

SINNERELLA

God's story for women

Inspired by the Holy Spirit

Inscribed by Cristina Coneff

Drowning . . . I am drowning. Sinking down, down, down. No air, no breath. Desperation chokes me and I gasp, flailing in a sea of pain, anguish, loss, torment and hopelessness. “This is where it ends. I will find peace in death.” Pain sears through me as I press a knife into my wrist, and jolts me awake from my death depression. Bright red blood floods my wound and suddenly a torrent of memories flood my mind . . .



I picture the day I was born, a baby wailing in my Father’s arms on the day of my birth. Tears made shiny clear ribbons down his face as my mother’s lifeless body was carried from the room. It was a dreadful beginning. Death, sorrow and loss from the start. No one celebrated my birth.



I was a young child feeling alone in a great house. As I longed for his love and attention, my grieving father sequestered himself in his study. The echoing halls seemed as empty and lonely as my heart. The outside beckoned to me like a friend. Nature stretched out her hand and I took it and was drawn through grassy meadows to the shores of a peaceful pond. There I made wreaths from flowers and played with the minnows, frogs and butterflies. The butterflies especially enchanted and delighted me.

One warm, sunny day I was happily playing in the mud, trying to catch the minnows that darted in the shallow water on the edge of the pond, when the reflection of a butterfly caught my eye. It was large and more colorful than any I had seen. I looked up, captivated by the flash of its wings as it flitted playfully around me. Joy and wonder filled my heart. I laughed and twirled as I imitated its airy dance. It was as if the butterfly was leading me, so I followed willingly. I opened my heart and took it all in: the warmth of the sun, the sound of birds and bugs and the breeze in the trees, the green of the tall grasses and the blue sky. I chased the butterfly along the shore and ran out on a fallen log as the butterfly flitted over the water. Suddenly, splash! I was sinking, enveloped in cold and wet. Bubbles rose toward the light. I reached for it as it seemed to get farther away and I was being claimed by darkness. The deep opened its mouth and swallowed me. Light was fading. Terror rising. No hope, no help. I couldn’t open my mouth to cry out. I thrashed about, struggling to follow those bubbles rushing to the surface. If only I could crawl inside one and be carried up.

It felt like the universe stood still and watched me as I gave up the fight and darkness overtook me. I pictured my father sitting at his desk. How long would it take him to notice I was gone? How

would he be able to bear the loss? It was no use to fight this force that was taking me. I was powerless. My life was fading into blackness. Then through the murky dark I saw something moving toward me. First a head. Then arms. Hands and body became clearer as He approached. Reaching me, He took my small body in His arms, and we rose to the surface.



I stood dressed in a gown of pink satin and held a bouquet of lilies. The sun warmed my face as hope stirred in me that my home would be filled with love and laughter again. My smiling father stood by the minister as the wedding march played. But as the bride swept up the aisle behind her two daughters, the sun darkened and a chill wind billowed her veil. She came into my life like a storm cloud drifting over the sun of my hopes. Her name was Fear. She was beautiful and cold as a snowy winter day.



On a grey fall day I was dressed in black as a dark hole in the earth swallowed my father's casket and all joy in my heart. How I longed to fall into the grave and be buried with him. I stood alone in my grief as my step-mother and step-sisters turned away from the grave. Suddenly I felt a hand on my shoulder and looked up. Warmth seemed to radiate from His touch and brown eyes full of tenderness met mine. They seemed familiar. He spoke no words but my sad, lonely heart thrilled. He lingered for a moment and then was gone.



I stood in a cold, dark, dirty attic room, surveying my surroundings, overwhelmed by shock and grief. Stepmother Fear had all my possessions moved out of my bedroom while we were at the funeral. There was a stained mattress for a bed. My beautiful dresses and furniture had mysteriously disappeared. "Now that your Father is dead, we must be frugal," Fear said. "We can't afford servants. Changes have to be made." Changes! The only one who had to change was me. This was Fear's plan all along. When Fear and her daughters, Criticalina and Drudgerine, first moved into my home, their demeanor toward me was cool and polite. I hoped to win them over and did whatever I could to be friendly and helpful. Soon they were asking more and more from me and I served them in any way I

could, while my heart longed to be part of a family. But I only felt more lonely and left out of their circle.

With my father gone, there was nothing to stop them from making my life truly dreary. My days were spent scrubbing floors, washing clothes, and cooking meals. As I worked, they would taunt, insult, and criticize me. All day these words would ring in my ears: “You are worthless, lazy, and dirty. You don’t deserve anything better. You are lucky we don’t turn you out because no one else would put up with you.”



One day, Criticalina taunted me: “Do you know why your life has been so miserable, Ella? It’s because you are evil inside. Your mother and father were evil and you are like them. In fact, I have a new name for you: Sinnerella. I know how dark and devious your heart is. That is why you will never be anything more than a filthy slave.” From that day on, they all called me Sinnerella.



On a hot summer afternoon I collapsed with exhaustion after drawing a bucket of water from the well. No one was around, so I took the bucket and emptied it over my head, laughing at the shock of the cold, wet shower. But I was quickly silenced by the sound of a man laughing behind me. I practically leapt to my feet and stood facing him, vainly trying to straighten my dingy dress. I was mortified, but His smile was kind and light seemed to sparkle in His eyes. I had seen those eyes somewhere before. In spite of His kind expression, my cheeks burned with shame. Under His penetrating gaze I wanted to squirm.

“Hot day, isn’t it?” He chuckled and then grew serious, “Would you draw me some water?”

I hesitated for a moment, wondering at Him. By the way He looked, he must have been working in the fields. He certainly didn’t appear to be anyone of importance, yet had an air of authority. My exhaustion and shame turned into irritation with this man who was obviously strong enough to get His own water.

“Why are you asking me to get water for you? Get your own water.”

He could have become angry at my insolent reply, but one corner of His mouth turned up in a half-smile and His expression darkened mysteriously as He said, “If you had any idea who I am, you would be asking *me* to give *you* water!”

I was astonished.

“You have no water!” I declared incredulously.

His smile broadened. “Not only do I have water, but my water is like none you have ever had before. If you drank my water you would never be thirsty again!”

I couldn’t believe His cheek. “Sir, you are right, I don’t know who you are, and I don’t have time to play games.”

Suddenly I felt desperate to escape His searching eyes. “I have work to do.” I reached for the empty bucket. In a flash He was next to me taking the bucket and my hand. Before I could protest, He smiled disarmingly and said, “Come with me.” I looked over my shoulder at the house. There was a mountain of work waiting for me in those dreary rooms. “I can’t.”

“It will be all right,” he said so warmly and confidently that my aching heart was drawn. Hand in hand we ran toward the green hills.



