

# When the Party's Over

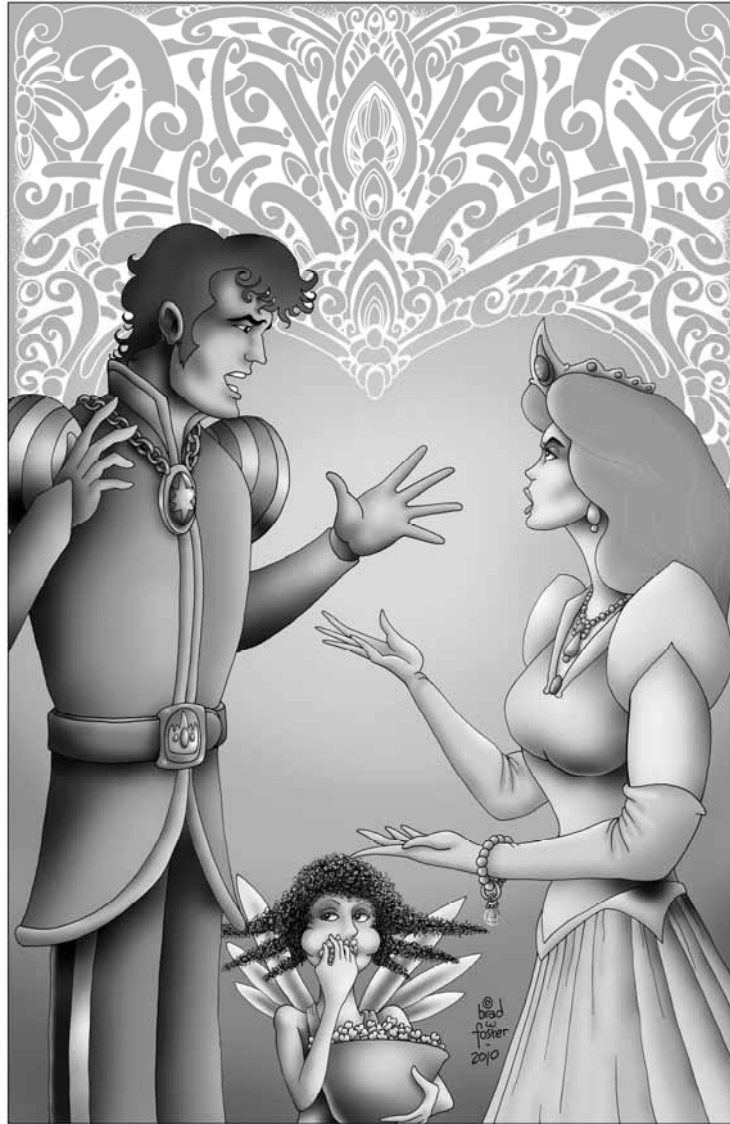
□ Fairy Tale Reality Endings □

Rhonda Eudaly



# **When the Party's Over**

## *Fairy Tale Reality Endings*



**Rhonda Eudaly**

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## **Dedication**

For Steve (Badger) and Carma Watkins

Who've provided friendship and computer, emotional, and coffee support above and beyond the call for longer than they probably should have. Thank you.

Thanks to Todd Caldwell, inaugural Redheads of the Apocalypse minion, and Debbie Waller for the copyediting and extra set of eyes. Special Thanks to Brad Foster for the amazing cover. Gotta love the folks who work for cookies.

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The biggest thanks of all goes to my husband, love-of-my-life, Jimmy, who lived with me through all this and did the layout and design work to keep me from bursting into tears. He goes above and beyond the call of wedding vows.

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"I heard you were there when Roger bit it, Millie."

Millie looked up from her goblet. The innkeeper, a big bear - literally- of a guy, wiped down the bar and refilled her goblet. Goldie's Inn was filled to capacity as anyone who was anyone was paying their last respects and memories of their friend and colleague, Roger, the first of his name, who'd recently died under ... unusual ... circumstances. Some mourned more seriously than others, now being well into their cups - like Millie.

"I was first on the scene. Nick and I were on call that night." Millie took a deep hit off her goblet.

"I heard it was bad," Goldie said.

"It sure wasn't pretty. You want to know how it happened?" Millie demanded of no one in particular. Her voice rose, slurred from the effects of the drink, "All right, then. I'll tell you how it happened."

## **Leporidaphobia**

Kendall jolted awake, a terrified scream locked in his throat, pajamas and bedding soaked with sweat. He tried to slow his racing pulse as he frantically scanned the room. There, that movement in the shadows - was it the twitch of long ears? That creak - was it the thump of large feet? No, it was only the wind and the glimmer of moonlight filtering in through the newly budding leaves on the trees outside. He shivered. The vivid imagery of his nightmare faded to haunting discomfort as the terror slowly subsided.

He padded to the bathroom for a glass of water. A noise downstairs froze him in place. He eased down the hall to investigate. He paused at the head of the stairs and listened. The noise definitely wasn't the wind or the trees. Someone was in the house. Kendall went straight for the hall closet bypassing the golf clubs and wrapped his hand around the baseball bat handle. The weight of solid wood reassured him as he slipped down the stairs, conscious of every creak and squeak his passing made.

Kendall stopped in the entry way at the bottom of the stairs. Movement in the darkness told him the intruder was in the living room. Whoever it was wasn't taking anything, but seemed to be leaving items behind. Kendall watched in morbid astonishment. The shadow elongated to man height, but there was something odd.

More shadows grew from its head like long fingers or large, floppy ears. Rabbit ears. Kendall made a strangled noise in the back of his throat and flipped on the nearest switch, bathing the room in bright, painful light.

The intruder froze. Kendall stared, shocked beyond comprehension. Standing in his living room was a six foot tall, gray rabbit wearing overalls, an incongruous pink bow, and carrying a basket full of colored eggs and chocolate.



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"Okay, you caught me." His voice was more at home on a Harley Davidson than in its present get up. "I exist. Now, can we forget all about this, turn off the light, and pretend this didn't happen? I have a lot of houses to get to, and it's not like I have elves and reindeer to help me out."

"You're. You're. You're..." He couldn't get the whole sentence out.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm the Easter Bunny. You wanna make something of it?"

Kendall made the strangled noise once more. The Bunny tapped a large hairy foot impatiently and crossed his arms across his overall bib. The Bunny seemed unaware of the impending sense of doom.

"Look, if you don't mind, I'm running late, and I'm getting cranky. I think it's low blood sugar. Does anyone leave me milk and cookies? No! Even that red-nose freak Nick's got playing headlight gets more carrot than I do. Don't these kids know a rabbit's gotta eat?"

Kendall felt his grip on sanity slip away even as his grip on the Louisville Slugger tightened. The Bunny must've seen something change in his eyes because he started to ease past Kendall, empty paws raised. The basket hung from the crook of his elbow.

"Hey, come on now, we're all friends here. You don't want to do anything rash."

"Rash? You intrude into my home, after what your kind has done to me over the years, and you say don't do anything rash? After all the torture, the torment, the terror! You've got to be kidding." Kendall tapped the bat rhythmically against his leg as he spoke.

"Look, buddy, I don't know who spooked you as a kid, but you really don't want to take it out on me."

"Why not? I'm within my rights. Who knows, maybe I'll actually, finally, get to see what's so lucky about rabbit's feet."

The Bunny's blood-curdling scream filled the spring night air. Once it died away, Kendall looked down at his handiwork. The rabbit was nothing more than stew meat now, but one last breath still lingered. He pinned Kendall with a bloody, beady glare.

"You don't know what you've done." The Bunny's voice came out a fading croak.

"I've rid the world of another of your kind."

"Another will take my place."

"So?"

"From the ashes of my demise...you will see...you'll get what's coming to you. Soon...you will pay..." The Bunny breathed his last and lay still.

Kendall laughed hysterically. He'd killed the Easter Bunny! He looked down at the bloody bat hanging limply from his hand, and his eyes widening with horror. He ran out the back door. His yard abutted a craggy ravine. With a mighty hurl powered by desperation, he sent the bat out into the night. He heard it tumble, bounce, and finally splash into the creek at the bottom of the ravine.

A wave of relief washed over him as he headed back to the house. He felt tingly all over as he climbed the porch steps. The evidence was gone. He'd soon follow it with the body. No one would ever know. He reached for the door handle when he heard voices inside the house.

"He was so young." The woman's voice had a sad catch in it. "Who could've done such a thing?"

"I don't know, Millie." Another male voice said kindly to someone. "Help's coming to dispose of...him...properly."

"What about his route? Who's going to finish it? I would but there are kids depending on me tonight..."

"Who are you people?" Kendall burst into the room. "What are you doing here?"

The man and woman turned as Kendall froze in stunned disbelief. The woman was young, pretty, and somehow familiar in her diaphanous white gown, complete with wings and a wand held white-knuckled in one fist. Her companion was an older, silver-haired, stocky man in a casual red and white outfit.

"What happened to Roger?" She brought up the wand defensively. "What did you do to him?"

"Who's Roger?" Kendall's voice held an obvious note of hysteria. "Who're you? This is my house. I belong here. You don't. You have one minute before I call the cops."



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"You won't do that. The police can't help you." The woman glared at Kendall and took a step toward him. The white-haired man put a hand on her arm to stop her and shook his head.

"Please, forgive Millie. She's upset," the man said.

"She's upset? You're in my house, and she's upset?"

Millie shook the man's hand off her. "You don't have to apologize for me, Nick. Roger's dead in this guy's house. He knows what happened to him. We're not leaving until we get some explanations."

"Roger? Roger's the rabbit? Seriously?"

"Bunny, actually. There's a difference."

"Could've fooled me. Rabbit, bunny, demon, all the same to me."

Neither Nick nor Millie acknowledged Kendall's comment or Kendall himself. He found it even more annoying. Nick cocked his head at some sound Kendall couldn't hear.

"Ah, help's arrived."

Four small men in Hawaiian shirts and ragged shorts appeared from the dining room. Kendall stared dumbly at the scene. He'd already awakened from his nightmare, hadn't he?

