



Mundane Magic

Or the story of:

—Mundane magic—

—Asparagus—

—& A Christmas pageant—

Once upon a time, far, far away, a powerful king and queen lived in perfect peace and harmony. Devoted to their land, their people and one another, a single shadow stained their contentment. After twelve years of marriage, they had no children. You might imagine the tears of joy, then, when the queen became pregnant! The entire land became a sea of flags and flowers and laughter. Garlands hung from every roof, dripping daisies and lilacs onto the cobblestones. Bakeries offered free cakes and pies

to every passerby.

Nine months later, their happiness became complete when the queen gave birth to a beautiful, healthy boy, blessed with brown curls, long lashes and bright, curious eyes. Over the years, this boy grew into a handsome, strapping lad, boasting both immense power and a generous, open heart. Alas, his childhood was to be a short one! At the age of six, his mother passed away. His father, heartbroken at the loss of so dear a companion, soon fell into a profound despair. Within months, he grew careless and idle. He refused to eat and sleep and conduct the affairs of state, preferring to roam the corridors deep, deep into the night.

Well, as the king grew more and more hopeless, the country began to suffer. Business began to collapse. Expired treaties left the nation vulnerable to attack. Soon, fearing for the whole country, the royal counselors had no choice but to take action. Since the prince was too young to govern, they turned to the younger brother of the monarch, a thin, angry man who was then living in a neighboring land.

The younger brother came immediately, bringing a train of pale, lean attendants and a surly, demanding wife. But what a king he made! In a matter of days, the thriving capital was transformed. Public parties were disbanded. Plays and jousts became a thing of the past. Slowly but surely, the joyous court became a hotbed of deceit and distrust. Brother turned against brother. Friend turned against friend. And like an invasive vine, winding tightly around an old oak, corruption seized the palace.

The counselors quickly saw their mistake. By that time, however, it was far, far too late. Unless the old king recovered, not a thing could be done. For better or worse, the younger brother was now the monarch, free to do whatever he so pleased.

So time passed. The young prince, once loud and boisterous, grew quiet and reserved. And although he retained a good, kind heart, he grew hard. He grew demanding. He grew indifferent to the cares and needs of those who were around him. Most importantly, faced everyday with his uncle and cold, hard reality, he quickly learned that fairytales may be wonderful in storybooks, but the dream ends there.

After many years, Prince Erik approached maturity. Remembering fondly the happy, prosperous days of old, the country eagerly awaited his coronation. Unfortunately, the wicked king had other ideas. He found an obscure clause that an unwed heir cannot, indeed *shall* not, ascend the throne. In order to become king, then, the boy would have to marry. And to make matters worse, he must wed before he turned twenty, a point now just a year and a half away!

In no time, the girls began to flock. Handsome, young and powerful, Prince Erik was the perfect catch. They swirled and they pranced and they danced for him, hoping to catch his eye. But as the weeks rolled by, the boy remained unmoved. To him, these girls were nothing. Shallow and vain, concerned only with appearance, clothing and wealth, they embodied the greed that he so despised. He wanted someone better, someone purer, someone whom he could truly love, body and soul. But *who?*

As time dragged on, the counselors and courtesans and noblemen grew impatient. Who could meet his expectations? Who could make him happy? Were he just to tell them, they would scour the seven seas to find her! They would do *anything!*

Hearing this, Prince Erik nodded. Well, that part was easy. He knew exactly what he wanted. He wanted a wife with eyes and power and heart.

“Eyes and power and heart?” cried the counselors. “What does that mean?”

“Listen!” Prince Erik replied. “Listen and I will tell you.”

His dream girl was more beautiful than a spring dawn, fresher than rain on cold, wet cobblestones and fairer than a summer sunset.

“What? Is that all?” cried the counselors and noblemen happily. “Is it just beauty that you seek? Pretty girls line every street of the capital!”

Prince Erik shook his head. No, it was more than beauty that he sought. She *also* had to be more powerful than a distant sorcerer, possessing the magic of the seas and the skies and the changing seasons. She had to be more magical even than he, capable of great feats unlike any other.