Darkness faded and I awakened feeling the hard floor unyielding against my flesh. Pain seared through me like fire. Was it a nightmare? No, it was my life, if you could call it a life. I couldn’t see it, but I knew my back was bloody from the whipping my step-mother had given me. I must have passed out. Memories from the day before spent with Him flooded my mind. This was the price I paid for my frivolity. Bitterness and hatred, like dark, hulking figures in my mind grew larger and larger, reaching out jagged hands to possess me. I struggled against the onslaught. “I don’t want to be like her!” my thoughts screamed. “Help me!” Wrenching cries shook me. Hopelessness, panic, desperation. My voice and my soul wailed and moaned for hours in the dark, while my heart pounded like a wild bird against the bars of a cage. Then, with nothing left, I lay panting and spent as blackness closed in.

“Peace.”

My eyes popped open. Did I hear His voice? My frightened eyes scanned the gloomy room. There was no one there, but calmness came over me like a gentle breeze.



The morning air was brisk as I stepped out onto the stone-paved courtyard and pulled my shawl close. Birds were twittering and the newborn sun was glorious as I paused to take in a deep breath. There was still some joy in the world, and it stirred in my heart. The sound of hooves turned my head. A mounted courier approached, his steed kicking up a cloud of dust. Reaching me, the man

extended a handful of sealed envelopes. Looking at the letters in my hand, I was astonished to see my name on one bearing the palace seal. Checking that no one was around, I broke it open and read:

Dearest Ella,

Nothing can ever separate us or come between us. Not time or space, not the height of ecstasy nor depth of hell, not hatred or evil, not pain or suffering, not life or death.

Though the entire army and power of darkness may come against us, it will not overcome. You are precious to me. Remember this when I am gone. I will come back for you. There is nothing more sure. Hold on.

Prince

This was beyond belief. My nameless friend was a prince? Even after spending an entire day with Him, I never suspected that He was anything more than an ordinary man. My heart pounded with joy. He was a prince and He loved me! But He was going away, leaving me. Elation and sorrow churned inside, making me light-headed.



I am singing in the dark. My voice echoes off stone walls. Longing and desire pour from me and like a tempest, overflow then recede. I grope in the pocket of my ragged dress for the limp, creased paper that keeps my hope alive. So many weary years have passed since my eyes first read the words written on its surface. Hope hurts. Despair is unbearable. I examine my rough, calloused hands and am ashamed. "I will come back for you." I read the faded words. What would He find if he returned for me? Would He recognize me? I would be mortified to have His eyes see my condition. I want hope to die. *I* want to die. The thought of living the rest of my life feels like a millstone around my neck.

"He's never coming back. He has forgotten you," my thoughts whisper. Pain rips my heart. A knife lies on the table and my eyes are drawn to it. Its blade offers hope of relief. Rushing to it, I grasp its handle and feel a sharp pain as I press it into my wrist. Blood floods the wound and suddenly I feel a thrill as if I have come alive. At that moment, the sound of excited voices pierces my brain. I hold my breath as I strain to distinguish what is being said. I feel drawn to the sound. Dropping the instrument of release, I tear a piece of my apron, wrap it around my wrist, and move toward the door, feeling strangely energized. Noiselessly, I creep down the dark stairs toward the voices and pause to listen outside the door.

"What is it, what is it?" Drudgerine squeals excitedly.

"It's a letter from the palace, you imbecile," Criticalina replies.

"What does it say, what does it say?" Drudgerine gushes.

“Shut up, idiots!” Fear commands and I hear her unfolding the paper.

“You are hereby invited to a royal ball celebrating the victorious return of His Royal Highness, the Prince. All His subjects are cordially welcome, regardless of rank or position.”

Shouts of delight from the sisters overwhelm Fear’s voice. There is a sound of feet pounding on the floor as the sisters dance excitedly.

“We’re going to a royal ball. We’re going to a royal ball!”

“Quiet!” Fear thunders, and the sounds of jubilation fade.

“The invitation says that all must come dressed appropriately for this grand occasion. This means that we must have the proper clothing. There is no time to waste. Girls, go through your closets and see what you have.”

As the sisters chatter, I turn and slowly climb the stairs, my mind awl with the news. My heart thrills at the thought that the Prince has returned. Is it possible that I could attend the ball? Then doubts creep in. If the Prince has returned, why has He not contacted me? Has He forgotten me? The thought pierces me like a knife. Self pity and hurt tempt me to indulge in their comfort, but I realize that I have a choice. I can nurse my painful feelings or take positive action. Slowly, determination grows in me to get to the ball. I set my mind to work on a plan and an ember of hope begins to glow. Perhaps if the Prince sees me, He will have mercy on me. Maybe He will remember the love He had for me.

I reach my attic room and study myself in the dusty mirror. A crack runs across it, jaggedly dividing my face in the reflection. My skin is brown and wrinkled from long hot hours tending the garden. My lips are chapped and peeling. My hair is limp and dirty. I look down at my hands, calloused and wrinkled. Tears blur my vision. The Prince loved me when I was young, but now I am damaged. He deserves better than me. I can never be a princess. But maybe He will have compassion on my plight and allow me to work as a servant in the palace. That would be glorious compared to this place. That is what I will do. I will go to the ball and beg for His assistance. I don’t know how I will get there or what I will wear, but there has to be a way! This may be my only chance to escape and have a better life. I clench my hands with determination. I must not let anything stop me.

“Sinner! Sinnerella! Where are you? Come here at once!” A shrill voice reaches my ears. Descending the staircase and entering Criticalina’s bedroom, I find her feverishly sorting through her closet bulging with garments. Dresses have been tossed carelessly on the floor.

“Get rid of those clothes immediately!” she demands, “I can’t stand the sight of them.”

I dutifully gather the garments and, arms loaded, turn to leave.

“Sinnerella!” I hear Drudgerine screech, “Get in here now!”

Depositing Criticalina’s pile in the hallway, I hurry to the adjoining bedroom where Drudgerine piles more heavy dresses on my waiting arms.

“Get these out of here this instant. They’re disgusting!”

As I bear away the cast-offs, an idea takes shape. I could use these dresses to make my own! An inner glow warms my heart. I am going to the ball!

On my knees I scrub the floor. My knuckles are red and raw. My skirt is soaked with water. Nevertheless, my heart is singing. I hum cheerfully as I scrub. My mind is working on my plan to attend the ball. A door opens in the next room and, hearing voices, I pause to listen.

“Mother, you won’t believe it!” Drudgerine says breathlessly. “This is so exciting!”

“Well, what is it?” Fear demands as Drudgerine struggles to catch her breath.

“I . . . I,” Drudgerine pants while there is a sound of a door opening and running footsteps.

“Mother!” Criticalina exclaims, “I was just down at the dressmaker’s and I heard the most amazing news! It’s all over the town that the Prince is planning to choose a bride at the royal ball! And they say that He has no interest in marrying a woman from the royal families or the nobility of the land!”