"You still hanging out with this bum, Millie?" one of the newcomers asked. "You know he's nothing without his elves. You should come join us. We can show you a better time than he can."

"One of me, seven of you? I think I've read this story. It's a snow job. Besides, we've got more immediate things to worry about. It's Roger. He's over there. He's dead."

"Leave him to us." After a brief moment of silence, the four dwarfish men regained their businesslike composure. "We know how to hide things in the woods. The kids'll never know. Speaking of which..."

"All we have to do is cover tonight, and then the next one will take his place," Nick said.

"Gotcha. The other three of us are available to help take care of this. We know you've got rounds to do, Millie. I'm sure Old Nick'll finally spring for some overtime in this time of need."

"Hah, hah, hah." Nick's face went red and his belly jiggled as he laughed.

"I thought it was 'ho, ho, ho', Nick, you old softie." Millie briefly had a wicked twinkle in her eyes. "We all know you're really a saint."

Kendall watched the scene play out wordlessly. His mind gibbering in confusion as the four small men started wrapping the body for transport. Another one of them knelt by the rabbit's head and looked up alarmed. "This was done deliberately."

"What?!" Nick's presumed jolliness evaporated in an instant. He knelt to look for himself.

"Blunt force trauma." The one playing doctor pointed. "Not a hammer, but the idea is the same. Trust me, I know blunt force trauma when I see it."

Suddenly Kendall felt all six pairs of eyes on him. Millie turned on him. "What. Did. You. Do?"

"Nothing!"

"I think somebody's name is moving to the naughty list. Permanently."

"We can get the information out him." The dwarf rubbed his hands and grinned maliciously. "We have ways to make people talk."

"No, let me." Millie narrowed her eyes and tapped her wand in her palm. "I need some new teeth for my collection anyway."

Kendall went cold with fear, throttling him in a death grip. It was a terror he'd not known since childhood when he encountered his first rabbit. He shrank back, as a tremor went through him. A flash of stupidity made him speak. "He was a vile creature! All rabbits are! He deserved what he got! I'd do it again, too!"

"No, I don't think so." Nick stopped Millie before she could lunge at Kendall. "Let it go, Millie. Justice will be served."

Millie studied Kendall so intently, he squirmed under her gaze. "If you say so, Nick." She turned to the dwarves. "Come on, boys, there's work to be done."

In a twinkling, they were gone with the bloody bunny body. There was no trace any of them had ever been there. No mark remained, not even a stray tuft of fur or a sliver of crushed chocolate. Kendall rubbed his eyes. The growing certainty that it had somehow all been a dream or

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hallucination comforted him. He stumbled up the stairs went back to bed, chalking it up to nervous exhaustion and late night Mexican food.

He awakened the next morning by the excited squeals of neighborhood children as they raced around their yards discovering painted eggs, candy, and toys. Kendall tried to drown them out, but burying his head under his pillow didn't seem to help.

Blairily he swung his feet out of bed. He felt for his slippers, but couldn't seem to get his feet in them. With a resigned sigh, he padded barefoot downstairs. He automatically started the coffee maker and went to get the paper off the front lawn. Some of the neighborhood children pointed and giggled in his direction. He took his paper back inside without acknowledging any of them. Kendall ignored children as much as possible.

He read the paper, drank his coffee, squirming in his bathrobe. Something felt...off. It was almost as if he was sitting on something, but there was nothing in the chair but him. He finally gave up and went upstairs to shower and brush his teeth. As he passed a mirror, he caught a brief glimpse of his reflection. He froze and slowly eased back into the mirror's field of view.

The image was wrong. His mind was playing tricks on him. He went into the bathroom, took off his robe and took a good long look at himself in the full length mirror. His feet seemed longer and flatter. His arms, beard, and most of his body seemed hairier. As he looked, his ears even seemed to be sticking out further than before, but that was impossible.

He showered mechanically, trying to keep his mind clear. He let the hot water steam away the fear and anxiety. He held onto the delusion of normalcy until he wiped the steam from the medicine cabinet mirror. An involuntary, inhuman shriek ripped from his throat. His reflection was no longer human. He could still see parts of himself in the eyes and maybe in the cheek bones, but the rest wasn't his. He was looking into the face of a rabbit. And not just any rabbit, but the Easter Bunny.

He didn't know how Millie knew to come, but she showed up just the same. Millie found him huddled in the corner of his bedroom, rocking back and forth, muttering nonsense words.

"What's your name?"

He looked at her with a complete lack of comprehension or recognition. She repeated the question with more emphasis.

"Kendall."

"It's not a bad name for the Bunny. You know you have a duty to perform, right?"

"But I didn't...didn't..." The words wouldn't come out.

"Ignorance is no excuse. Don't do the crime if you can't do the time. Roger didn't know when he was out hunting, but he took responsibility like a man. Now it's your turn. That's the way this all works."

"Anything but this!" Kendall clutched at her dress in blind panic. His voice shrill. "I'll do anything else. Prison. The electric chair. Anything but this."

"You'd rather...oh! Great. It figures. You're leporidaphobic? That's just what we need, an Easter Bunny afraid of his own shadow. Too bad you didn't kill the Groundhog. We could've used that! But no! You're afraid of rabbits! Nick hasn't lost his touch, this is justice. Poetic even. It's beautiful." Millie giggled with evil glee at the thought.

"You don't have to take such pleasure in it."

"Boy, this really is your worst nightmare, doesn't it?" Millie couldn't stop the laughter bubbling into her voice.

"It's not funny."

"That's what you think!" Millie went off on another peal of laughter. "Nick! Oh, Nick! You've got to hear this!"

The old man from the night before popped in from the dining room dressed in red Bermuda shorts and a white polo shirt with evergreen trees around the hem. "What is it, Millie? The missus and I were just about to sign up for the limbo tournament." He saw Kendall for the first time. "Well, well, check out the new guy."

"He's leporidaphobic, Nick."

"He's what-a-phobic? Have you been hitting the eggnog early this year, Millie?"

"No. Our boy, here, has an irrational and terrifying fear of rabbits."

"What're we going to do about it?" Nick asked.

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"Group therapy?"

"You do know I'm still in the room." Kendall watched the two talk about him as if he wasn't there. He didn't like the evil glee gleaming in their eyes.

"Ready?"

"Let's get going." Millie took one of Kendall's arms. Nick took the other. Kendall found himself hustled into the dining room and suddenly elsewhere. He looked around and saw his reflection in a darkened glass door pane, and squeaked in terror. He was completely rabbit now. There was nothing even vaguely resembling the man he'd once been.

"Where are we going?" He asked much too late.

"Therapy. Leporidaphobia is not a common fear - like being afraid of cotton balls or something - but it exists."

"Hey, cotton balls don't have teeth, or twitchy noses. They're not mean, nasty, hoppy creatures. Cotton balls are nothing like rabbits."

"Save it for the Buffy reunion movie." Nick didn't sound so jolly now.

Before Kendall could protest, they reached a door. Millie knocked and stuck her head in. Kendall couldn't hear what she was saying, but it was clear he was the topic. He would've bolted, but Nick's grip on his arm was immovable. After a moment, Millie rejoined them.

"You can go in now. They're ready for you."

Kendall looked between Nick and Millie. He couldn't help the uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. They smiled at him. Maybe things were going to be all right after all. He went through the door Millie held open for him and went in without a backward glance. The door slammed shut behind him with an eerie finality as Kendall got a good look at the room.

Screaming, he scrabbled at the door, trying to get out, but the door wouldn't open from the inside. Behind him, looking benignly supportive were all the great rabbits of literature. There were cotton-tailed ones, velveteen ones, even animated ones in various shapes, sizes and colors. There was even an all white one that kept checking his watch as Kendall slumped to the floor in a quivering, sobbing mass.

"Ah, great. Now we're late. We're late. And this is a very important date." The white one snapped a pocket watch closed.

The last thing Kendall heard before the blackness over took him was a hauntingly familiar voice saying, "Eh, what's up, Doc...with the new guy?"

Even after he came to, he couldn't escape. Everywhere he looked, they were there, and they just kept going and going and going.

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"That was a good story."

"It's what happened. Ask Nick." Millie looked over at the odd, little man sitting on the barstool next to her. He hadn't been there before, had he? "Who're you?"

"Piedmont Crane." He stuck out his hand. She grudgingly shook it before going back to her drink.

"Mr. Crane? Mr. Crane, is that you?"

Piedmont and Millie turned to look as a man hurried over to them waving wildly. The man threw an arm around Piedmont and slapped the bar top with the other. Millie thought he looked familiar but couldn't quite put her finger on it.

"Anything Mr. Crane wants, you give it to him. Put it on my tab. This man got me out of a terrible jam. If it weren't for him, I'd be the daily special in a giant's dinner."

"Aw, come on, Jack, that's not why we're here..."

"No, no really. These fine folks like a good story. And this is a good one, I'm tellin' ya."

Millie slid off her stool. "I have to get to work. You guys have fun." As she left, she could hear Jack getting warmed up to his captive audience.



## **Beyond the Beanstalk**

The axe bit deep into the flesh of the vine, sending shockwaves up his arms. It wasn't enough. Again and again the axe fell until the stalk crumpled to the ground. Suddenly there was an ear-piercing shriek as the sun was blotted out by an ever-growing shadow. Realization dawned as the young man scrambled out of the way, and a larger-than-life body hit the ground with a resounding thud.

Jack sat bolt upright in bed, sweating and panting. He took deep, slow breaths, trying to slow his racing heart. It was the same nightmare he'd had on a regular basis. The giant died in the fall, and it was all Jack's fault.

"Someone would've had to have done it," a voice said in the dark. "And you had more reason than most."

"Who's there?" he demanded.

The glow grew out of the darkness. Jack recognized his late night visitor after only a moment.

"Oh, it's you."

"There's enthusiasm for you. Is that any way to talk to an old friend?" The fairy pouted as she perched on Jack's footboard.