“Then you want a wizardess!” cried the counselors and noblemen. “That is easy enough! We will find you one in no time! Have no fear!”

But again, Prince Erik held up a hand. Still, there was more. Besides being beautiful and powerful, the girl had to be purer, kinder and more generous than the noblest of nuns.

Well, at this, the counselors and courtesans and noblemen gave a cry of dismay. “Eyes and power and heart!” cried they, wringing their hands. “You must be joking! Such a woman cannot exist!”

Prince Erik just shrugged. Perhaps not. All the same, he would do his best to try. And so, taking matters into his *own* hands, he left the capital to find a wife.

As you might imagine, his quest produced such a stir across the land! As townsmen and farmers and merchants learned of his mission, they brought their daughters forward. Eager to please the exacting prince, they took pains to put their offspring in the kindest, most amenable light. Did he want beauty? Just look at Rosie Lee and dear Gretchin and Susie Ann! Look at the red lips and fair skin and pretty curls! They were truly unparalleled! Was it power that he wanted? Well, hear of the grandiose, sweeping spells that dear that Francine had done just a day ago! See the raw power! The control! And as for generosity, well, in this, Laurie Jeanne truly had no equal. Listen to the orphanages and schools that she had built. Listen to the kind works and grand deeds. Oh! What generosity! What class!

In truth, hardly a household remained untouched. Like a disease, excitement spread throughout the nation, extending from the capital to the plains to the Highland Mountains and beyond. And the Gomez household, tucked in small, sleepy Aquinas, was no exception to this rule.

The Gomez household was composed of two sisters, Lillian and Maria Gomez. Years and years ago, the pair had had some wealth, their house a grand, stately affair and their yard a vast expanse of rich, manicured gardens. Since Papa Gomez had died, however, the Gomez fortunes had taken a downhill turn. By now, the two daughters and their mother were lucky to scrape by. And when Mama Gomez fell ill, well, things went from bad to worse.

To be fair, this transition was hard on *everyone*. Lillian Gomez, however, appeared to have taken it the worst. With dark eyes, olive skin and full, pink lips, she had always been the belle of Aquinas. Blessed with astounding power, a merry, infectious laugh, quick wits and sparkling eyes, everyone had been so *sure* that she would make a fine, prosperous match! Unfortunately, when Papa Gomez died, all if this changed. She was no longer invited to parties. Her beauty and brains went unnoticed. And so, as time passed, she became more and more bitter, not to mention more and more defiant. Accustomed to a certain level of finery and convenience, she refused to acknowledge that horses and carriages and silk scarves were a thing of the past. On the contrary, she continued to buy fine dresses and shawls on credit. She demanded that meals, however meager, be served on the finest, prettiest china. And she would *never* consent to dress herself.

Next to her, young Maria was nothing but a mouse. Small, drab and lacking even a whit of magic, the younger Gomez had never charmed audiences. Unlike her sister, she had never been considered a hot prospect on the marriage market. And she had certainly never had the flair and sheer exuberance of the vivacious Lillian.

In a way, however, this probably made the change easier to bear. To put it bluntly, she had less to miss. As a child, she had been known to leave the most vibrant, delectable parties to milk the cows.

After all, *someone* had to do it. Blessed with a fine memory, she had always kept track of the names and birthdays of every maid and servant, telling her father when a good cake was appropriate. And so, as time passed, it is unsurprising that young Maria began taking care of Lillian. She learned to make mere scraps into elegant, tasty dinners. She learned how to clean the marble staircases and scrub the floors. In the mornings, she learned how to dress Lillian properly and comb her hair into glossy, shimmering waves.

In truth, Maria minded the transition little. Although forced to do the household washing and cooking and look after her sister, she seldom complained. And when Lillian flew into a rage, she could calm the weeping, moaning girl, brew a pot of herbal tea *and*, even as fair Lillian continued to gasp and choke and shake, make a mental note to buy more tissues. To be sure, this may seem like a small thing. After all, remembering about tissues does not a ballad make. But this is exactly what Maria was best at. She, well, *thought about* things. And when she found an opportunity to do something good, she just did it.