“What?” Fear gasps. “Are you daft? This is idle gossip!”

“No, it’s true,” Drudgerine cries, having recovered her breath, “And there’s more! I heard that the Prince fell in love with a young girl in His youth and had to be parted from her. He may carry a torch for her still, but no one knows who she is!”

“This is very interesting!” Fear says slyly.

I can tell she is hatching a plan. Something is going on in her diabolical mind and it isn’t good.

“Girls,” Her voice is urgent, “This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. We have one chance to deceive the Prince and make Him forget that girl from long ago. I will spare no expense. Everything must be perfect: your dresses, your make-up, perfume, hair – everything! What have you found to wear?”

“I don’t have anything that will do,” Drudgerine whines.

“Everything that I have is awful,” Criticalina sulks.

“Well, then we must have the dresses made,” Fear states.

“But the dressmaker is completely overwhelmed with orders!” Drudgerine wails. “It’s impossible to get a dress made in time!”

“There has to be a way!” Fear shouts. “Think, you idiots! . . . I know! Sinnerella will do it.”

“That lazy slob? She can’t make a dress fit for a beggar, much less a royal ball!” Criticalina snickers.

“Maybe, but I have another idea.” Fear says slyly. “She had many beautiful dresses, which I have hidden away. One of them is bound to be suitable with some modifications. Come girls. Let’s go ‘shopping!’”

I hear their footsteps and voices fading as they leave the room. My stomach churns and I feel sick at the thought that they have hidden my things from me and are not only planning to use my dresses but will require me to alter them for their use. Feelings of powerlessness, frustration, and rage sear through me like red hot metal burning my core. Hot tears leak from my eyes as I scrub harder and faster. Energized by anger, I work for hours until I feel ready to collapse with exhaustion.

The next few days are exhausting and I hardly have time to think. All day I am occupied with chores, and at night I stay up late, working by candlelight on the dresses for the sisters. My rage over the unfairness of my situation has turned to numbness as I get through each day and fall into bed at night.

One night as I am sewing tiny beads on a dress, I remember the idea I had several days before. The garments that the sisters rejected from their closets are lying in a pile on the floor. Surely I can find one that I can alter to make a dress for myself. They are using my dresses, so I can use one of their cast-offs! Quickly I rummage through the stack. The clothing is not high quality, but I feel confident that I can make an acceptable gown. Once again, hope glows within me.

Each night I set aside time to work on my gown. I work hard daily to complete my tasks efficiently and save precious minutes to spend sewing at the end of the day. As my dress takes shape, my optimism increases. I find myself humming and singing now and then as I imagine the moment I will finally meet the Prince. But my cheerfulness is noticed by unfriendly eyes.

“Something is wrong with Sinner,” Drudgerine states one morning as she lounges with her mother and sister in the drawing room.

“That’s preposterous. There’s nothing wrong with her,” Fear replies. “If anything, I’d say she has been more cheerful lately. I think she is enjoying being a servant.”

“That’s just it!” Drudgerine exclaims, “She’s been humming and singing.”

“Yes, and she goes around with a ridiculous smile on her face!” Criticalina chimes in.

“What of it?” Fear says harshly. “As long as she gets her work done, I don’t care.”

“It’s so annoying!” Drudgerine whines. “Can’t you tell her to stop?”

“Yes, she never did that before. I liked it better when she looked gloomy and depressed all the time,” Criticalina smirks.

“I wonder what has caused the change,” Fear says suspiciously. “Maybe this is worth investigating. I have an idea.”

“What?!” The sisters exclaim.

“Just leave it to me, girls,” Fear replies mysteriously.

It is the end of another long, difficult day of work. For days I have been sewing, washing, and ironing so my sisters will have what they need for the ball. Bone tired, I slowly climb the stairs to my attic room, looking forward to a few hours of sewing in the privacy of my room, away from the constant demands and insults of my family. My dress is nearly finished, and just in time. The ball is tomorrow night!

At the top of the stairs I breath a tired sigh and turn the doorknob. As the door opens, I gasp and my heart pounds suddenly at the sight of Fear sitting in my room, holding my precious ball gown!

“Well, well, what do we have here?” She purrs, “It’s a lovely gown. Wherever did you get it?”

Terror claws at me like a wild animal. “I, uh, I made it.”

“How interesting! And why would someone like you need a dress like this? You aren’t scheming behind my back to go to the ball, are you?”

I can’t let her see how afraid I am. My heart is pounding and my mind frantically searches for a way to answer. Then, I think of Him. Suddenly, it’s as if I can hear His voice speaking words of peace, soothing my fear. A feeling of strength and calm comes over me. I straighten, standing as tall as I can, and face her piercing gaze.

“The invitation includes everyone, even me.”

For a moment, I see what looks like uncertainty flash across Fear’s face. She stands and approaches me like a cat stalking her prey. I tremble, waiting for her to strike. But she doesn’t.

“You are right,” she says smoothly and pauses, her eyes boring into me. “I will let you go if you get all the work done and are ready by the time the coach gets here.” She throws the dress at me and opens the door to leave. “I can’t imagine the likes of you being allowed in the palace. Even in this dress, you can’t disguise what you really are.”

With a slam of the door she is gone. I slump into the chair, my heart still pounding and my breath heaving.

Immediately, Fear searches for her daughters. Finding them, she says, “I just found out that Sinnerella is planning to go to the ball.” The girls open their mouths to protest, but Fear silences them with a raised hand.

“I have told her that I will not stop her if she can get all her work done tomorrow.”

Once again the girls begin to protest, but Fear yells, “Quiet!”

“You are to give her so much work that she will never be done in time.” She smiles maliciously.

The girls’ expressions change to looks of glee, and they immediately set about their task with relish.

The dawning sun wakes me after a troubled sleep. I can't believe that Fear will let me go to the ball. I wonder if she is right, maybe I won't even be allowed to enter the palace tonight. I don't trust her; I wonder what she has planned. I soon find out. As I am serving breakfast, Criticalina speaks.

"Your highness," she mocks. "I know you have so much to do to get ready for the ball, but before you do, I need my shoes polished. Do you think you could find time to do that?"

The sisters look at each other and laugh.

"Oh, yes," Drudgerine adds, "Mine, too. And I need you to do my hair tonight. You are so good at that."

"Me first," Criticalina demands.

"Yes," Fear says smoothly, "And after you clean up the breakfast dishes, I want you to start on the laundry."

"But today isn't laundry day!" I exclaim, "I always do laundry on Thursday."

"I want it done today!" Fear commands. "And I want all the floors swept and the rugs cleaned. This place is looking like a pigsty."

I stare at her in disbelief, rage building inside. I should have known she would never allow me to attend the ball.

"Don't stand there gaping! You have a lot of work to do."