"Some friend you are! The last time I did something for you, someone died. What do you want me to do now? Spread plague, pestilence, famine maybe?"

The fairy laughed in the light, musical way only fairies can. "Oh, Jack, that's very funny, but no. Thanks for the offer, but that's already taken care of."

"Then why are you here?"

"My, but you're cranky first thing in the morning, aren't you?"

"It's not morning. It's the middle of the night. Now out with it."

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"Cranky, cranky, you were a lot more fun before the giant. By the way, like what you've done with the place. Guess those golden eggs came in handy, huh?"

"Gah!" Jack was beyond words.

"Oh, all right. I came to warn you."

"Warn me about what?"

"You know that old saying, 'no good deed goes unpunished'?" She paused until Jack nodded. "Well, they're getting ready to arrest you."

"What?!" Jack cried in very real horror. "What for?"

"Killing the giant, what else? Yeah, I know, tough break."

"Why now? It's been years."

"Well, one, there's no statute of limitations on murder, and two, it's taken this long to grow another beanstalk." The fairy shrugged.

"Mine grew overnight."

"They didn't have the benefit of fairy magic."

"Thank God for small favors. So what do we do?"

"We? Darlin', there ain't no we to this. I can't help you. In fact, no one knows I'm here. You're on your own. I'd suggest you get a good lawyer. The public defenders in the giants' realm...well, let's just say I wouldn't trust my life to them, and I'm immortal."

"Hey, wait! You can't do that! This is as much your doing as mine!"

The fairy's light began to fade. "Just keep telling them that, perhaps an insanity plea will work better than self-defense."

Jack sat in the dark, frightened and alone. When the sun rose, he was still no closer to an answer. After completing his morning chores, he sat his mother down and told her what happened.

"They're not going to take my son without a fight!" His mother seemed adamant.

"Mom, please don't do anything foolish. If you're arrested, too, then I'll have no one to help me."

The village constable arrived with one of the giants and arrested Jack. His mother watched with the rest of the villagers as he was taken away. When he turned back for one last look, he was relieved by the fiercely determined look on her face.

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"You have visitors. Your lawyer and your mother."

Jack came to the bars of the cramped cell in anticipation. It beat wondering if the death sentence was death by entree. He'd hoped if he became someone's dinner, they'd use a nice light wine sauce. Cream sauces didn't agree with him, and red was much more his color. Fortunately, the arrival of his defense team drove those thoughts from his mind.

His mother, a well-padded, matronly woman came in with a spindly little man Jack had never seen before. He wondered if the ill-fitting suit was merely poorly tailored, or if the gaunt frame refused to be flattered. He'd never seen a less inspiring man in all his short life.

"Jack, dear, this is Piedmont Crane, Esquire. He's your attorney."

"Really?"

"Ah, yes, Jack, your mother has told me about your case. Intriguing." Piedmont's voice was thin and reedy.

"Mother...?"

"Now, Jack, give Piedmont a chance. He's never lost a case."

"How many has he won?" Jack asked.

"Jack!" His mother's voice sparked with irritation. "Piedmont's the only one willing to take on the giants. So I suggest you suck it up and listen to him."

Piedmont cleared his throat. "Jack, I need to know everything that happened on the days in question."

"All right." Jack told the attorney everything. From the butcher buying the cow for beans, to the fairy's mission, all the way to the giant's wife hiding him in the house on each visit.

"Wait, the victim's wife hid you in the house?"

"Is that important?"

"It's definitely interesting. She's the one pressing charges. Three counts of grand theft. One count of murder."

"The fairy! She told me the giant killed my father and stole the stuff from him to begin with. I was just taking back what was ours."

"Did you have any proof of original ownership? Receipts or anything?"

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"Uh, no."

"Did the fairy offer you any proof of culpability on the giant's part?"

"Culpa-what?"

"Fault?"

"Uh, no."

"So you just took the fairy's word for it?"

"Uh, yeah?"

Piedmont threw up his hands in disgust. "You've just made the prosecution's case."

"What do we do?"

"I don't suppose you know where this fairy is now?"

"Oberon's court, I think."

"Fabulous. Have you ever tried to get extradition from Oberon? It's like he thinks he's a god or something. I'll see what I can do. I'll be in touch." Piedmont left, muttering under his breath as he went. "Maybe he'll be in a charitable mood, or maybe I can go through Titania. The wife is always easier to deal with, just as long as it isn't Puck."

"I wish we'd just eaten that cow." Jack's mother sighed. "Then this wouldn't be happening."

Jack grinned. "It's all the cow's fault."

"I'll look around the house. Maybe I saved something all those years ago when I escaped with you."

"Thanks, Mom. For everything."

His mother squeezed Jack's hand through the bars. "I love you, son."

#

The giants believed in speedy trials and swift justice. Before Jack could blink, his trial had begun. He could tell it was going to be an uphill battle. The spectators were giants. Only a few of the jury were human, but Jack knew it was only a token attempt for fairness. It didn't help that Piedmont looked so nervous.

"We're in trouble, aren't we?" Jack asked.

"All rise, criminal court is now in session, the Honorable B. G. Jotuns presiding."

Piedmont groaned. There was Jack's answer.

"What? What's wrong?"

"The judge. I never thought he'd leave his bridge."

The judge entered and glared at the entire courtroom. The whole room cringed in fear and fell silent. He was large, ugly, and scary.

"He's a troll!" Jack didn't mean to blurt his thought aloud.

"And he's been in a foul mood ever since those stupid goats killed his brother. This just got tougher." Piedmont wiped his forehead with his monogrammed handkerchief.

"Like it was easy before," Jack said under his breath.

The trial's highly skilled Prosecutor made Jack, himself, feel guilty. Piedmont's cross-examinations did nothing to help alleviate his doubts.

"Why aren't you doing more?" Jack asked after a while.

"Patience, Jack, I know what I'm doing." He didn't sound confident.

"I sure hope so, it's only my life."

The prosecution's last witness was the giant's wife. She told a tearful story of Jack's deception and theft on three different occasions. She ended her story with one dramatically pointed finger. "And that's when he killed him, your Honor!"

"That's not how it happened!" Jack protested in spite of Piedmont's insistent tug on his sleeve.

The courtroom exploded. The judge snarled and smashed his gavel on the bench. "Order! There will be order in this courtroom, or I will have it cleared! Those who persist will become my dinner!"

The courtroom stilled instantly. The judge's threat wasn't taken lightly. The troll judge glared at Jack and Piedmont. Jack sank back in his chair, trying to make himself appear even smaller than he already did.

"And I trust that is the last outburst we will hear from your client, Piedmont?"

"Yes, your Honor."

The judge looked back at the Prosecutor. "Proceed."

"Nothing further."

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"Cross-examine."

Piedmont leaned over to Jack. "Now it's our turn."

"I wish that made me feel better."

Surprisingly, it did. Piedmont laid into the giant's widow with a force Jack had not expected from such a little man. He tore apart her story, made her seem like she had something to gain from her husband's death. Jack almost felt sorry for her.

The giant was known to be cruel and vicious. He bragged about killing Jack's father and taking his wealth from him, not to mention putting his widow and baby son out on the streets with nothing but the clothes on their backs. The widow had known about this, been party to it. In his death, not only did she escape an abusive relationship, she also gained far more financially than she would have in a divorce.

The widow had the motive and opportunity to see the giant killed, and by using a boy already under the influence of a fairy directive, she let the giant's death happen. The Goose Who Laid the Golden Eggs, the bags of gold and silver, and the harp were small prices to pay a young man to rid both of them of a continual threat.

It was a powerful argument. Piedmont backed up his argument with a string of witnesses confirming how Jack became a respected and valued member of the human community since the beanstalk incident. Jack was generous, giving, and responsible adult now. He had outgrown the spoiled, obnoxious child he had been. Piedmont did everything he could to show Jack had only been a pawn in a bigger scheme. In his remorse for the events surrounding the beanstalk, he totally changed his life after being used in such a heinous way by first the fairy and then the giant's wife. Jack was a victim not a criminal.

The Prosecutor scoffed at the idea of a fairy being involved. They only had Jack's word that the fairy even existed. No one else had seen or could find the fairy. Oberon's court wouldn't even confirm Jack's family had ever been the focus of fairy attention. It was a ploy being used by the defense to shift the blame to someone else, even after Jack freely admitted to cutting down the beanstalk which resulted in the giant's death. Also, Jack's newfound generosity was financed by the proceeds from Jack's thefts.

Then it was all up to the jury. Neither Jack, Piedmont, nor his mother strayed far from the courtroom. They wanted to be close when the decision came down. Jack's mother twisted her hands in her skirts as she watched them pace.

"What happens if they find Jack guilty?"

"Well, ma'am, I won't lie to you. Sometimes bad things happen even to good people."

"But he was only trying to help his family."

"And I think we can all agree that he made some bad choices. Choices have consequences. Even though he had good intentions, Jack still has to face those consequences."

Jotuns said almost that exact same thing when handing down Jack's sentence. He was found guilty of theft, but not murder. The jury apparently found Reasonable Doubt. Jack was sentenced to hard community labor under the direction of the giant's widow, in way of reparation.

"Perhaps when you are working for the giant community, you will begin to understand that violence, whether or not with good intentions, only continues to divide people. Perhaps this can be a new beginning for giant and human relations."

Jack was confined to the giant community until a magic bracelet could be fashioned allowing Jack to be monitored between the realms. This way, he could continue to take care of his mother, who had no one else to help her, while carrying out his sentence.

Jack was still alive. Piedmont had no intention of appealing, since the judge made it clear appeal was out of the question. Though if anyone dared, they could talk to him under his bridge. No one stepped forward.

Jack was given a moment to say goodbye to his mother before the giant's widow took custody of him. He found his work in the giant's realm much like what he'd done in his own after he'd cut down the beanstalk, only larger in scale. He just hadn't yet realized how far he'd come or how far he had to go to get beyond the beanstalk. It remained a part of him for the rest of his life.

#



## When the Party's Over

"My what big teeth you have."