Now, it would be a mistake to imply that Maria was an angel. Like any human, she had days that tried her. But even at the worst and lowest of moments, when Lillian was fuming and raging like a Spanish bull, she had a secret weapon that Lillian never did. That is, she had an unparalleled imagination. Scrubbing the marble floors and baking loaves of bread, Maria would tell herself delicious stories about distant lands and soaring mountains. She would imagine traveling across the world, forging through hot, crumbly deserts and over rolling hills of the prairie. She would imagine climbing the Highland Mountains and spying firsthand the curly wool of yaks. Most of all, she would dream of the sea. Sitting in the dark house, folding laundry late at night, she would imagine floating in the cool, dark water, inhaling the salty air and staring upward at the purple sky and pinprick stars.

“But you can’t swim.”

That, of course, was Lillian talking. She thought that traveling was a silly dream.

Maria shrugged. “I’ll learn.”

When the Gomez sisters heard about Prince Erik and his quest, their reactions were quite dissimilar. For Maria, the announcement meant little. Neither very beautiful nor very magical, she had little hope or even *desire* of winning his heart. Frankly, there were dishes to wash and cows to be milked. She had no time for princes.

Lillian, however, saw a light at the end of the tunnel. “This is it!” Lillian cried joyfully, turning happily to her sister. “This is the end to our poverty! Don’t you see? I shall win his heart and we will live happily ever after!”

In fact, Lillian *did* seem to have everything that Prince Erik sought. She was beautiful and graceful, combining natural charm and perfect grace. And her magic was truly inspiring.

“But what about the purity of heart?” Maria ventured haltingly.

“What? Do you think that I am *impure*?” Lillian challenged, her eyebrows snapping together.

Maria was instantly abashed. “Of course not!” Better just to drop it.

But after some reflection, however, Lillian realized that her sister was right. “After all, what have I done for the world?” she mused. “How have I made it a better place?” Standing in the kitchen, distractedly watching Maria finish the dishes, she knew that the answer was nothing. And so, right then and there, an idea formed. “I will go abroad!”

“Where to?” Maria asked calmly, drying her hands and grabbing a spoon to taste the soup.

“Everywhere!” Lillian cried excitedly, warming to her plan. “I will go abroad and build schools and climb mountains and do good deeds! When stories of my adventures spread, the prince will be *bound* to find me!”

Maria nodded. It sounded reasonable. More importantly, the soup was done.

“I will leave now!” Lillian exclaimed loudly, grabbing her coat.

“No,” said Maria calmly. “You will leave after dinner.”

Lillian shook her head impatiently. “I haven’t any time to waste!”

But Maria was adamant. And when Maria was adamant, there was quite little that anyone could do. “There’s always time for soup.”

As usual, Maria won out. She removed the soup from the stove, ladling it into three bowls. Then she packed her sister a bag of provisions. While Lillian plotted her route, brainstorming noble causes and worthy fights, Maria jammed warm clothing and wholesome food into a canvas rucksack. By the time that Lillian left, it was dawn.

With Lillian gone, the Gomez household changed quite a bit. It must be admitted, however, that not all of these changes were bad. For one, there was certainly less to clean. And in the evenings, Maria actually had time to sit near the fire and read. And oh, the books that she devoured! She learned of magical lands and dragons and dinosaurs and monsters and madwomen and bold governesses and wayward princesses and foreign wars and chocolate factories and rafts on the lazy Mississippi. She inhaled the words, letting them slip, run and skitter through her mind. In fact, when she found a passage that particularly grabbed her, she would even read it aloud.

So it was that, reclining in a nearby chair, Mama Gomez could momentarily escape her illness and aching joints. Without moving a muscle, the older woman could join Maria in remote cities and wonderful fairylands.



As time passed, so much did Maria love reading that she began visiting the local school. Although useless with science and math, she humbly proposed that she might read a bit with the younger children. Understaffed and overworked, the schoolteacher, a round, redheaded woman named Mrs. Jones, was delighted. Within a few days, Maria had become an indispensable aide, walking lightly between the children and bringing their primers alive. She would squat beside them, her hair tied back and chalk on her nose, and she would help them sound out the longer words. Lib—*it means free*—er—*like in earnest*—a—*like in able*—and -tion—*say SHUN*.