I throw Fear a piercing look, then turn and leave. Fury fuels my energy and I determine to do everything they ask and still be done in time. I will beat them at their malicious game. This time I can't let them win. I feel as if I have superhuman strength. For hours I work madly. The towering mountain of chores gradually shrinks to a hill.

"Sinner, get in here now!" Criticalina's acid voice blasts into my feverish focus. The hour I have been dreading is here. It's time to help the sisters get ready.

"I'll be right there," I call as I survey the spotless room. Everything is done! I did it! I finished my tasks in time.

Entering Criticalina's room, I am stunned by the sight. Stockings, petticoats, shoes, jewelry, and all manner of things are strewn everywhere. There is scarcely a square foot of space not cluttered. Criticalina sits at her vanity like a queen in a pigpen. Gingerly I make my way through the rubble and pick up the hairbrush.

It feels like hours later when I hear the hall clock chime 7:30 as I make the last curl in Drudgerine's hair. All my work is done, and I think I have enough time to clean up and put on my ball gown. As I turn to leave I hear Criticalina's voice from the next room.

"Sinner, you need to clean up this room before we leave tonight."

"Yes, mine too," Drudgerine adds. "I don't want to come home to this mess."

My one chance at freedom seems to be slipping away! Once again, fury and fear threaten to overwhelm my defenses. I want to scream at the sisters. I hear footsteps approaching in the hall and Fear appears at the bedroom door, looking imposing in her formal attire.

“This room is a disaster!” she says, “Sinner, clean it up at once.” Hatred and anger boil inside me. Robotically, I set about the task, feeling hopeless. I tried my best, but I can’t win.

As the clock chimes 8, I trudge up the stairs to my room. I hear excited chatter, swishing skirts, and clicking heels as the family leaves. My dark, tragic future rises up before me in all its inevitability. Entering the room, I fall onto the bed, ready to release a torrent of tears, but my eyes glimpse my ball dress and I gasp. There it lies, draped over the chair, torn to shreds. It’s the exclamation point at the end of my heartbreaking day. They made sure that there would be no way I could go tonight.

Suddenly I feel desperate to escape the gloomy room. I flee down the stairs and out to the courtyard. Slumping to the ground by a stone bench, the pent-up emotions of the day explode. My body heaves with sobs. The hopes and dreams that I dared to nurture are crumbling to dust. The glittering castle in the distance mocks me. The sounds of laughter and happy voices drifting on the night air, feel like the prickling of thousands of thorns. I writhe on the cold, dusty stones, wishing to die.

How long I lie there, I don’t know. Time stands still and my mind strays. I am spent. Then, as if awakened, I feel a gentle breeze caress my damp face. Distracted from my pain, I focus on the sensation. My tears stop flowing as the breeze gradually grows stronger. I am drawn up to my feet as the air swirls around me. Something strange is happening! I am frightened and intensely curious at the same time.

“Peace, my child.” I hear a woman’s voice behind me and almost jump out of my skin! Turning, I am startled by the figure of a woman resplendent in a glowing white gown. Her radiant face seems familiar, and my mind races to recall where I have seen her before. Fear and fascination battle inside me.

“Wh . . . what, I mean . . . who . . . who are you?” I stammer.

“Don’t you know me?” Her voice is extraordinary, light and airy like a symphony, yet strong and deep. The sound soothes and calms me. “I am the Spirit of God*. I have been with you all your life.”

Her assertion is unbelievable. I have been alone all my life! If this woman had been with me, I would certainly have known it.

“Ma’am,” I reply incredulously, “I have never seen you before.”

Her eyes seem to shine with joy.

*Jesus used the feminine term “Ruach,” when talking to Nicodemus about the Spirit.

“That is true. You have never seen me, but your heart knows me. You have heard my voice in your mind countless times.”

Memories rush through my mind. Many dark, desperate moments when I was given the strength to go on. Suddenly I feel a surge of emotion as if I am meeting an old, dear friend after a long separation. Love and joy mix with awe at this great being who knows me intimately and has been my constant companion, yet whose appearance is majestic and imposing. I want to throw myself into her arms, but hesitate, daunted by her greatness and my filthiness.

“Oh, child,” she smiles tenderly, “You are so loved.”

And before I know it, I am enveloped in her warm, strong arms. My resistance weakens and I yield to the embrace, feeling that I am relaxing into a soft, feather bed. Then the walls around my heart begin to crumble, the pain of years wells up inside and suddenly bursts forth with a violence that shakes my body. For a long time, Spirit patiently waits as wave after wave of sorrow flow out from the depths of my soul in heaving sobs. Then, as the tide of sorrow subsides, Spirit takes me by the shoulders, holds me at arm’s length, and looks into my eyes.

“Do you want to go the the ball?”

“I can’t possibly . . .” I stutter, looking down at my ragged clothes.

Undeterred, she asks more firmly, “Do you want to go the ball?”

“Why . . . of course, but . . .”

“Then let’s get to work,” she says with determination.

Leaving me, she moves around the courtyard, her eyes searching for something. She sees the old hay wagon behind overgrown bushes and smiles with satisfaction.

“This will do,” I hear her say. She touches the decaying wood with her hand and I gasp in surprise as the clunky contraption becomes an elegant, sparkling coach before my eyes! I am dumbfounded with astonishment and can only gape in wonder. Spirit confidently surveys her work.

“Perfect!” she says, then turns and strides toward the dilapidated barn. Coming out of my daze, I scurry to follow her.

“Ma’am!” I am suddenly alarmed. “There’s nothing there that . . .”

“Animals!” she shouts, “I need animals!”

“No you mustn’t,” I cry, “It’s filthy!”

She dismisses my concern with a wave of her hand. Arriving at the barn door she peers into the dark interior.

“Gus!” she calls gently, “Gus, come here. I have a job for you.”

I am amazed when I hear a stirring in the darkness. In a moment, our old donkey appears at the doorway. Flecks of straw pepper his hide. He shakes himself and a cloud of dust rises. I am embarrassed, but Spirit chuckles and rubs Gus’s ears.

“Good boy,” she murmurs, “I have an important job for you.”

A picture of shabby old Gus pulling the resplendent coach pops into my mind and I stifle a snicker. Not only is it a ridiculous image, but I know that getting that ornery donkey to do anything would be a miracle. Spirit smiles knowingly then heads back toward the courtyard. I follow her and am amazed again when Gus trudges behind obediently.

A breeze rustles the dead leaves on the cold stones as Spirit faces Gus, who now stands still before her. Lightly she steps to his side and whispers in his ear. Right before my astonished eyes, tired, old Gus begins to grow larger and change color. His scrawny legs lengthen and become muscular. His straight back curves elegantly. His head lengthens into a magnificently sculpted profile. His short, scrubby mane and tail become long and flowing. A powerful white stallion stands before me, snorting and pawing the ground as if anxious to dispatch his duty.

I suddenly become aware that my mouth has been hanging open, but Spirit, always composed, calmly inspects her work and nods with satisfaction.