"Do I look like I'm wearing a riding hood? Red or otherwise." Millie turned and glared at the wolf. "Besides, isn't that the girl's line?"

"Aw, come on, Millie, have a heart." The wolf stepped out of the trees. "I'm bored."

"Why not go to Goldie's? Jack's telling his beanstalk story again."

"I thought it was the wake for Roger."

"It was, but you know Jack. Any excuse to tell a story."

"I'd rather hang out with you. Jack's nice enough, but I prefer the company of beautiful women."

"I don't have time for this. I have teeth to collect. I'm already late, and lost. These directions make no sense. It's a freakin' forest! How am I supposed to know an elm from an oak? Not to mention which brooks are babbling? They could just be chatty or talkative? Who am I to judge?"

"You're the one who's babbling, Millie." The wolf took the piece of paper she'd been waving around and led her over to a log. "Sit down a minute. Let me take a look, maybe I can help. I know these woods better than anyone."

"That would be a first, you helping out. Why're you being so nice? Aren't you supposed to be the Big Bad Wolf?"

"Call it a slow day and a bad rap. Besides, I thought you were a fairy - not a harpy."

"Keep it up, smart guy, and I'll show you what this wand can do."

Millie brandished a silver stick with a glittery star on the end. The wolf had no doubts if she used it he'd be seeing more than the one star.

"Do you want my help or not? If you want Bad Wolf, I could leave you here, lost in the woods."

"Help. Please?"

He very prudently looked at the paper. "Where'd you get these directions? Oh, never mind. I see. Come on, I know this place. I'll show you the way. It'll be easier than explaining EtherQuest directions."

"You've got to be kidding."

"Do you want to wander the woods all night, or do you want to get your job done?"

"As long as we're clear on these are my clients and not your appetizers. But just so you know, I don't normally wander the woods with wolves."

"Yes, ma'am. We're very clear."

"Okay then, and as long as you're escorting me, you might as well entertain me."

Now it was the wolf's turn to be wary. "What did you have in mind? By the way, my rug impersonation stinks."

"I want the real story about Red Riding Hood. There's always been more to it than what made the news."

"I don't know what you're talking about." The wolf's nervous shifting said he lied. Millie saw it and knew it.

"Sure you do. It was all over the Weekly Grapevine. So, come on, spill. We have a ways to go. Right?"

"Oh, all right. If you insist."

"I insist."

## Red Riding Hood Affair

The knock on the door startled her, making her bang her head on the oven she was cleaning. She wiped her sweat-smeared face with the edge of her apron as she opened the door. A mousy, corporate-looking man fidgeted on her doorstep. "Can I help you?" she asked.

"I'm looking for Miss Hood? Miss Red Riding Hood?"

"I'm Red. Who're you?"

"I'm Percy Myatt." He fumbled with his suit coat and shoulder bag until he finally pulled out a card. "Forestland Mutual Life Insurance."

Red studied the card and then at the man on her doorstep. "I'm sorry, Mr. Myatt, I'm not interested in life insurance. If you'll excuse me, I'm very busy." As she started to shut the door in his face, Percy's hand shot out, blocking the door. She looked at him in surprise. "I beg your pardon? What are you doing?"

"I'm not selling insurance, Miss Hood, I'm with claims."

"I don't understand. What's all about?"

"It's about your grandmother. May I come in, please?"

Red hastily backed out of Percy's way, allowing him access to the house. "Yes, yes of course. Forgive my appearance, I've been straightening up my grandmother's affects. The house is about to go up for sale. Have a seat. Can I get you anything? Tea?"

"If it's no trouble, tea would be lovely."

"Oh, no, it's no trouble. Do you take anything in it?"

"No. Just tea."

Red busied herself with the teapot while Percy settled at the rustic table. He rummaged through his bag, pulling out some papers, a pair of spectacles, and a pen.

"Thank you." He sipped the tea Red brought over to the table.

She sat down next to him and gave Percy her undivided attention. "What's this all about, Mr. Myatt? There's isn't anything wrong is there?"

Percy looked through the papers for a moment, sparing Red only a glance. She could be quite distracting with her tumbled red locks and fetching dirt streaks. If he weren't careful, those big, innocent, green eyes were going to be trouble. "Well, Miss Hood..."

"Please, call me Red."

"Miss Hood, it appears your grandmother had a sizable policy with us."

"She did? Really?"

Percy looked at her over the rim of his spectacles. "She did. You were named sole beneficiary."

"I was?"

"You're telling me you didn't know?"

"She may have mentioned it at one time or another. But I didn't keep track."

"Oh, yes, Miss Hood, it was bought two years ago. And because of the way she died, we have to look into it. It's routine procedure. The company likes to make sure everything's in order before the pay out, so I need to ask you a few questions."

"Yes, of course."

"According to the sheriff's report, your grandmother was a victim of a wolf? A big, bad wolf to be precise."

"Yes, that's true. He had big eyes and nose and teeth. Really big teeth."

"So you were a witness to the fatal attack?"

"No. I didn't actually see it happen."

"Then how do you know what transpired?"

"I was the next intended victim, Mr. Myatt. The wolf was waiting for me when I arrived, pretending to be my grandmother."

"And you couldn't tell the difference?"

"Mr. Myatt, I was trying to save my life. I played along. I was lucky that woodsman came along when he did."

"Then what happened?"

"It's all in the sheriff's report, Mr. Myatt."

"We need to hear it first-hand."

"See that skin?" She pointed to a fur draped across a rocking chair.

## When the Party's Over

Percy shrugged. "Yeah, what about it?"

"That's what's left of the wolf."

Percy made a note and shuffled his papers. "We would've preferred the wolf to have been captured rather than killed. It looks better for the paperwork."

"Of course you would, you weren't staring down the wolf's muzzle. I really didn't care one way or the other as long as it was over. I don't understand where all this is going, Mr. Myatt."

"New procedures, Miss Hood. Ever since a woodsman and his wife coerced their kids into shoving a witch into an oven after taking a policy out on her, we have to be more careful. Especially with policies this large."

"May I ask how large we're talking about?"

Percy wrote a number on a slip of paper and passed it to her.

Red read the amount and looked up with wide eyes. "You're kidding! Seriously?"

"We never kid about policies, ma'am."

"More tea, Mr. Myatt?"

An hour later, Red closed the door behind Percy Myatt and breathed a huge sigh of relief. She picked up the teacups and washed them. A rattling at the back door made her freeze. Her hand crept to the wickedly large carving knife on the counter when the door opened.

"You shouldn't be here," she said, not lowering the knife.

#

Percy held his own with the woodsman as they tramped through the woods the next day. They retraced the woodsman's movements from the night in question. "This is where I brought the wolf down."

Percy looked around. "You're sure?"

"Mr. Myatt, I know these woods better than my own family."

"What makes you think it wasn't the original wolf?"

"I'm good at what I do, Mr. Myatt. I know what I saw when I chased the wolf. I know what I saw when I killed the wolf. They weren't the same."

"Can you prove it?"

"You tell me."

The woodsman spent the next hour showing Percy the places where a switch could be made. The insurance man made understanding noises in his throat as they moved through the scene. He wasn't sure if what he was shown would hold up under law.

"Was there anything else?" Percy asked. "Anything more concrete?"

"You didn't see the head then?"

"The head? Of the wolf? Why?"

"Come with me."

Percy found himself looking at a disembodied wolf's head a short while later in the Woodsman's workshop. He fought his gag reflex and wondered how taxidermists slept at night. He shook the thought out of his head. "What am I looking at?"

"The eyes."

"What about them?"

"Would you consider them big?"

Percy studied the head. "They're okay."

"And the nose?"

"Probably got the job done."

"Take a look at the teeth."

Percy gingerly lifted the edge of the muzzle and looked sharply at the woodsman. "Hey! What happened to the big teeth?"

"Now you know why I called you in."

"Yes, indeed, but why didn't you just tell me this to begin with?"

"I'm a woodsman, a hunter, you see. Going straight to the kill wouldn't be sporting, would it?"

#

Red noticed him as she picked up some things in the village market. Percy seemed to be everywhere she went, but never quite at the same moment. He was either entering or leaving the place she was going. They made eye contact but little else. He didn't try to talk to her. Red couldn't help but feel uneasy.

"Who is this guy?" she asked the baker's daughter. They leaned out the bakery window to tempt passersby and gossip.

## When the Party's Over

"I don't know, Red, but he was asking questions about you and your grandmother."

"Who does he think he is anyway?"

"Beats me, Red, but when insurance is involved, people get weird. That guy's talking to everyone, too. He's kinda cute though - in a geeky kind of way."

"If you say so, I don't see it."

"Oh, come on, Red, we all know you go for the Bad Boys, but even you had to notice..."

Red wasn't even listening. Something caught her eye, making her pull back inside. "Huh? Yeah, sure, whatever. I have to go."

"Red?" But the baker's daughter was talking to herself, Red was already gone.

#

"Come in to the den, take off your hood. Stay awhile."

"I won't be here that long." Red paced the den, her agitation evident.

"Why are you here?" The wolf watched her and licked his muzzle.

"You've got to leave town now. The guy from the insurance company I told you about? He's asking a lot of questions around town."

"You think he knows something?"

"He suspects something. That's enough. You've got to get out of here."

"Why me? Why not you?" He paused a moment to scratch a particularly annoying itch on his shoulder with his hind paw.

"You're the one who's supposed to be dead!"

"Oh. Right. Good point."

"So you'll go, then?" Red asked.

"When I get my share."

"If that insurance guy catches on there won't be any shares to get."

"Then how can I be sure I get what's coming to me?"

Red slipped over to him and wrapped her arms around him. She scratched behind one of his grey, grizzled ears and was amused to see him trying to keep his leg still. "Come on, Wolfie, have I ever cheated you? You'll get what you deserve. I promise."



The lupine eyes narrowed and the lips pulled back in a particularly wolfish grin. "Don't you forget it."