As the months rolled by, Mrs. Jones and the students came to know and depend on Maria. As a result, when the Aquinas Elementary School Christmas pageant started to take shape, it was barely a question that young Maria would help.

How exciting was it to choose costumes and roles and acts! Maria was flushed with pleasure and fulfillment. What joy! What fun! Never had she been so happy. Unfortunately, not everyone in the class was so lucky. At the Aquinas Elementary School, one girl, a slower, bigger girl with a prominent forehead and dull eyes, was often left behind. Unable to understand that lib-er-a-tion should become liberation, Josie White blushed and stammered through her lessons. While the other children snickered, she struggled to decode the simplest, easiest of words. She practiced for hours and hours, staying long after the others had left. But no matter how hard she worked, no matter how the sweat beaded her neck and she tried, tried, tried to remember, sentences squirmed away and meant nothing. Long paragraphs remained a mystery that she was powerless to solve.

During lunch, Josie always sat alone. Staring dumbly at the wooden tabletop, she slowly, quietly ate her sandwich and apple. When some juice or applesauce landed on her chin, she would sometimes forget to wipe it. At recess, she would sit on a stone bench, huddling against the cold and watching the others play.

Seeing this, Maria grew vexed. In vain, she urged the others to engage Josie and be her friend. But how? The girl lacked the coordination for basketball and kickball and soccer. Whenever someone passed to her, she would muffle the play, letting the ball hit her chest or arm. In games like handball and foursquare, she would perform so badly that hot, wet tears of anguish would fill her eyes. And the others, impatient at having their game ruined, would yell in irritation. So Josie kept her distance, sticking to her bench and the cool, comforting shadows, apparently hoping that if she sat perfectly still and kept perfectly, perfectly quiet, she might just disappear.

When it was time to cast the Christmas pageant, Maria hoped that Josie would receive a part. But what would the girl be able to do? Unable to memorize lines, she could hardly be in a skit. Her voice was too low and toneless to sing. And her fingers were far, far too clumsy ever to strum an instrument.

And so, as the Christmas pageant moved into production, Josie sat quietly in a corner. She watched the rehearsal eagerly, staring longingly at the smiling faces and brassy instruments. She softly,

enthusiastically tapped her foot to the tune. And that afternoon, long after the others had left, she stayed behind.

At first, Maria was unsurprised. Too ashamed to read when anyone could hear her, Josie often stayed behind, frowning hard at the mysterious words and letters that filled her primer. But today, Maria saw that Josie left her desk and her primer and the puzzling paragraphs. Instead, she walked slowly to the stage, fingering the brassy instruments that lay across it. She girl stroked the imposing drums and sleek violins. She ogled the brash trumpets. She wondered at the noble cello. And then, gingerly and reverently, her fingers settled on a little set of bells. At when *that* happened, Maria smiled. She had an idea.

As the pageant drew closer, Maria visited the school more and more often. She worked with the pupils, unraveling the complexities of compound sentences and multisyllabic words. And after school, she stayed with Josie. It was their secret project. For weeks and weeks and weeks, until Maria was confident that her idea would be a success, not a soul knew a thing.

In late November, perhaps a few weeks after Maria had started this, Lillian returned. Her journey had been a triumph. Oh, the good that she had accomplished! The lives that she had saved! The hospitals that she had visited! Reclining by the fire, she told Maria everything. The sights that she had seen! The soaring Himalayas. The sweeping deserts. The pounding ocean. The feel of the ocean waves!

“You swam in the ocean?” Maria asked quietly, momentarily pausing her darning. It seemed that world travelling could seriously damage your socks.

Had she! Lillian had swum for hours and hours and hours, staring at the sky and rejoicing. Oh! It was the most beautiful thing! It was too bad that Maria was so weak and unadventurous. After all, she would have loved the sea!

In response, Maria said nothing. She simply returned to her darning. And it was a long time before she looked up again.”

“And how is mother?” Lillian asked presently.