“Beautiful!” she declares matter-of-factly. “Now to get you hitched up to the coach.”

She pauses and thinks for a moment, and I continue to stare dumbfounded at what has become of old Gus. Cautiously, I step forward and reach my hand to touch his silky mane.

“Luminar!”

I jump back, startled by Spirit’s loud cry.

“Aaah!” I yell as a towering, radiant being appears, standing next to Spirit. I feel I am about to faint from fright and exhaustion, but I hear Spirit speak to the angel.

“You got here so quickly! You must have been close by.”

“Always,” Luminar replies. His voice is deep and melodious, like cello music.

“Good, good,” Spirit says cheerfully. “Now, I need you to harness this noble steed to the coach and then, I am counting on you to get this lovely child to the ball tonight.”

She motions toward me and I want to shrink into the ground with shame at having this imposing apparition setting eyes on me. I lower my gaze for a moment and inwardly cringe.

“Yes,” I hear Spirit say thoughtfully, “it won’t do for you to go looking like that. You’ll frighten those people. Let’s get you into your human disguise.”

I can’t resist looking up and am again astonished to see Luminar transformed into a tall, but ordinary-looking human in the uniform of a coach driver. He immediately sets to work hitching the horse to the carriage, which he accomplishes with ease, as if he has done it a hundred times. Then, as I

watch in wonder, he leaps into the driver's seat with the agility and strength of a gazelle. He sits tall and dignified, holding the reins and flashes me a dazzling smile. I can't help but laugh.

Spirit turns her eyes on me.

"Now it's your turn."

It has been a night of transformations, so I close my eyes and await my magic makeover. But nothing happens.

"Get yourself into the coach," Spirit says brightly.

I open my eyes and look down. I am still arrayed in the torn, dirty dress, which only looks worse in contrast to the glittering coach. I look uncertainly at Spirit. She nods her head toward the waiting carriage. I step slowly toward it and Luminar is immediately at the door. He offers his hand, which I take as he helps me inside. My heart pounds as I gingerly settle onto the seat cushion. My hand trembles as I stroke the smooth fabric, appreciating its beauty and softness.

Spirit appears at the opening and I am glad to see her climbing in. She enters and sits on the seat facing me. I hear Luminar whistle and the coach begins to move. I look around at the exquisite interior and worry about my appearance.

"You look troubled, child," Spirit says.

"I can't go to the ball like this." I tug at my dingy skirt. "I'm not worthy to meet the Prince in this dress."

"You are right, my dear," she says warmly. "No dress you could sew or buy would make you worthy to stand in His Presence."

"I did sew myself a dress for tonight but . . . well, it got ruined."

"Even if it hadn't been torn apart, it still would not do," she says earnestly. "The only garment that will be recognized by the Prince at the ball is the one He has provided."

Leaning forward, she takes my hands and looks into my eyes.

"I need to tell you something very important. The Prince has provided a dress for you. It is extremely precious. He went through unimaginable torture and was imprisoned in the enemy's dungeon in order to acquire this garment for you. He yearns so much to be with you that He left nothing undone to obtain this flawless gown."

"Is that why He has been away for so long?" Emotions that have long been pent up stir inside me. "For years I have been forced to work to exhaustion, being abused and humiliated, thinking He had forgotten me."

I cannot meet her gaze as I confess, "I have been so angry that He abandoned me."

"Yes, I know." Her voice is gentle. "It's been a hard road for you. I've been with you every step of the way."

My eyes are drawn to hers, and, through the tears blurring my vision, I see the tenderness and compassion that my heart craves radiating from her eyes.

“There is a powerful evil that wants to destroy the Prince and all He holds dear, including you. He has been fighting for you night and day. There was never a moment that you were not on His mind. He endured poverty, deprivation, humiliation, betrayal, beatings, and so much more.”

My tears flow freely as I hear Spirit’s words, but this time I am not crying for myself.

“I have been so selfish,” I sob. “I have been so wrapped up in my own pain. I should have known He would not forget me. I should have believed in Him. He told me He would come back, but it’s been so long . . . I lost hope. I’ve tried to save myself but nothing has worked.”

“Are you willing to trust in Him again?”

“I want to so much, but I am afraid.”

Spirit reaches out and wraps me in her arms. As she holds me she whispers in my ear.

“The Prince has overcome everything that has the power to hurt you. He has earned the right to heal you. Will you accept Him?”

Weeping, I nod my head.

“Then it is done.”

My eyes are closed for a few moments and when I open them, something wonderful has happened. My rags have been replaced by an iridescent white gown that sparkles as though sprinkled with diamond dust. A luxuriously soft white cape drapes over my shoulders. Elegant white gloves grace my hands and arms. I pull down one of the gloves and notice that my skin, which had been smudged and grimy, is now clean and glowing. In wonder, I run my hands over the smooth fabric of the dress, feeling unworthy to wear this garment. Spirit’s voice interrupts my thoughts.

“You are ready to meet the Prince.”

The coach halts. I look out the coach window and am surprised to see that we are already at the palace. Excitement and fear surge through me. Luminar is at the coach door, opening it for me. I glance at the stairs leading to the massive palace entrance and I feel afraid.

“Will you come with me?” I ask Spirit desperately.

“I am always with you,” she says, “but you won’t be able to see me. You will have to trust. Now go and have a wonderful time!”

Inhaling deeply, I take Luminar’s hand and step out of the coach into the cool night air. I notice that the sky is a deep blue and the stars gleam like jewels, as do the lights of the town below. I pause for a moment enjoying the spectacular view and gathering my courage. The splendor of the massive palace towers above, making me feel small as a mouse. Gathering the full skirt in my hands, I begin climbing the stairs. A feeling of strength and calm grow inside me, even though my heart flutters with nervousness and excitement.

Reaching the top of the stairs, I am surprised that I am not out of breath, but don’t have time to give it more than a fleeting thought. I step through the entryway and before me stands a tall man

dressed in a smart uniform. Behind him several other uniformed men and women wait, all smiling broadly at me.

“Welcome, Princess! We have been waiting for you. May I take your wrap?”

“No, I’m not . . .” I begin to protest as I remove my cape and hand it over, but the man seems not to hear me as he bows politely and motions with his arm for me to proceed down the long hall toward a brightly lit room.

“Enjoy the evening. If there is anything you need, please do not hesitate to make it known to the staff. We are at your service.”

I take a deep breath as I face the hallway. The uniformed man’s smile fades into an expression of understanding.

“It is a special night for you. The Prince has been waiting anxiously for your arrival. He has made everything ready.”

They must have confused me with someone else! I open my mouth to correct him, but he interrupts me.

“Please proceed to the ballroom. He is waiting.”

