Well, I guess that disproves that theory."

"What about deviations from the recipe?" Locks suggested. "Perhaps Papa Bear added something new and Grandma Greene had a reaction to it. I've eaten enough of the stuff-- if there's anything different about this porridge, I'll know."

"Go for it," Goldi said. "If it's toxin-free, you'll be fine. Your records show no allergies."

"Nope. Not even allergic to you."

"Ha, ha," Goldi said dryly.

Locks picked up the first bowl and a spoon and began eating.

"Locks?" came his voice a few minutes later.

"Yeah?"

"Just making sure you're still alive. You don't have to eat the WHOLE bowl, Locks."

"Right," said Locks. "Sorry. It's just so good!"

"Original recipe?"

"Yeah."

"Try the other ones."

"Okay-- OUCH!"

"LOCKS?!?" Goldi sounded alarmed.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. It just burned me, that's all. It's too hot."

"Giant beanstalks, Locks, you scared the golden eggs out of me! Don't do that!"

"Sorry," she mumbled. She tested the last bowl, first with her finger, then with her tongue. "Ew. Too cold. But still tastes normal."

"I guess it wasn't the porridge then, huh?"

"Guess not. I'm all set in here, I think I'll move on to the living room now."

"Okay."

Locks stepped confidently but cautiously into the next room and glanced around. Something felt not quite right here. The room was immaculate, like her own mother's house, but that wasn't what was wrong. Against one wall were three mismatched chairs, placed in a semicircle, or as close to one as is possible with three chairs. Locks sat carefully in the nearest one, straight-backed and cushion-less. The chairs' angles would have made conversation awkward. She sat for a minute, trying to come up with an explanation for their contrived positions.

"What is it now, Locks? What do you see?"

"These chairs, they're really weird, the way they are placed." She moved to sit in the second one, nicely cushioned. "Ooh, but this one feels nice." She looked over at the third chair, which was half facing her. She stood and stepped toward it. What was it about this chair?

She turned slowly and sat down. "AHH!" she shrieked, as the chair gave way beneath her. "The chair just fell apart!" she shouted at Goldi. "What family has chairs that just fall apart?"

"Oh," said Goldi. "Didn't I mention that Baby Bear is a Theatre Arts Major? He's focusing on playwrighting and directing."

"No," snapped Locks. "You didn't." She stood up and looked around the room. On the table in front of her was a document. She read the top page out loud. "'*Death of the Eldest*. A play by Barry Bere.'"

"Collapsible furniture, a play about death, and his grandmother is dead," said Goldi. "Can you say 'suspicious?'"

"No," said Locks. "Grandma Greene didn't break a hip, she was asphyxiated. Collapsible furniture doesn't do that to people. But we'll have to check out this play, for sure." Locks mounted the stairs and climbed to the second floor.

"There's nothing up here but three beds and two dressers."

"Try one."

"Excuse me?"

"The beds," Goldi clarified. "Try one. Or three."

"Well, she did sleep here," admitted Locks. At least it wasn't her deathbed. Climbing onto the deathbed of Grandma Greene was not on the list of things she wanted to do today. But then, William Woolf had done that. There was something odd about that boy. Perhaps he truly was guilty. Could he have poisoned Grandma Greene? Choked the life out of her?

She lay down on the bed closest to the door.

"Hey, Goldi," she said after an hour long minute. "How long do I have to lie here?"

"If nothing has happened, try the next one."

She did. "Still nothing. One more."

Locks lay down on the farthest bed, next to the window. For a few minutes, she wondered if this was worth it. What would she discover by lying in these beds? If she hadn't found the cause of death by now, staying in the bed wouldn't help. She rolled over onto her side

and was about to push herself off the bed when she realized how tired she was. And how good the sheets smelled. She lowered her nose to the pillow to sniff it.

"Locks?" She heard him calling her name. "Locks?" he said again. "LOCKS!"