“She does well,” Maria replied, her gaze still on the socks. “Would you like to see her? She is awake now.”

“What?” Lillian said distractedly, kicking her shoes onto the rug. “Oh no. I must unpack. So much to do! So *very* much to do! I will see her in a bit.”

A few days later, Lillian received the good news. It seemed that her journey had *truly* been a success. Prince Erik had heard about a young and beautiful sorceress who was voyaging around the world and doing good deeds. And, miracle of miracles, he wished to meet this girl! Could he visit for a fortnight? Would it be an inconvenience?

Lillian, of course, was in raptures. An inconvenience! Perish the thought! The date was quickly set. The prince would arrive in but a few days.

Oh! Never had Maria worked so hard! She scrubbed and polished and shone and trimmed and dusted. Meanwhile, Lillian fretted about her wardrobe. Years of poverty had reduced it so. Once a model of all that was nice and fashionable, she now had nothing to wear! Feeling for her, Maria admitted that they *did* have a bit of money set aside. Although it was meant to be for Christmas, perhaps Maria *could* let her have it now.

Lillian was all gratitude. Maria was too kind! Not an hour later, she was racing to the shops that lined the central plaza in Aquinas. And when she returned, she had an armload of new things, ranging from miffs and mittens and scarves to new frocks and silk slippers. Unsurprisingly, not a cent remained of what Maria had given her.

Three days later, the entire house sparkled. Fresh flowers filled the vases. The windows gleamed like diamonds. The floorboards practically glowed. When the prince entered, then, he was bound to notice.

“Your place looks beautiful.”

Lillian, standing in the spacious entryway, was nothing but modest. “Your Highness is too kind. It is a shadow of what it used to be. As you can imagine, with the servants gone, it has become *so* hard to keep it clean!”

“What!” Prince Erik exclaimed, gazing around again. You’re saying that *you* readied this place? *You* have made it shine so?”

Lillian shrugged demurely, keeping her gaze averred. “I have done my best. And should it meet with approval, I will consider it no work at all.”

Maria, who was then standing behind her sister, blinked in disbelief. No work at all? Each stair had taken fifteen minutes of scrubbing! And she had the scars to prove it. Aloud, however, she said nothing. She simply retreated into the kitchen, leaving Lillian and the prince to talk. After all, who would really miss her? Plain and mousy and with soap stains covering her dress, she was nothing besides the fair Lillian. Sure enough, the prince barely saw her at all.

That night, following an afternoon where Lillian showed Prince Erik the sprawling gardens, they ate the delicious supper that Maria had prepared. Although simple, the food had been cut and boiled and roasted painstakingly, each dish a labor of love.

“This food is delicious!” cried Prince Erik, laying down his fork. “The palace serves nothing finer.”

In reply, Lillian again lowered her eyes demurely, never even glancing at Maria. “It is what we can afford. With the resources at my disposal, I do my best.”

“What!” the prince exclaimed, surprised again. “Then *you* cooked this? *You* cleaned the house and *you* cooked this meal?”

Hearing this, Maria looked up, expecting a correction. When none came, she frowned, loudly taking another serving of pie. When little bits splattered onto her plate and the table, a few even landing on her shirt, the prince looked at her.

“What was your name again?” he asked kindly. “Maria?”

Maria nodded, a frown still on her face.

Prince Erik smiled. “Well, I hope that we shall become friends.” Glancing at Lillian, his smile broadened. “Who knows? It may be that we have some occasion to.”

Lillian beamed.

After dinner, Lillian and Prince Erik sat in the parlor, talking politics and philosophy and literature for hours. Maria, meanwhile, did the dishes, cleaned the kitchen floor and then began making her way upstairs. Halfway up the wooden staircase, however, something made her stop. From the parlor, she could have sworn that she heard her name. Yes! She was sure of it!

“Your sister, what is she like?” Prince Erik was asking.

“Maria?” Lillian asked, her tone surprised. “Well, she is what you would expect. Not uncommonly bright, not uncommonly pretty.” Saying this, Lillian paused. “That is, unless *you* find her so!”