The sound of music and voices tickle my ears. I am drawn toward it as if enchanted. I don’t know what I will say or do when I enter the room, but I feel I must give myself up to this adventure or turn around right now and escape. I walk slowly but resolutely toward the sound and as I step through the doorway into the bright lights, time stands still. It’s as if I have stepped onto a stage. I am standing at the top of stairs that descend to the dance floor. Everywhere are beautifully-dressed people. Some are conversing, some laughing and some just observing. I scan the room, looking for Fear, Criticalina and Drudgerine.

“Presenting her royal highness, Princess Purity!”

I am startled by the loud cry of the uniformed man whom I hadn’t noticed standing to my right. My cheeks begin to burn with embarrassment as every eye turns toward me. A hush falls over the assembly and all movement in the room ceases except for one man crossing the floor hurriedly in my direction. As he approaches I recognize His face and my heart beat quickens. He looks like my friend, but there is also something very different about Him. There is no mistaking His royal dress and I bow low when He stands before me, His face beaming.

“Princess! How lovely you are. I can’t tell you how much I have looked forward to seeing you tonight.” He takes my hands and I rise, looking into His eyes.

“I can’t believe that it’s you . . . and me . . . here after all these years!” I exclaim in wonder.

“Come, let’s find a quiet place to talk.” He guides me down the stairs and across the floor as everyone watches. He leads me through a door that opens to a landscaped terrace and we settle on a bench bathed in moonlight. For a few moments, all I can do is gaze at His smiling face. He seems to radiate with joy.

“I just can’t believe this is happening. You have changed so much. I mean, you are so . . . so royal and fine . . . and larger, or stronger.” I struggle to find words. I am embarrassed to begin that way, but don’t know what else to say.

His gaze never falters, but He looks more intently into my eyes. I cannot meet His searching gaze for long and my eyes look to the ground in shame.

“You were gone so long. I needed you desperately,” I murmur.

“Come with me. I want to show you something.” He takes my hand again and leads me to a stairway which we descend and then come upon a door leading back into the palace, but on a lower level than the ball room. We enter into a dimly lit hallway with doors on the left and right. I follow Him past several until He stops at one and opens it, entering into a completely dark room.

“Let there be light.” Obeying His command, a warm light gradually brightens the space. The room looks like a museum, with shelves on several walls, displaying treasures. He leads me across the room to a small table. On the table rests something that looks like branches from a thorn bush that have been shaped into a circle like a wreath. I have never seen such long, sharp thorns. It looks like there is dried blood on them.

“What is this?” I look from the object to His face in horror.

“This was forced on my head. That’s my blood on the thorns.”

“Wh-why? . . . when?”

He does not answer, but takes me to another item on a shelf. It is a dirty, ragged, blood-stained cloth made of rough fabric.

“This is my robe. The blood is from the whips that tore my back.”

I am appalled, angry and indignant.

“Who would do such a thing?”

Again, He does not answer but goes to another shelf and points to two large rusty nails. They are the largest, roughest nails I have ever seen, and they are also red with blood.

“These nails pierced my hands.” He hands the nails to me and removes the white gloves that cover His hands. I gasp at the ugly nail holes in His hands, and my eyes begin to fill with tears.

“How could anyone do this? What happened to you?”

Still He does not answer, but walks to where a scarlet curtain hangs and pulls it aside to reveal a huge, rough wood cross mounted so that it stands upright. The wood is so jagged that it would certainly embed splinters in any skin that came in contact with it. The cross is also blood-stained.

I am overcome with sympathy.

“This was yours?” I whisper as tears begin to fall. The look in His eyes pierces my heart. I reach for Him and cling to Him as I sob.

“I’m so sorry!” My voice chokes with emotion. “I needed you so much and I felt so alone. I wanted you to rescue me. When you didn’t come I . . . I lost faith in you!”

He holds me and lets me cry. When my tears are finally spent, He whispers in my ear.

“My Spirit is always with you. You are never alone. Can you believe that I will make all things better in time?”

Holding me at arms length He lifts my chin until our eyes meet. I smile through my tears.

“Yes . . . yes. Being with you here has made such a difference. I feel peaceful . . . joyful . . . set free.”

“This peace will be tested,” He says gently, “When the test comes, hold onto your faith in me.”

“Can we be together from now on?” I plead.

“I have many things yet to accomplish, things that will take me away in body.” He pauses meaningfully, “But I am always with you in Spirit as long as you believe in me.”

For a long moment His eyes search mine. Then smiling, He takes my hand.

“I want to dance with you tonight.”

I flush with embarrassment.

“Umm . . . the truth is . . . I never learned how . . . and with all those people watching . . .”

“Just follow me.”

Still holding my hand, He turns and leads me out the door. We return to the ballroom and as the strains of orchestra music fill my ears, He leads me onto the dance floor and takes me in His arms. I feel that all eyes are on us as we move around the room and I dare not look at anyone but Him or I will falter. We are alone on the dance floor and as long as I keep my eyes on Him, all is well. Soon I feel as if I am floating and can no longer sense the passage of time. My spirit soars and I feel that I am no longer in that ballroom but flying through space. It is pure ecstasy and glorious freedom. Everything else disappears and it is only Him and me. Nothing else matters. But unfriendly eyes are watching us with keen interest.

At last the music ends and I stand, still looking at Him as if transfixed. How I long for this moment to go on forever. But a familiar chilling voice calls out, startling me.

“Excuse me, Your Highness!”

The sound jolts me like being awakened from a sweet dream by a bucket of ice water thrown on me. For a few wonderful moments, I had forgotten that she is here. My eyes turn toward the her. Fear is bowing to the Prince but I can see her smug expression.

“Please forgive this intrusion, Your Highness. I am terribly sorry to interrupt your lovely party. You are obviously having a wonderful time with this young lady, but, like all your loyal servants, I am concerned with preserving your honor and dignity. So I feel compelled to ask if you know who this girl is?”

The Prince’s eyes gaze warmly at me.

“Yes, I do. I know everything about her.”

“Well then, pardon me, sir, but you must know that she is a lowly girl who is impersonating nobility and it is beneath you to have anything to do with her. She is my servant and I know her to be a liar and a cheat. I don’t know how she got here tonight, but I apologize for her behavior and am mortified by what she has done.”

From her bowed position, Fear turns cold, hard eyes on me filled with hatred.

“How could you do this, Sinnerella? After all I have done for you? You are a wicked, ungrateful, miserable wretch.”

Her words echo in the cavernous room. No one speaks. The Prince still gazes at me warmly, but I am humiliated. I can’t take another second. Tearing myself away from his arms, I run through the crowd. It feels like I push past a thousand condemning eyes. Their faces are blurred by my tears but I feel their judgmental gaze.

“Princess! Princess!” I hear His voice calling, but I can’t go back. I run down the hall and through the palace doors, then down the steps and through the courtyard gates. On and on I speed, desperately trying to outrun my shame until I can go no further and collapse in exhaustion as everything fades to black.