#

Red accepted Myatt's dinner invitation reluctantly. Curiosity drew her to the inn. She knew all she had to do is keep her mouth shut, but it would be hard. She stood in the doorway to the dining room, scanning the tables. She spotted him at a corner table definitely looking less mousy than before. Maybe the baker's daughter had been right. Myatt cleaned up pretty good.

She slid into the seat across from him. "Good evening, Mr. Myatt. This is unexpected."

"Thank you for coming, Miss Hood."

Red slid out of her signature cloak and leaned her chin on her hand, making full use of the current advantage of the latest bodice styles. "To what do I owe this honor?"

"We needed to talk, Miss Hood, and I thought a public place might be best."

"That sounds rather ominous, Mr. Myatt. What's this all about?"

"I hope you haven't already spent the money from your grandmother's policy."

"How could I? I told you I had no idea she even had that policy."

Percy watched her eyes as well as her expression. "Now why do I find that hard to believe?"

"I don't know, Mr. Myatt." She took a sip from the goblet that had been set at her place.

Percy leaned closer and dropped his voice. "I know what you're trying to do. You won't get away with it."

"I don't have to listen to this. It's insulting." She pushed back her chair and gathered up her cloak.

"I know the wolf isn't dead."

"Then you should have people out hunting him down, Mr. Myatt. If that wolf is alive, then he's dangerous. He killed my grandmother, and he tried to kill me. And if you're looking for blame, then you might want to check out the woodsman. He chased the wolf into the forest. Maybe he wanted to keep his reputation? They could've been in it together."

## When the Party's Over

"Interesting theory."

"And that's all you've got, Mr. Myatt, theories. You don't have a shred of proof that anything unusual - much less criminal - happened."

"Are you willing to bet your future on that?"

"Good night, Mr. Myatt."

Percy watched her leave the inn, as did every male eye in the place. She had that kind of walk. He took a very long drink from his goblet. The woodsman came out of the shadows and sat down in Red's recently vacated chair.

"She brought up an interesting point." Percy sipped his drink.

"Oh, that bit about it being me? She's trying to shift the blame. When I hunt, I bring down what I go after. Ask anyone around these parts."

"Yes, of course."

"You don't believe me?"

"Let's just say I don't like complications. There's only one thing left to do."

"What's that?"

"Find the wolf."

"What good would that do?"

"It'll tell me who he's working for."

"Are you sure that's wise?"

Percy thought a moment before he answered. "Wise? Perhaps not. Necessary? Oh yes."

#

Red sent a message to Wolf with a few simple instructions: to stay away from the cabin, to never mention her name, and to leave the woods as quickly as possible. She suggested a time and place outside the realm where they could meet and settle accounts. Then she went back to the cabin and stayed there, to properly mourn, or so she told her friends in the village.

#

The pounding on the door froze Wolf in his tracks. He looked around furtively, but there was no where for him to go. The door flew

open on its own. Wolf looked at the shadowed figure in his doorway.  
"Who are you?"

#

"Do you think she'll come?"

"Oh, she'll come," Percy said confidently.

There was the crunch of a broken twig.

"Okay. I'm here." Red came out of the shadows. "What do you want now, Mr. Myatt?"

"We need to make a deal, Miss Hood. One that profits both of us."

"You've got to be kidding. Why would I want to do that?"

"Because if you don't, you'll never see a cent."

"I'm listening."

"You took that policy out on your grandmother yourself."

"You can't prove that."

"Can't I?"

"What do you think you have?"

"I think I have your partner. He told me everything."

"Nice try, Mr. Myatt, but I don't have a partner because there was never a plot."

"That's not what he said." Percy gestured. The woodsman hustled Wolf into the pool of light where Percy and Red spoke. Red didn't even flinch. Percy had to give her credit for that.

"Am I supposed to know him?"

"Red! Come on, I think this guy's really going to skin me!" The wolf sounded scared.

"I've never seen this creature before in my life."

Understanding dawned in Wolf's eyes. He looked between Red, Percy, and the Huntsman. "You were right! She was playing me!"

"I told you there were varying degrees of Big Bad. I think you've just met your match."

Wolf faced Red down, growling deep in his throat. "You were never going to meet me were you? You were going to let me rot in the other realm and keep all the money for yourself."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

## When the Party's Over

Wolf turned to Percy and the Woodsman. "It was all her idea. I'll testify to that in exchange for immunity. I'll sing like the biggest canary you've ever seen."

"You fool!"

"Ready to deal now, Miss Hood?"

"What do you want?"

"Half the money."

"No deal."

"Oh, it's not just for me," Percy said. "I'd call it an equal split of all concerned here. There are four of us. We know you set this whole thing up to get rid of your grandmother. Four way split seems reasonable, don't you think?"

"If that's what it takes. You've got a deal."

"Just one more question, for my own curiosity, you understand."

"What?"

"Why the old lady? Why'd you insure her, then kill her?"

"Because she was a mean, controlling old woman, and I couldn't wait for her to go on her own. She controlled through money, and was threatening to leave everything to the Widows and Orphans Fund. I couldn't let that happen. Not after all those trips through the woods. All those baskets. I was just protecting my inheritance, before she gave it all away."

"Why use the wolf?"

"Everyone knows wolves are suckers. The plan was perfect until you came along. Insurance men have to be worse than evil fairies!"

"You have no idea, Miss Hood. Everyone heard enough?"

Red looked around quickly. "What's going on?"

The village sheriff came through the trees with more woodsmen. "We heard everything, Mr. Myatt. We'll take it from here."

#

Percy was ready to check out of the inn when the woodsman caught him. "You're leaving already?"

"I'll be back for the trial. Forestland Mutual is very grateful for your assistance in this matter. You saved us a lot of money. I think I will be able to see my way clear for authorizing a reward."

"That would be nice, but it's not why I did it."

"Why did you, then?"

"I don't like it when other people's happily ever after comes at the expense of others."

"Don't worry, Red'll have a long time to think about what she's done. I hope she's got a good lawyer. She's going to need it." Percy thought a moment. "What about the wolf?"

"Wolf? Oh, we have plans for him. His immunity had conditions."

"Dare I ask?"

"Oh, he'll be the model of community spirit, or he'll end up as a rug. It's as simple as that."

"I see." Percy looked around once more. "Sounds like everyone's getting what they deserve."

"And then some."

#

## When the Party's Over

You know I don't believe a word of it," Millie told Wolf as they continued through the forest. "If they made you go straight, why are you still here?"

"Part of my community service. I do my 'Big Bad' routine, it keeps the riff-raff away and the crime down. Or so they tell me."

"Oh, right, of course."

"Your assignment is right down that road, you can't miss it. Have a good night, Millie." The wolf headed off in the opposite direction.

"Where are you going? I thought the opportunity to scare a farmer and some kids would be a draw for you."

"You've got to be kidding, right? My shift's over. I'm going home. It's Thursday night, you know."

"And? What's so special about Thursday night?"

"Have you been living under a rock? How is it possible you haven't heard about this?"

"I still don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on, Millie, The Monica Lynch Show?"

The Tooth Fairy fought her impatience. "What about it?"

"Cindy and the girls are going up against the stepmothers tonight."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. Where've you been? It's been all the buzz."

"I work nights, you know, and there's been the whole Roger thing. I don't get to watch TV much. You recording it?"

"Absolutely, but if you get done pretty quick, why don't you come by? I'll leave the den lights on. It's going to be better live."

Millie studied the wolf for a moment to see if this was a legitimate invitation or a come on. Only innocent invitation came out of his lupine eyes. "You'll behave yourself? No funny stuff?"

"I promise. I don't want to miss the show."

"I'll think about it. Don't wait up."

"Oh, you'll come by. It's totally princess night." The wolf nodded knowingly. "I'll see you later. You won't miss a cage match with tiaras. I know you, Millie."

"You know princesses." Millie thought for a moment. "You said it was princess night. What's on before that?"

"One of those Based on Real Events shows. The 'true' fairy tale story of the Princess and the Blue Frog."

"I remember reading about that. Next realm over, right? I hear they have a killer swim team now."

"It's all in the show. The door will be open. Princess night. Popcorn. Snarky comments. You know you wanna."

"Sometimes you're such a girl."

"Takes one to know one."

"Hah. See you later."

"Maybe."

#

Millie went on to her next stop. She knew she only had this one house and she'd be done for the night. The wolf's invitation sounded better - better than being out in the woods in the dark anyway. Fortunately, most woodsmen's kids went to bed early. She might get done in time to see the show after all.

She came around the bend in the road. The cottage glowed in the dark. She slipped up to the windows. The woodsman and his wife were curled up on the sofa, facing the TV. They were engrossed with the previews of the show the wolf mentioned.

She floated up to the second story. The kids were tucked in their beds, sleeping. Millie checked her list. The girl. As she exchanged the baby tooth for a gold piece, she heard the television downstairs begin the re-enactment.



## Big Blue Frog

"It's not supposed to happen this way! Everyone knows when you kiss the frog you're supposed to end up with the Handsome Prince! That's how all the stories end. Not like this!" Elyse threw herself across her large feather bed and pounded her pillows. "It's not fair."

"Come on, Elyse, it's not that bad."

Elyse rolled over and glared at her perfectly groomed, blond-haired, blue-eyed friend who sat calmly filing her nails. "Not that bad? Not. That. Bad? I don't see you jumping up and down to be in my shoes, Cindy."

"I've already done the shoe thing. This one is all you. Besides there must be something to the guy. You did kiss him, after all."

"I suppose."

"You suppose? What's there to suppose, Elyse? Either you kissed him or you didn't, and since we're having the conversation, the answer to that is obvious."

"I kissed him. I suppose there was something about him. I just didn't think it was going to be like this."

"Like what?"

"I thought he'd change all the way back. You know-tall, dark, and handsome. But he's...he's..."

"Tall, blue, and amphibious," Cindy said.

Elyse flopped down at her dressing table on the outside wall of her tower. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and recoiled in horror. She certainly wouldn't be in the running for "Fairest in the Land" any time soon. Her porcelain skin was blotchy and her own dazzling blue eyes were red from crying. Her raven tresses tufted out in strange spikes from her wallowing on her large feather bed. She picked up a handkerchief instead and blew her nose in a loud, long, and utterly unlady-like honk. She turned back to Cindy.