“Pretty? Maria?” Erik echoed. “Certainly not! Her looks are extraordinarily plain. At the palace, hardly a soul would notice her. At times, in fact, I quite forget that you two are related!”

Hearing this, Lillian laughed. “You are too much!”

Without waiting to hear more, Maria continued upstairs, frowning even deeper. Well, see what Lillian would be eating tomorrow! Let *her* make soup for herself!

“How are things going?” Mama Gomez asked eagerly, spotting Maria in the doorway. Too ill to make an appearance, the woman was waiting anxiously for news, her eyes bright and a cotton cap covering her curls.

Maria gritted her teeth, setting down the soup perhaps a bit harder than was necessary. “Well.” She paused, trying to keep her voice neutral. After all, what did she care what Prince Erik thought? He and Lillian deserved each other. “*Extraordinarily* well.”

“Oh! Wonderful!” Mama Gomez said, happily biting into her roll. In response, Maria sighed. Then she grabbed the book that they had been reading together, flipping to the right page. A moment later, she began to read, her mother nodding along.

The following day, Lillian and the prince went for a ride. Although Maria had had to sell all but one horse, Lillian had secretly borrowed one from a neighboring family. Explaining her purpose, she had hinted that their generosity might be *richly* rewarded at some distant, perhaps *not* so distant, point in the future.

As Prince Erik and Lillian made to leave, the prince caught sight of Maria. Without thinking much of it, he extended an invitation to join their party. After all, said he, the party would be infinitely gayer with one more!

“She couldn’t!” Lillian said quickly, looking alarmed.

“And why is that?” Erik asked calmly.

“Well, there are no more horses. You saw for yourself! The stables have been quite emptied.”

The prince, who had been raised to be polite, gave a little shrug. “No matter. I should happily surrender my own.”

“But to what end?” Lillian asked. “Maria *never* rides. I think, it must be confessed, that she is rather afraid. Poor soul! It would be cruelty to insist!”

Prince Erik nodded. “You are all goodness.”

A moment later, prince and girl trotted away, leaving Maria far behind them. A glower on her face, Maria shrugged and stalked to the dairy. Well, no matter. With Prince Erik there, there was significantly more work to be done. After all, royalty visiting or not, the cows still had to be milked. And besides, by not joining the happy couple, Maria had the perfect chance to slip away. By now, her time at the school, especially working with Josie, was the highlight of her day.

That night, she cooked another feast. The prince expressed his satisfaction with all of it. All of it, that is, but the beetroot.

“I cannot abide beetroot!” Prince Erik said. “It has always disagreed with me.”

“I feel the same!” Lillian cried instantly. “In fact, I said the very same thing today. Maria, however, simply *insisted* that we have it.”

“And why not?” Prince Erik countered easily. “She couldn’t have known. As a child, my own *family* often forgot! But if I could choose any vegetable—”

“Do tell me!” Lillian said eagerly.

“It would be asparagus.”

“Asparagus?” Maria sniggered incredulously, momentarily forgetting herself. Prince Erik and Lillian instantly turned to her. Feeling their gaze, Maria looked up, fork pausing halfway to her mouth.

“Do you have something to say?” Lillian asked icily, delicately arching one eyebrow.

Maria glanced at her sister. She glanced at the prince. She glanced back. Then she shrugged and lifted the fork to her lips. “I hate asparagus.” And without another word, she bit and swallowed her food.

Lillian sucked her teeth, shooting Maria a look of death. Prince Erik, however, just smiled, really looking at Maria. “Duly noted.”

The following day, fair Lillian had a few chores to attend to, mostly relating to personal hygiene and the washing of hair. The prince, having nothing else to do, chose to wander the grounds. After a while, this brought him into the dairy. And it was there that he found what he was looking for. That is, Maria.

Just then, Maria was perched on a wooden stool, milking an enormous heifer with sad, liquid eyes. When Prince Erik entered, the creature lowed complacently.

“Might I interrupt you?” the prince asked politely.

Not having heard him, Maria started and overturned the milk. Although little was lost, the incident did precious little to improve her mood.

“I didn’t see Your Highness,” Maria said stiffly, righting her pail.

Prince Erik winced. “Please call me Erik. Your Highness sounds so, well, formal.”