I am awakened by the twittering of birds and light through the window. Like fog slowly lifting, I gradually become aware. Nothing seems to have changed, but suddenly the memory of last night jolts through me like a bolt of electricity. It is confusing and overwhelming. It started out awful, then became gloriously wonderful and magical, but ended horribly. What did it all mean? Why did this happen? Isn’t my life bad enough? Why get my hopes up and then let them be dashed to pieces? How could He let it happen? I wish I had never gone to the ball. I wish I had never met the Prince. I wish the world had ended last night. I feel bitterness like a cold, dead weight descend on my heart. I want to shut down my heart and hate. I want to be mean and spiteful. If this is my reward for working hard and being good, I don’t want it. I might as well become like them and take what I can get.

Then I remember His words last night and the look in His eyes.

“Can you believe that I will make all things better in time?”

“I am always with you in Spirit as long as you believe in me.”

The image of Fear smirking and bowing flashes across my mind, and I see her and the Prince before me contrasted like night and day. He certainly endured more suffering than I, yet there was no trace of bitterness or hatred in Him. My choice becomes clear. Which one do I want to be?

Again I hear His words in my head, “This peace will be tested. When the test comes, hold onto your faith in me.”

I am gripped with remorse as I realize that I was tested last night and failed.

“Oh no! I am so sorry. Please give me another chance!” I speak aloud to the empty room. “I believe in You. You said You would always be with me as long as I believe in You. I am clinging to the

belief that You aren't abandoning me because I failed You. I know You would not do that, even though I fear that You will have nothing to do with me after last night. You have kindled hope in my heart and I must hang on to that or give up and die. I am choosing hope. I am choosing You. I know that having hope will hurt like crazy, but so will giving up. If I must have pain, then I choose to have the pain of struggling to stay hopeful in this dark place. I open myself up to You so You can keep that flame alive in my heart."

In my anguish I have to believe that He can hear me somehow. And then another thought pierces me. The last thing I remember last night was passing out on the road, but now I am in my bedroom, on my bed dressed in a nightgown. Leaping up I rush to the closet and throw open the doors. I catch my breath as I see the dress hanging there, glowing in the darkness. As I caress it in wonder, a folded paper falls to the floor. Picking it up, I unfold it and read these words:

Princess,

I have more to teach you. You must learn to stand firm in who you are, not how others define you. How others treat you is not who you are. You must see yourself as I see you. To me you are pure, noble, lovely and precious.

There are more difficulties ahead, but they are not punishment, they are training. The purpose is for you to learn to rely on my strength alone. You will not see me but my Spirit will be guiding you. Hold on, dear one. When the time is right I will come for you.

His words cause a thrill of energy inside me. It is just what I need to face the day ahead. I get dressed and proceed to the kitchen to begin my work with determination. It's going to be a difficult day, but I feel strangely peaceful. I know that they will taunt and torment me, but I also know what they don't: I am loved by the Prince and He is giving me the strength I need to endure whatever they do to me. I also know He is going to rescue me.

The usual morning routine of preparing breakfast for the family is sweetened by the thought that I am serving my Prince. Everything I do is for Him. I feel joy glowing inside me as I carry the food into the dining room where Fear, Criticalina and Drudgerine wait at the table. My stepmother glares at me with hostility, but Criticalina speaks.

Well, well . . . it's the Prince's date from the ball! He seemed quite taken with you. Did He ask you to marry him? Oh, excuse me, I forgot. You ran away before He had the chance!"

The sisters erupt in mocking laughter. I am not immune to the sting of their words but there is a calmness deep inside that they cannot touch.

“It does surprise me, though,” Criticalina continues, “That He was fooled by your disguise. It causes me to question His discernment. Everyone could see you aren’t royalty.” She gasps as a thought strikes her, “Maybe He is an imposter, too! What a scandal that would be!”

“What I want to know is where you got that dress.” Drudgerine scowls, “And how you got to be at the ball in the first place.”

“Yes! You certainly couldn’t afford a dress like that one. Did you steal it from someone, Sinner?” Criticalina looks suspiciously at me.

Their words feel like arrows aimed at piercing my soul and causing me to collapse like a jellyfish on the floor. But there is a strength inside me that I cannot understand. I used to be so affected by their taunts, which always gave them great satisfaction, but this time I am able to ignore their comments, which seems to drive them crazy. They hurl more insinuations and insults which just bounce off me like arrows hitting iron. Eventually they run out of steam and drift into silence. Now *I* am the one feeling a sense of satisfaction at their inability to get a rise out of me.

I face the day’s mind-numbing, bone-wearying work with a song in my heart. Nothing changes in my situation but every morning there is a message from the Prince delivered mysteriously during the night. It is like a secret love affair, a delicious tryst. I am oppressed daily as Fear, Drudgerine and Criticalina try to break my spirit, but each morning message from the Prince seems to anticipate the obstacles of the day ahead and I draw strength from His words.

Day after day, I make it through as I wait for Him to come back as He promised. As the days turn into weeks, then months, then years, I am tempted to doubt, give up and despair. Yet the messages from Him appear morning by morning, keeping my hope alive.

“You are always on my mind. I can never stop thinking about you and working for you. I never sleep so even when you are resting, I am working. I love you eternally.”

“Keep my words in your mind all day. They will give you comfort and strength. My spirit is with you always. Take courage from Her. She works beside you. Believe this even when you don’t feel it.”

“As I said before, nothing, NOTHING can separate you from my love. Feel it in the gentle breeze and the warm sunlight. Hear it in the songs of birds and the gentle rain. Taste it in the delicious fruits and vegetables that I provide to sustain you. See it in the blue sky and the green grass. Smell it in the fragrance of flowers and the scent of baking bread. When you savor the piece of bread that you break off the loaf, remember that this represents how my body and spirit was torn apart to win your freedom. As you eat the bread and it becomes a part of you, I also become a part of you and you become a part of me. Nothing can break that union.”

One day the message from the Prince says, “If you learn to delight in me even in this dreary place, then you are ready to come to my castle. I can teach you how. Are you willing to learn?”

And so, I surrender again to Spirit's transforming power. It is unbearably painful to let go of my right to be angry, to hate, to be unhappy, discontent, dissatisfied and full of self-pity. I feel like I am dying.

"My Prince, I cannot do it. Please do it for me." I whisper.

This is a daily, hourly, moment-by-moment surrender as I endure and persevere through all that Fear, Criticalina and Drudgerine can throw at me. Years pass and my body grows old. My skin is wrinkled and sagging. My body aches and my back is hunched from scrubbing floors on my knees. I look at myself in the cracked mirror and wonder how the Prince could love me now. I wonder if he knows how much I have deteriorated.

Then one morning, I read these words from Him:

"I will be coming for you soon. When you hear my voice calling, put on the dress and come to me. You must put on the dress first and then come to me."