"What am I going to do?"

"You ask that like you actually have choices, Elyse. You know as well as I do how this story ends. So suck it up and deal."

"I don't know if I can go through with it."

"Sweetie, I don't see how there's any way you can not go through with it. Not only would you be reneging on the enchantment - and God only knows what would happen then - but your father would kill you after all he's paid for this wedding. And it's not like you can get fat real quick to make the slipper not fit."

Elyse paced the available floor space of her cluttered tower. Her eyes widened as the sentence sunk in. "Cindy, you didn't."

"Of course not. I know my duty and place in life. Besides, you met my stepsisters. Would you stay there if you had a choice?"

"Good point. But it worked out for you." Elyse threw down her powder puff. "Why did I ever go into that swamp?"

"Why do any of us do what we do? We're princesses, and it's what we do. It's our destiny. We do our best for the fairy tale ending. And honestly? There are two more reasons. One, the pool of available princes is dwindling-no pun intended-there aren't that many left. And two, I think you're getting a better deal than a lot of us."

"At least you got to see what you were getting."

"Right, a prince with a foot fetish. Do you know what I spend on pedicures now? Think about it."

"Cindy, he's a frog! A blue frog. A big, blue frog."

Cindy held up her hand. "But he's six foot three and has a great body. All swimmers do - and you have to admit he's an excellent swimmer - and I hear swimmers have fantastic lung capacity."

"He wears glasses."

"He's smart, Elyse. Even with the enchantment, he earned his Ph.D. in Marine Biology from Realm University. That's probably why the witch turned him into a frog in the first place. His intelligence threatened her power base or something. Do you know how much I wish I'd ended up with someone with a little more going on in the brains department? Looks only get you so far, but intelligent conversation? That's gold, sister. You may have gotten the best deal of us all."

## When the Party's Over

"What if we have kids? What'll the neighbors say?"

"They'll be great looking because they'll have your face and great swimmers because they'll have his feet? There are possible scholarships there."

Elyse rolled her eyes and came over to throw herself on the bed next to her friend. "Do you always have to find the bright side to everything, Cindy?"

Cindy grinned. "Just call me Silver Lining Girl."

"He's still a frog. He was supposed to turn all the way back into a human prince."

"Geez, you're a broken record, Elyse. So there was a loophole, go figure. He's got a good heart, or you wouldn't have tried to break the enchantment to begin with. Be grateful you found someone who'll love you warts and all."

"Warts! I hadn't even thought of warts. What if I get warts?"

Cindy threw up her perfectly manicured hands in disgust. "I give up. But I will tell you this, you better hop to it, girlfriend. There are a lot of other princesses out there who don't care what the neighbors think and would rather have him than some smelly dwarves."

"But he eats flies!"

"Just think how handy that'll be next summer. And before you go on about living near a swamp, just think about how much we spent on that mud bath at the spa last week. Open up your own place. You'll make a fortune!"

"Well..." Elyse paused to count the dollar signs suddenly dancing in her head. Spas were big business when done right.

"Do you love him? I mean really. When you finally kissed him, you didn't do it just because you really thought you were getting the fairy tale ending did you?"

"Well, not just."

Cindy sighed. "What was it then?"

Elyse stared out the tower window. She couldn't help but smile as she thought about that day. She hadn't meant to lose the ball in the well, but she'd thrown it over her dog's head, and it was Poochie's favorite. The Frog had come along at just the right time, just like in the stories.

But, instead of the whole blackmail into marrying ploy, they'd actually talked. He'd turned out to be funny and charming and...

"Come on, Elyse, you can do it. Just answer the question."

Elyse threw up her hands in defeat. "Oh, all right, I admit it. I'm in love with a big, blue frog."

"Now what're going to do about it?"

Elyse looked in the mirror. Determination glinted back at her through puffy eyes. Cindy was right. It was time to put up or shut up. She'd dallied long enough. Now that she admitted it to herself, there was only one thing to do.

"Help me pull myself together. The wedding's in an hour. We don't want to be late, and I need to look my best."

Cindy leapt into action, reaching for a hair brush. The bride-to-be grabbed her powder puff and paused with it halfway to her face.

"What now, Elyse?"

"You know, I was just having cold feet, right?"

"Well, considering you're marrying an amphibian, cold feet probably come with the territory. Just don't make it a habit."

"I didn't think of that..."

"Don't make me argue this again, Elyse."

"Oh it's not that."

Cindy narrowed her eyes at her suspiciously. "Then what is it?"

Elyse grinned. "I was thinking about how fun it might be to get those feet warm."

"There you go. See, sometimes Silver Lining Girl can be contagious. Come on, it's about that time."

"What time?"

"Happily Ever After time."

#

## When the Party's Over

"Oh, yeah, like that was realistic. How long did the tabloids give that marriage? Six months?" Millie asked as the credits rolled.

Wolf didn't even turn his big, furry head. "I knew you'd show up, Millie."

"Yeah, but that was two years ago. They've beat most of the betting pools already. And I hear they have a tadpole on the way."

"Ah, if there are kids, I hope they have teeth, I could use the business."

"Really?" the Wolf sounded surprised.

"Teeth are a finite business."

"Good thing you love what you do, then."

"Yeah, you know me so well." Millie plopped down on the sofa beside Wolf's recliner. "So, I take it I didn't miss anything important?"

"Oh no, the show hasn't started yet, but it's about to, and it's gonna be good."

"Then shut up and pass the popcorn. I need it after the day I've had."

Wolf grinned, well, wolfishly as he handed over the bowl. "Yeah, Roger would've loved this, wouldn't he?"

"He was a sucker for reality shows and princesses. Now, hush, it's starting."

## **When the Party's Over**

"Two minutes to air, people! Two minutes!" The stage manager stormed across the stage. "Let's finish getting the audience in and settled."

The crew scurried to complete necessary tasks in the last fleeting moments before air time. Their concentration was absolute in the cacophony of the audience filling the stage seating to capacity. The electrical current to their excitement carried to the whole studio.

The stage manager knocked on a dressing room door. "One minute, Ms. Lynch."

"Thank you, Harvey." Monica Lynch came out of her dressing room and smiled at the thirty-something, balding man in the wild print shirt over his t-shirt and jeans. He wore a headset covering one ear. "How are our guests doing?"

"About how you'd expect." Harvey shrugged.

"Anyone fighting yet?"

"They're saving it for the cameras, but it's there."

"Perfect."

Harvey listened to his headset. "Twenty seconds, Ms. Lynch."

"Then places, Harvey, places."

#

The audience went silent in anticipation as Harvey counted down the last few seconds before going live on television. The theme music swelled, and the anonymous announcer introduced the show and its host, Monica Lynch.

The audience went wild as Monica made her grand entrance. She was a stately woman in the prime of her adult life. She was the personification of charm, charisma, and compassion - of which, only part of her act was a complete sham. She paused a moment to bask in the adoration of her audience. Oprah, eat your heart out.

## When the Party's Over

Monica Lynch was the most controversial talk show host on the air. She left everyone else in the dust. Jenny Jones, Dr. Phil, even Geraldo had nothing on her. Her fans were heralded as a "Lynch Mob", and even acted like it. Monica had made more people cry than Barbara Walters, sparked more fights than Jerry Springer, and the viewing audience couldn't wait to see what she would do next.

When the roar of the crowd started to wane, she began her introduction to that day's show. "Hello, and thank you! We have a great show in store for you today. You've heard the stories - young girls, wicked stepmothers, and charming princes. It's a classic combination, but does it always lead to Happily Ever After? Were these young girls really innocent? How wicked were the stepmothers? We're about to find out. This is blended family dynamics at its best - or worst. We'll meet our first guests right after these messages."

"And we're out!" Harvey gestured for everyone to go about their tasks. "Two minutes, everyone."

Monica relaxed a smidgen and used the brief break to settle back in her chair. Around taking a sip of water and having her hair and makeup checked, she flipped through her notes to remind herself of the game plan. She would occasionally acknowledge something from the audience, but for the most part, she ignored them.

"Twenty seconds." Harvey's voice penetrated her thoughts.

Monica put away her notes and put on her mega-watt, camera ready smile, ready for Harvey's final countdown. "And we're back. Our first guest needs no introduction. We were captivated by the rags to riches story. We were fascinated by the shoes. Please welcome Cinderella!"

The crowd went wild as the popular blond-haired, blue-eyed princess glided out on stage. She and Monica greeted each other warmly. Then, when the crowd quieted sufficiently, Monica brought out her second guest.

"Also with us today, a young woman who's endured multiple attempts on her life by her stepmother. She made her own way in the Dwarvish community and is now also a princess. Please welcome, Snow White!"

Again the crowd went nuts for the dark-haired, blue-eyed beauty. She gave them her brightest blood-red smile as she greeted Monica and Cinderella. She took her place on the guest sofa.

"And our third guest is somewhat of an exception. Though she didn't suffer at the hands of a stepmother, but she was cursed by a wicked fairy godmother. Please welcome Aurora, better known as Sleeping Beauty!"

The second blonde bombshell received a slightly cooler reception, but she wasn't as well-known or loved as the other two princesses. She waved politely to the audience, greeted the others on stage and took her own seat.

Monica paused a moment for dramatic effect before getting on with the interview process. "As we've already mentioned, there is a common thread connecting you all - stepmothers or godmothers. How has that contributed in your lives, and how much was the press blowing things out of proportion? Aurora, why don't you go first?"

"Well, granted, I didn't have the same stepmother issue these other girls had, but at least they knew what was happening to them. No one told me about the curse this evil witch put on me when I was born. One day I'm roaming the castle, minding my own business, trying new things, when - BAM! - the next thing I know it's a hundred years later and there's some prince standing over me. I had no idea what the heck happened. Fairy godmothers! Bah! Who needs 'em!"