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"Here we go. She's waking up. I told you she would be okay." It was Red Hood's voice, but Goldi was the one leaning over her anxiously, and it was his dark brown eyes and messy, matching hair that filled her vision when her eyes fluttered open.

"Thank goodness," he sighed, relieved. "Locks, I'm so sorry, you weren't answering, so I called Red Hood and Bread Crumbs.... I was so worried."

"Well, apparently I'm all right now. What happened?"

"We don't know," said Bread. "When we arrived, you were just lying on the bed, scarcely breathing. We tried to wake you up, but--" She shook her head.

"We had to get you out immediately," her brother finished. "By the time we got you safely away, the Bears were headed home. Aborted the mission."

Locks sighed. "Poor Grandma Greene. That may have been our only chance to get in there. Now we have no evidence and no leads."

"Not true," grinned Crumb. "Goldi told me about the play, so I swiped it."

"Well, great! Let's check it out."

"No. Not you. You're going to lie down again and stay there for a while until you recover," commanded Red Hood. "Goldi and I will check it out. We'll let you know what we find."

"Red Hood, no, *I'm* supposed to be taking over so that *you* can rest...."

"And you did. Now it's my turn. We'll be back."

They came back three hours later, empty handed.

"The play isn't finished, but there's an outline," Goldi explained. "The elder mentioned in the title is just the oldest of three brothers. He gets eaten by a wolf or something. Also, the play is garbage."

*Garbage.* "Has anyone checked their garbage?" Locks asked quickly.

"Of course," said Red Hood. "We should have thought of that." She turned and left the room.

"Stay there, Locks. I'm going to go make you dinner." Goldi turned to follow Red Hood out the door.

"But I'm supposed to be covering for Red Hood!"

"Let Red Hood and Bread Crumbs handle this one. Please. You have to rest."

"That's what got me into trouble in the first place," she muttered.

"Just for tonight. If you feel better in the morning, you can pick up where you left off. But please, promise me you'll stay here until the morning?"

Locks glanced around the room. "Fine," she said, "But I want to hear about everything they find tonight."

"Deal."

The agents found nothing of value in the trash that night. They began plans to recover any trash that might have been collected from the Bear cottage since Grandma Greene's visit began. Locks, meanwhile, waited until morning. She would not break her promise to Goldi. But the moment the sun's morning rays spilled over the windowsill, she was out of bed, dressed, and climbing out the window.

Locks raced back to the Beres' cottage. She passed a stopped garbage truck as she rounded the last corner. *I'll have to be quick*, she thought. She came to a halt in front of the garbage barrel by the Beres' cottage. She pulled out a knife and tore open the bag. Remnants of the cold porridge from yesterday. *Gross*. She dug through the top few layers of trash. *Come on, there has to be something in here*. Toward the bottom, she felt something soft. Pulling it out, she realized that it was a pillow. The pillow on which she had rested her head the previous afternoon. Careful to keep it away from her face, Locks squeezed the pillow under her jacket, tucked the knife back into her boot, and stole away into the early morning light.

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There was a loud, sharp rap on the Beres' cottage door. Locks watched as Mr. Bere opened it.

"Can I help you?" he asked the guard.

"We need to take you, your wife and your son in for questioning."

"What is this about?"

"Grandma Greene died in bed after staying in your house over the weekend. The autopsy identified asphyxiation as the probable cause," the guard replied. "We found a toxic substance on the pillowcase in your trash early this morning. I'm going to have to ask the three of you to come with us." By this time, Barry and Mrs. Bere had come to the door, and the Avenalia Guards escorted the three of them to the waiting carriage.

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Locks entered the interrogation facility and found Mrs. Bere. She had remained silent for hours, but as soon as the guards decided to keep the family overnight, she admitted everything so that Barry and her husband could go home.

"Was the money really worth killing your mother?" Locks asked. Locks hadn't spoken to her own mother in years-- she wasn't worth mentioning. Locks believed it was entirely her mother's fault that they became homeless when Locks was twenty-one years old. But Grandma Greene was such a sweet old lady. It angered Locks that this woman would throw away the most precious relationship on earth for an early inheritance.