A thrill of joy and fear jolts through me, causing my heart to pound. But I have aged so much. Anxiety grips me and I am afraid He will be terribly disappointed in me. I go to my wardrobe and open the door. The beautiful dress gleams, lighting up the dark space. Seeing that dress there has kept me going day after dreary day. It's a miracle that no one has taken it away or destroyed it. I lovingly caress the smooth fabric with rough, wrinkled hands.

I wonder why the Prince has been delayed so long. My youthful beauty faded long ago and I have nothing to offer Him. I am worn and tired. My energy and time has been spent doing menial chores. When I was young, I dreamed of doing something significant with my life. I wanted to pursue my interests and develop my mind and my talents to do some good for humanity. As year after year passed by with no change in my situation, my dreams faded along with my health. Now it is impossible for me to be anything more than what I am, a lowly slave.

Then amid these mournful thoughts, it's as if I hear the Prince's voice in my head, "You must learn to stand firm in who you really are, not how others define you. How others treat you is not who you are. You must see yourself as I see you. To me you are pure, noble, lovely and precious."

"I believe," I whisper, "Help my unbelief."

My work is like a crushing burden weighing me down. One day blurs into the next with nothing to distinguish one from another. But I have learned to recognize and receive with joy the gifts that the Prince sends without fail: the song of a bird, a fragrant breeze, the bright colors of a flower, and so many others. He reminds me of His love constantly. I can't help but sing when I think of all He has done for me and is doing. I long to see Him.

It is a day like a million others. The sun rose but I can't see it through the thick clouds. It is cold and damp. I rise and go about my work as always, though I move much more slowly than I used to. My body aches and almost creaks with age.

Soon I am on my knees next to a bucket of dirty water as I scrub the floor inside the front door of the manor. Under my knees, my skirt absorbs moisture from the floor. Everything seems cold and hard in my world, but my spirits are lifted when a song comes to mind. First I hum, and then begin to sing as my heart opens and is transported away from the current circumstances. I hear footsteps and Criticalina appears at the entrance to the sitting room.

“Stop that awful racket! You sound like a croaking toad.”

I hear Drudgerine's cackling laughter from inside the room. But then I hear another sound. Someone is singing in a deep, melodious voice. It seems to be coming from outside. For a few moments, I am confused and stunned, trying to figure out what is happening.

“What the blazes is that?” Criticalina scowls and steps toward the entrance door. As she does, I suddenly understand. My heart wants me to leap to my feet and fly up the stairs to my room, but my body doesn't cooperate. As quickly as my old bones allow, I rise and make my way to the back stairs leading to my attic room. Criticalina watches me curiously. I hobble up the stairs, my mind focused on my goal. I am not aware that Criticalina followed me and is watching from the bottom of the stairs. Panting from the climb, I enter my room and go to the wardrobe. With trembling hands, I tear off my ragged work clothes, take the shining gown from its hanger and pull it over my head.

“Come on!” I mutter in frustration as I fumble with the shiny buttons. The dress is just as breath-taking as that magical night long ago when I first wore it. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for myself. I want to cry as I catch my reflection in the mirror. But no, I must go to Him, as He asked, just as I am.

Taking a deep breath, I hurry to the door and as I start down the stairs, I hear a loud, mocking laugh. Criticalina steps out from the shadows where she was hiding.

“What do you think you're doing, Sinner?”

Ignoring her, I continue down, but as I pass her on the stair, she extends her foot, tripping me. I scream as I pitch violently forward, unable to stop the momentum as I fall, hitting one stair and then another, tumbling and bumping uncontrollably to the bottom. There I lie unable to move, stunned with searing pain shooting through every nerve. I hear the Prince's voice outside but I am helpless to reach Him. My heart pounds in my chest like a caged bird desperately attempting to escape.

With a smug look on her face, Criticalina marches down the stairs as Fear and Drudgerine burst through the door above me.

“What's going on here?” Fear demands.

“I think she was going to see the Prince!” Criticalina laughs.

“Is she alive?” Drudgerine peers at me.

Fear descends the stairs to where my crumpled body lies and bends over my still form.

“She’s breathing! Come on, let’s get her into the basement and lock her in.”

The girls clamber down the stairs and, taking my arms and legs they drag me, groaning in pain, down the stairs to the basement. Reaching the bottom, someone opens the basement door. Suddenly a blinding, terrifying explosion of light from above throws them to the floor. All eyes turn upward as a towering form, brilliant with light moves toward us down the stairs. Criticalina and Drudgerine scramble over each other to escape into the basement, but Fear stands her ground defiantly.

“You can’t have her!” She shrieks.

“Be gone!” Booms a thunderous voice.

Fear screams and falls back. Reaching me, Luminar gently lifts me in his powerful arms and carries me up the stairs, through the house and out into the sunshine where the Prince is waiting with His honor guard, all mounted on magnificent white horses. He is resplendent in a white uniform trimmed with gold.

Dismounting, He meets us, gazes intently into my eyes and caresses my face with his nail-scarred hand. At His touch, energy pulses through my body and pain ceases. I take His hand and notice that my hand is young and strong again. Luminar sets me on the ground and as the Prince and I embrace, joy explodes inside me. No more sadness or suffering, no more toil and struggle. I am forever free.

“My Prince!” I exclaim breathlessly.

“Yes,” He smiles tenderly, “It’s time to come home.”

I hear birds singing and I slowly open my eyes. I’m not in a dark, dirty attic room. The morning sun filters through filmy curtains surrounding my unbelievably soft and cozy bed, piled with pillows and a fluffy comforter. Yesterday I awoke exhausted and anticipated another dreary day. Today, I awake rested and energized, my heart bursting with joy as I think of the day ahead and my future. My body is young and strong again. I feel gloriously and beautifully alive.

Rising from my bed, I walk to balcony and gaze at the magnificent view. From my room high in the palace, I see rolling green hills gradually sloping to the turquoise waters of the sea, and white foaming waves lapping the sandy shore. I hear a call and raise my eyes to see a majestic eagle soaring in the clear blue sky.

“Someday you will soar on wings like eagles. Wait for me and I promise you this. The day is coming when you will no longer be tired, hungry, thirsty, fearful or hurt. You will be able to run for miles without growing weary and walk all day without feeling faint.” I hear His words in my mind, words He sent to me in the dark days.

My heart is full. I am in ecstasy. This will be my home forever. I want to sing, leap, dance and . . . fly! My eyes turn toward a sound of laughter drifting toward me on a warm breeze. Gloriously beautiful men and women fly by me toward the green hills. Several of them pause in flight and beckon me to join them.

I step to the edge of the balcony. Yes, I have wings! Strong, iridescent, colorful and sparkling. I feel the wind swirling past, pulling me to join in the joy, and I surrender to it as my legs push me away from the safety of the solid footing and I am carried out and up, up, up into the wild blue sky.