"Mine was pretty cool," Cinderella smiled sweetly. "If it weren't for my fairy godmother, I'd still be back in my father's house doing domestic work for my stepmother. And I'll tell you, Monica, the press didn't exaggerate one bit with my case. The witch my father married made me a servant in my own home. There's a common thread. Witches."

"Oh whine, whine, whine." Snow White crossed her arms and rolled her eyes. "I slept for a hundred years'. 'My mommy made me mop the floors'. You had it so rough. Yeah, right."

"It sounds like you've got something to say, Snow."

"Bleepin' right, I do, Monica. When one of these two has a stepmother who not only hires a hit man to have her killed, but tries it



## When the Party's Over

herself three times, then I'll have some sympathy. And they didn't have to deal with the dwarves."

"You got to live with seven men who adored you!" Cinderella retorted. "I had to deal with two power hungry stepsisters who undermined everything I did to better myself."

"Oh, boo freakin' hoo. You got to meet your prince at a party, dressed up and pretty. I had to wait for mine to stumble on me in the woods while I was unconscious."

"You think that ball was easy? You try dancing in glass slippers. They're cold. They're hard. And they have no traction!"

"Well, what about me?" Aurora interrupted.

"What about you?" Snow White and Cinderella chorused.

"At least you got to live your lives! I slept through what should've been my life. I woke up and everything was completely different! A hundred years is a long time!"

Monica sat back and watched as the girls bickered among themselves over who'd had the rougher life and smiled smugly. She loved it when her guests took over. It made her job a lot easier. She's let them have their heads - like frisky, young colts - for another minute. A discreet cue from Harvey told her it was time to rein her guests in before going to commercial.

"We have to take a break. When we come back, we'll hear the other side of the story." Monica looked at her guests. The cameras followed and fixed on the princesses puzzled expressions. "Stay tuned."

Harvey led the cheering crowd to new levels of enthusiasm before giving the all clear and a two minute warning. The set was rearranged to accommodate the next set of guests. Hair and makeup people swarmed over the stage - fixing, powdering, and teasing - then melted away before Harvey began his final countdown. The princesses, who'd been chatting amiably in those two minutes, went right back to looking pensive. Monica had to give them credit for being trained to know their roles.

She turned back to the audience and the camera. "Our next set of guests have been pursued, persecuted, and vilified by the press and the public, but has it all been a giant misunderstanding? I give you the

stepmothers! Cinderella's stepmother, Blanche; Snow White's stepmother, Clarisse; and Aurora's fairy godmother, Lilith!"

The three women came out as Monica rattled off each of their names. The boos, catcalls, and general unpleasantness greeted each woman as she came out, until Lilith. The fairy's entrance brought a hushed air of fearful respect. The stage hands kept the crowd controlled enough to keep them from throwing things. No one wanted another lawsuit. At least not until Sweeps Week. The women sat primly on their sofa across from their charges. "Charges" being an operative word - sparks of recrimination flew between the women on stage in a most dramatic moment. Monica drew it out as long as she dared. Then it was back to business.

"Ladies, you've heard the girls' stories while backstage. Now, it's your turn. Blanche, let's start with you."

No one could deny that Blanche was a handsome woman, but with a cold, hard edge. "I did the best I could, Monica. I was a single mother with two girls of my own when I met Cindy's father. I put the best interests of my own girls ahead of hers. So what? What parent wouldn't? I did my best with her. I can't help it if she's ungrateful."

"Your best?" Cinderella scoffed. "You turned me into a maid!"

"I was trying to teach you life skills! Something to fall back on in case you needed to work. Not everyone snags a prince."

"I wore rags and slept in a tiny room off the kitchen."

"Lessons in humility! I didn't want to make the same mistake with you that I made with my own girls. Don't you think I didn't know my own two girls were conceited and lazy?"

"And ugly." Cinderella wasn't smiling so sweetly now.

"That's uncalled for!" Blanche stabbed a finger at her. "I gave you management skill. Life skills that will carry you through the rest of your life! That's more than I had going in!"

"Yeah, right."

"Maybe Cindy is trying to tell you, Blanche, that there might've been better ways to get those life lessons across." Monica was in translator mode now.

## When the Party's Over

Cinderella's blue eyes flashed. "If this was all for 'my own good', Blanche, then explain why you did what you did the day of the ball?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, come now, Blanche, this isn't a court of law," Monica prodded none too gently. "Don't worry about self-incrimination. Think of this as your opportunity to tell your side of the story. Clear the air."

"Yeah, Blanche, tell them about how you wouldn't let me go to the ball when every woman in the realm was supposed...was ordered...to go! How you had your girls destroy my dress? How you locked me in my room so I couldn't have gone even if I'd had something to wear."

"You did pretty well with that fairy godmother of yours," Blanche shot back.

"I didn't want a godmother! I wanted a mother! Was that too much to ask?"

"You ended up with a handsome prince and a kingdom! What did I get out of all of it? I can't go anywhere without someone booing me. Don't get me started on the pushing and spitting. You had that prince of yours turn my girls into statues!"

"The statue thing was his idea, and it was only for a month! Besides, the prolonged clay mask did wonders for their skin! Ask them!"

Cinderella pointed out into the audience. The camera and the audience's attention were drawn to the two embarrassed young women alternating between trying to sink into their seats and enjoying the attention. The girls were slightly older than Cinderella and plain, but the "ugly" epitaph had been exaggerated.

Monica was immediately on her feet, holding out her hand for the wireless microphone which was slapped into it by Harvey. It had the feel of an experienced surgical team. Before the audience could draw a collective breath, Monica was at the end of the sisters' row drawing them out.

"Tell us your names, please?"

"Um, I'm Hortense," the taller, older, leaner sister said.

"And I'm Maude," said the shorter, rounder, younger sister.

"And do you have something you'd like to say about all of this?"

Hortense took control of the microphone. "You know, Monica, Cindy was right. Being a statue did wonders for the pores - even cleared up Maude's stubborn acne."

"It did!" Maude beamed for the camera. "At least it had some visible benefit, not like what Mother Dearest wanted us to do."

"And what was that?"

"When Cindy's prince showed up with that stupid glass slipper, she," Hortense indicated Blanche, "wanted us to cut off parts of our feet to make the shoe fit. Do whatever we had to do to get that prince."

Blanche jumped to her feet, gesturing emphatically toward them. "I was only trying to provide for you girls the best way I knew how!" The crowd booed and hissed her back into her seat. "I was just trying to look out for my...for you girls!"

Monica sent Hortense and Maude back to their seats and made her way back to the stage. She noticed Cinderella expression was somewhere between smug and uncertain. It was an unusual expression, but one Monica knew well. She also knew it was time to switch the focus.

"Clarisse, what about you? Snow White contends you tried to have her killed not once but four times."

"All the charges were dropped."

Snow White snorted in a most unlady-like manner. Monica smiled slowly. This was going to be good. She could feel the ratings climb.

Clarisse went on. "It's bad enough to get older, but do you realize the pressure to retain one's beauty in this world? You gain a little bit of weight, get one wrinkle, or heaven forbid contemplate cosmetic surgery, and the press is all over you! And it's never good. Then before you know it, you've been replaced by the next young thing."

"Is that why you used the Magic Mirror?" Monica asked.

"How else was I supposed to keep up with my competition? This was my livelihood we were talking about. Then she sprouted. It was one thing when she was an adorable little brat, but when Snow became a teenager...well, the game changed. She would've had my throne if I hadn't done what I did." Clarisse stopped herself before she finished her thought.

## When the Party's Over

Monica didn't let the minor curse in the back of her brain reach anything that would come across on camera. She'd come this close to an on-camera confession. She turned her attention to Snow White. The young princess was sputtering wordlessly in her seat. If possible, her trademark snow white skin paling even further.

"That's what this whole horrid affair was all about?" the young woman asked shrilly when she could speak. "Public opinion?"

"Public opinion is worth more than gold when it comes to politics, my dear. Haven't you learned that by now?"

"Have I learned? Have I learned? I'll tell you what I've learned..."

The audience growled its approval. They knew the sounds of a cat fight when they heard one. Monica spared a glance their direction, but it was good movement. It didn't have the feel of anything dangerous. Yet. She let them go a while longer.

"Just because you wanted to stay a cover girl, I had to live with seven dwarves? If I was to live at all? Are you serious?"

"What're you complaining about?" Clarisse demanded. "You're the fairest one in the land whether you have dishpan hands or not! You have the prince, power, popularity..."

"No thanks to you!"

"Be careful, Snow, you're starting to sound like me."

Snow White leapt to her feet. Her right hand, red-tipped index finger stabbed accusingly toward her stepmother while her left clenched in a white knuckled fist. "I am nothing like you!"

"Not yet, maybe, but just you wait until the next young thing comes along, then we'll see!"

"Never!" Snow White's voice dropped to an intense, emotion-laden growl. "I will never, ever be like you."

The princess dropped back onto the sofa with a muffled sob. Monica automatically handed her a box of tissue. Snow White took a couple and daintily dabbed her eyes and her nose, careful not to smear her makeup.

Monica knew a transition when she saw it and turned to the last woman. "Let's move on to you, Lilith. While you're not technically a

stepmother, but you've fulfilled the role traditionally held by them. Why did you put the curse on Aurora?"

"Revenge."

Monica was surprised by the taciturn, one word answer. She hoped for more, but Lilith folded her hands in her lap and sat back. Monica smiled slowly as she sized up the fairy. Lilith wasn't the tiny, delicate winged creature most people associated with the word. She was tall, angular with sharp bones and planes. She had a dusky complexion and stormy dark eyes. If Monica didn't know better, she would swear Lilith was a thundercloud on two legs. Her reticence meant nothing to Monica. She'd dealt with tougher interviews.

"Revenge for what?"

"Her parents slighted me. They invited everyone else to her christening but me."

"It wasn't on purpose!"

Lilith turned on Aurora, eyes flashing like lightening. "What do you know about it, you little twit? You were an infant. You still are."

The audience reacted enthusiastically to the interview already dissolving into name calling. Monica had to follow things closely now, to make sure things didn't break down completely. At least not until she wanted them to.