Maria nodded, biting back a smile. “Of course.” She paused. “Whatever Your Highness wishes.”

Erik glanced at her sharply, his expression surprised. Then he slowly took an empty stool and sat down, looking at her thoughtfully.

“You probably know the reason that I have come here. To become king, I must find a wife before January 4. Should I fail to do so—”

“You can’t become king.” Maria nodded. She, like everyone else, had heard the story before. She just cared a bit less.

“Exactly.” He paused briefly, clearing his throat. Then he continued. “And as you have probably noticed, I most ardently admire your sister. The deeds that she has done! The good work! The charity!” He stopped, apparently quite overcome. “Well, what am I telling you? You know her far better than I!”

“Don’t I!” Maria muttered.

“What was that?” Prince Erik asked, frowning slightly, his head still in the clouds.

Maria sighed. “Nothing.”

“Really! To have a sister like that! What *say* you?” the prince breathed.

Maria grimaced. “I *say* that I need another pail.”

“What?” Prince Erik asked blankly, descending to Earth.

Maria sighed. “My father used to have a saying. If you can’t help with the milking—”

Prince Erik waited politely, his head cocked slightly to the side.

“Well, get out of the dairy.” Saying this, Maria gestured at a stack of empty pails. “Could you hand me one?”

“Oh.” Seeming slightly embarrassed, Prince Erik fumbled to obey. “Right.”

For a moment, there was silence. Then, drawing a deep breath, the prince resumed. “Anyway, I *came* here because, well, I was hoping that you might help me.”

“Help you!” Maria repeated incredulously, angling the pail underneath the cow. “How?”

“I need to make your sister love me.”

Maria nearly laughed. “Is that all? Come now! You really don’t need *my* help with that.”

“But I *do!*” Prince Erik protested. “Just give me a bit of guidance. I’m, well, not very good at stuff.”

Maria paused. Was he being *serious*? He certainly *seemed* to be. Well, from the twisted, contorted look on his face, he was either really serious or really, *really* constipated. And given that he was staying still, rather than running desperately for the loo, it had to be former. With a sigh, she put down her milk.

“Well, think of it like this. There are seven steps to falling in love.”

“Seven steps!” Prince Erik cried. “This is perfect. What are they?”

“Well, to start, you must have a common interest. So when you find something that she enjoys, just pretend to like it. Then you’ll have something to do together.”

Prince Erik nodded. “That’s simple enough. What comes next?”

“Step two is to compliment her. Tell her how good she looks. Tell her how wonderfully she rides.”

“Oh, that’s easy,” Prince Erik said dismissively. “The moment that I got here, I praised her cooking and her cleaning.”

Maria squirmed. “Well, find more things.” Maria paused. “For example, try admiring her looks. She always likes that.”

“And the third thing?” Prince Erik asked.

Maria leaned back, looking slightly dreamy. “Long and romantic walks in the moonlight.”

At this, Prince Erik laughed. Maria glared at him, grabbing her pale again. “What? You asked.”

He nodded, forcing himself to lose the smile. “I know. Go on.”

“And the fourth—”

But here, Prince Erik raised his hand. “Stop there. I can’t possibly remember more than that. Let me do all of these. *Then* I will come back for the rest. Would that be acceptable?”

Maria looked at him. He had the brightest, greenest eyes that she had ever seen. It was odd that she had never noticed that. And his features were good, too, a square jaw and straight nose, all framed by dark curls and long eyelashes. In truth, he really was the handsomest man in the land. It was no wonder that the townspeople and farmers and noblemen had made so much fuss!

Thinking this, Maria heaved a little high. It figured. She thought that *he* was perfectly lovely. And he thought that *she* was extraordinarily plain. Right. Shrugging her shoulders, she glumly returned to the milking. “As you wish.”

After dinner that night, Prince Erik saw the chessboard in the parlor. Putting two and two together, he turned to Lillian.

“You play chess! Why, I had no idea. It’s my favorite. You must do me the honor of a game!”