"It was never about the money," Mrs. Bere said. "You don't know what it was like having Grandma Greene for a mother!"

"Yes, eating all her cookies must have been terrible," Locks snapped.

"No, it wasn't like that," Mrs. Bere said. "Growing up, yes, my mother made sweets for me and all my friends, and then for Barry and all his friends. But I never had time to make sweets for Barry. I was too busy at work. I chose saving lives over baking cookies." Mrs. Bere was a doctor at the Royal Hospital of Avenalia. "So of course Barry liked spending time with her more. And my mother," she spat, "I am the best at what I do. But that meant nothing to her. She didn't understand why I didn't want to be like her. She hated my job. She told me every time she saw me that I should be spending more time with Barry, that he was growing up and I was missing it. And I knew that. And it kills me. But what I do is important. I save people so that they can go home to watch their kids grow up. I couldn't take it anymore, not from her. My father missed seeing me grow up so that he could feed me, and her! Not everyone has the luxury of staying home to bake for their child. She could never see that. So I bought the Sleeping Dust, a little at a time, and brought it home from the hospital. It is heavily regulated, because too much of it is deadly. It took a while, but after last week I finally had enough, and Mother was visiting for the weekend. I laced her pillowcase with the dust, brought her body back to her house, told

my husband she had left early, and that was that. Now I don't have to deal with her criticism anymore."

Locks stared at Mrs. Bere silently. She had never sympathized with any of the criminals she brought in as much as she did with Grandma Greene's murderer. She loved Grandma Greene. But then, she knew what it was like to be criticized for what she did by the one person who was supposed to support her. She experienced this same complaint from her mother when she joined the KSA, and when her mother wouldn't let it go, she cut her mother out of her life. *She didn't understand why I didn't want to be like her.* Mrs. Bere's words stuck in Locks' mind. Hadn't this been her own mother's problem, as well? Her mother made a living by marrying wealthy, single men. This worked out very well until the man also happened to be a father. Locks' stepsister inherited everything, and Locks realized that her mother had made a mistake in her choice of lifestyle. Locks decided right then that she would not become her mother, and she joined the Kingdom Surveillance Agency. But she didn't want her mother dead.

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When Locks left the facility, she took a different path home. One she had not taken for a long time. Before she understood why she was doing it, she knocked on the door of the mansion.

"Hello, Evelyn," Locks said when the door opened.

"Isabelle!" exclaimed her mother, pulling her into a hug. "You're home."

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Locks found Red Hood back at the base in the same recovery bed that Locks had used to revive from the Sleeping Dust. "Hey, are you alright?"

"Yeah," said Red Hood. "I'm glad they caught Mrs. Bere."

"Me, too," said Locks. "You know, if you want to talk, or cry, or whatever, you can do it in front of me. You've put on a brave face for a long time-- now you should let yourself mourn."

"I thought I'd be able to, once this was all over," said Red Hood, "But it's not something that can be forced, and it's not something I'm ready to do right now. But I won't hold it in anymore. If I need to let my energy out, I will."

Locks gave her a quick hug. "I'll leave you alone then. Good work, Red Hood."

"You, too."

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Rachel walked with William back from the station. It had been a long week for both of them.

"I'm just glad it's over," said Rachel.

"I still can't believe they thought it was me."

"I'm not surprised. You *do* look like a punk."

"Oh, stop it."

"No, really. And I'm sure that if they looked at your record and saw it was clean, they'd be surprised. But there should be a law against your outfit."

"What's wrong with my outfit?"

"You've killed fashion."

"I think I look great."

"Everyone knows you can't wear short socks with breeches."

"Don't hate me for being a trendsetter. You're just jealous!"

They laughed. They laughed so long that Rachel's laughter turned to sobs, and when William Woolf realized that she was crying, he embraced her, and she cried into his shoulder, from her relief, from her exhaustion and for the loss of Grandma Greene.

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