"I heard the stories after I woke up. I read the letters. They told me what you did. I bet it really ticked you off when I didn't die."

"Sleeping for a hundred years was enough, especially when your parents had to remain awake for the good of the kingdom. Did you think I didn't know about Callie hiding in the wings? I knew what she was going to do, and either way, I got what I wanted. Your parents suffered for what they did to me."

"Just because you had your feelings hurt? No one had seen you for decades! You were a legend! You weren't real!"

"Well, they learned what happens when you make assumptions, now didn't they?"

"Didn't you ever hear of an RSVP? Or a forwarding address? From what I found out, they tried to invite you, but you didn't respond! Who

knew you were coming? If you got your feelings hurt, it's your own fault!"

Lilith glared at Aurora as the audience roared its approval of the Beauty's argument. Monica glanced at Harvey. He was gesturing frantically for her to wrap up.

"We have to take another break, but when we come back we'll be taking questions and seeing if we can get to the bottom of all of this. Please stay tuned."

She held her smile and her pose until Harvey released her. Everyone relaxed as the crew scurried about their tasks. Monica's microphones were checked as she headed out into the audience for the next segment. This was actually her favorite part of the show, the free for all. Anything could happen now, and Monica could count on her "Lynch Mob" to make it happen.

"And we're back! If you've just joined us, we're talking with the princesses and their stepmothers. Now it's time for questions from our studio audience."

Hands went up all over the studio. Monica had a good eye for picking which could be good drama and which were simply people looking for fifteen seconds of fame. She picked a round, enthusiastic matron for her first question.

The large woman in the loud, floral print patio dress climbed to her feet and all but snatched the microphone out of Monica's hand. "All I wanna know is what kinda mama you ladies - and I use that term loosely - think you are? Anybody treatin' their younguns that way should be horsewhipped."

"It didn't kill them, so now they're stronger," Lilith responded coolly. "I may not be a mother, but I applaud what these ladies for what did for these girls. Look at them-they're strong, independent women who are now are rich and powerful."

"You gotta to be kidding! How can you possibly justify..."

"You weren't there!" Clarisse jumped to her feet, stabbing the air with her finger. "You don't know the pressure we were under."

"Would you do things differently if you could go back and do it again?" Monica asked, getting into the fray.

"We can't answer that!" Blanche said.

"Why not?" Cinderella climbed to her feet and got into Blanche's face. "Why can't you answer that, Blanche? Because you'd be and do the exact same thing all over again, wouldn't you?"

"She didn't say that!" Clarisse jumped to Blanche's defense - verbally and physically. "We'd do our best for you like we did then."

"Your best? Your best!" Snow White got into the mix. "You think that was doing your best?"

"You got the prince, didn't you?"

"Who asked us if that's what we wanted?" Aurora joined the other girls. "Did you ever ask if we wanted those princes?"

"Every girl wants a prince. Everyone knows that. It's nature."

"Says you. Did you ever ask?"

Snow White looked at Clarisse. "I never wanted to be fairest in the land. I didn't ask to be. That was my birth mother's wish, not mine. Did you ever think to ask what I may have wanted? NO! It's all about the queen's wishes - not the princess'. Nobody asked me."

"Just what's so special about a Prince?" Cinderella asked. "I mean most the time they're more inbred than half the red necks in Arkansas."

"Hey!" A trio of remarkable similarly outraged voices protested from off camera.

Monica turned with cameras and audience to the three young men storming their way onto the stage. One was tall, virile with the looks of a romance cover model. The one next to him was much the same, except with teen movie idol looks. Monica had no doubt these were the handsome princes.

The third was different. He was shorter, stockier, more "typical" looking with slightly thinning hair, but he had a charisma about him that made people stop and take notice. Monica knew in a flash this was Prince Charming. He would be the most dangerous and the most dramatic.

The three paragons of male royalty strutted toward their women. Monica had to move quickly to reach the stage in time to meet them. The drama level just shot up another notch. And from the looks on the girls' faces, Monica was glad they'd gone from chairs to sofas or



someone would have something broken by a chair. She quickly inserted herself between the boys and girls, drawing everyone's attention to herself and the cameras.

"Would you gentlemen care to have a seat and tell us your side of the story?"

"Why sit?" the Fabio-esque prince, Handsome #1, demanded. "When we can say everything we need to say right here?"

Charming stepped forward and smiled in a winning manner. "We're here, Monica, because we're tired of getting the short end of this stick."

Cinderella looked him over haughtily. "If anyone's getting the short stick, I'd say it was Snow."

The audience reacted loudly to that. Charming's face froze and his mouth went tight. Monica nearly swooned with excitement. The ratings were going to be stellar. Her next contract was secure.

Aurora sneered a bit. "You - all of you - got what you wanted, a princess to carry on your family lines."

The teen idol prince, Handsome #2, carried on for the testosterone-laden trio. "Oh, yeah, we so got what we wanted. Co-dependent, diva princesses and the mothers-in-law from Hell. Oh, yeah, that's our fairy tale romance. Why do you think we spend so much 'patrolling the borders'? None of us are at war. It was to get away from all your whining."

Charming turned on Snow White. "We were just as deceived, manipulated, and used as you were, and you don't see us moaning about it."

Handsome #2 turned on Cinderella, anger not about to mar his teen idol looks. "Did you really think I wanted to go throughout the realm trying that slipper on every girl? The smell of sweat socks still gives me nightmares. I did it because I fell in love at that stupid party, and it's what was expected of me! It's part of our lives, we deal with it."

Cinderella's lower lip trembled as she backed down from her prince's tirade. Her big blue eyes filling with tears. Somewhere in the back of Monica's brain she added up the ratings points this was going to net her. She couldn't count that high.

"We all did what was expected of us. Didn't you ever think it was strange that I met you in a forest - with my allergies? Come on! Think about it," Charming demanded.

"Well..." Snow White hesitated, suddenly uncertain.

Handsome #1 turned on Aurora, "And you, did you really think I wanted a hundred year old sleeping chick? I was manipulated into being at the 'right place at the right time.'"

Aurora sputtered. All three princesses collapsed on their sofa in sobbing puddles.

"So what are you trying to say?" Monica said, trying to ooze compassion.

"We're saying the party's over, Monica," Charming replied. "Either these women get some counseling, or they find some new fairy tales. We're gonna walk."

Everyone made shocked and horrified sounds. The stepmothers and even Lilith jumped to their feet in protest. Charming turned on them next. "Don't get me started on you ladies. We've given you plenty of time and opportunity to straighten this out. You wouldn't. Now, it's all or nothing."

"That sounds an awful lot like an ultimatum," Monica said.

"Not 'sounds like', Monica. It is an ultimatum. You don't understand what it's been like, living with this. We have full support of the fathers, too. We're not leaving without an answer."

"You dare give me an ultimatum?" Lilith demanded in a voice that sounded suspiciously like thunder. Some of the audience members ducked in their seats.

"Give it a rest, Lilith, or we'll tell everyone you're not as scary as you pretend to be," Handsome #1 said, smiling sweetly.

Lilith glared at him.

"Do the words 'pink taffeta' mean anything to you, Lil?"

"Deal."

"Lilith!" Clarisse and Blanche chorused, horrified.

"I wouldn't get too comfortable if I were you ladies," Handsome #2 said. "We have your numbers too."

"Give it your best shot, pretty boy," Blanche said.

## When the Party's Over

"Grandchildren," Charming said. "And the lack thereof."

"You wouldn't dare," Clarisse said. Her voice a low hiss. "You need children, too. You have to think of succession."

"There are other ways to secure successions which don't involve you people," Charming said.

"You wouldn't dare," Cinderella said, planting her hands on her hips. "We'd take you to the cleaners in community property."

"It might be worth it," Handsome #2 said. "Listen, Princess, we're tired of the drama and you're not even queens yet."

"And if you don't deal now," Handsome #1 said, picking up where #2 left off. "You never will be."

"So what's it gonna be, ladies?" Charming asked. "Counselors are standing by. This is a limited time offer."

The women looked among themselves with expressions mixing apprehension and suspicion. Then in a rush they agreed as one. The audience went wild.

Monica saw they were out of time. "We will check back in with our guests in the future to see how this all plays out. Because, even as the princes have said, the party may be over, but the ever after is just beginning. Whether or not it'll be happy is anyone's guess. Just because this show's fairy tales may not always come true, here's encouraging you to never stop wishing..."

The guests behind Monica were heard repeating, in various degrees of sincerity, "I'm sorry," while hugging in varying degrees of warmth. Monica didn't even spare them a glance. "I'm Monica Lynch. Good night."

#

"Wow." Millie sat back on the sofa as the Wolf turned off the television. "That was..."

"Yeah. I wonder how much of it was real." The Wolf looked down. The popcorn bowl was empty. How had that happened?

"Roger would've loved that show. He knew Lilith, you know," Millie said, wiping at her eyes and a note of sadness in her voice.

"Really?"

"He could've told us if that pink taffeta crack was real or not."

"Oh, that is true. I know that one."

Millie sat up straighter. "What? How?"

"Big Bad Holiday party last year. It wasn't pretty. I've tried to block it out, but it happened." The Wolf shuddered. "So what now?"

"So now I go home. Tomorrow's a new day. And even if it's not happily ever after, we go on. Even in fairy tales."

"Good night, Millie."

"Good night, Wolf."

**The End**

## **About the Author**

Rhonda Eudaly lives in Arlington, Texas, where she's worked in a multitude of industries – making her one of those dangerous people who knows a little bit about a lot of stuff. She is married to a wonderful and exceptionally patient man and has an Elder Cat and a Stepdog. She loves all things ink and graphite (writing instruments) and unusual notebooks, as well as music. Her old smiley face collection has been forced out by persistent and precocious Rubber Ducks. She has dozens of short stories and non-fiction pieces published in print and online. She's also written screenplays for fun and profit. She is best known for her work with the *Four Redheads of the Apocalypse* by YardDog Press.