Lillian blinked, placing a pretty hand across her chest. “Me? Play chess?” She shook her head. “You must be kidding! Chess bores me to tears.” She nodded at her sister. “Ask Maria. The set is hers. Father gave it to her years ago.”

By this point, Maria, who had guessed what the prince was trying to do, had turned scarlet.

“Well?” Prince Erik asked lightly, glancing at the younger sister. “What do you say?”

Maria fidgeted. When she spoke, her voice was an undertone. “You don’t have to. I can say that I have a headache.”

He smiled. “But I *want* to.”

She frowned. “Fine. But don’t expect any favors! I don’t play to lose.”

Prince Erik grinned. “I’ll take my chances.”

A few hours later, Lillian went to bed. Still finishing the game, Maria and Prince Erik remained downstairs.

Once they were alone, Maria relaxed and sat back. “Well, you certainly botched *that* one.”

Prince Erik shrugged, his gaze still on the game. “There’s always tomorrow.”

Maria nodded.

Twenty minutes later, the game was over, Maria the victor. By this time, it was quite late, midnight having long come and gone. But as they headed to bed, Maria heard a strange lowing. She froze. “Oh no! Bessy must have escaped!”

Prince Erik frowned. “Who is Bessy?”

Dashing down the stairs, Maria explained. “Bessy is the cow. The latch broke a few years ago on the gate. This happens quite a lot.”

The prince nodded, turning toward the doorway. “I’ll go with you.”

“No!” Maria said instantly.

Prince Erik blinked. “Why not?”

Maria colored slightly. “I just mean, well, you can go to bed. This happens often. I *always* go alone. It’s fine.”

Erik shrugged. “Maybe you do. But at the moment, I’m here.” Saying this, he paused briefly. “Unless, that is, you don’t want me to.”

Maria froze, completely trapped and unable to do a thing. With a sigh, she grabbed her coat and hat. “As you wish.”

Outside, the November sky was an ocean of stars. Although the moon was obscured, sulking behind one of the bilious clouds that dotted the heavens, their way was brightly lit. As it turned out, Bessy had not gone far. In a matter of moments, then, they had found and returned her, locking her again in her stable.

As they turned back, however, Prince Erik spied a little trail in the brush. “Where does that lead?” he asked curiously.



“That? To the lake.”

“To the lake!” Prince Erik cried, his face lighting up. And just like that, he was off.

“What?” Maria said. “Wait! No! *Come back!*” And she chased after him, not liking where this was going at all.

After a hundred yards, sure enough, the trail ended at a beautiful, shimmering oval of glassy water. Trapped between the evergreen forest and the jagged mountains, the panorama had the calm perfection of a nature calendar, an Ansell Adams sprung to life.

Prince Erik caught his breath. “It’s beautiful!”

Maria shivered slightly, staring at the scenery. “Yes.” Her voice was quiet. “It is.”

Without quite meaning to, they made their way onto the rocks, clambering from stone to stone. As they walked, Maria started to talk. Slowly but surely, memories came flooding back. “When I was little, my father and I had a game. It was a bit like follow the leader. One person would hop from one rock to the next, any rock to any other, and the other would have to follow.”

Erik grinned devilishly. “Challenge me?”

Maria grinned back. “You’re on.”

After an hour, they were exhausted. Returning to the bluff, they located the little path and headed into the trees. When they emerged, no more than thirty yards from the white house, the moon suddenly rose, bathing the world in a milky, creamy glow. In an instant, the overgrown garden was transformed into a secret fairyland of electric shrubs, glittering fences and gravel walks.

An odd expression on his face, Prince Erik glanced at Maria.

“What?” Maria asked suspiciously.

“Nothing.” His voice was quiet. “I was just wrong about something. That’s all.”

“What do you mean?”

Erik shook his head. “Nothing. It doesn’t matter.”

And without another word, Erik and Maria crossed the quiet, moonlit lawn and went inside.

The next day, Prince Erik looked for her. Maria, however, was nowhere to be found, having spent her day at the Aquinas Elementary School, working with Josie and the other kids. In fact, when the prince finally glimpsed her, it was nearly sunset.

“Maria!” Prince Erik said.

Maria, just then throwing on an apron, whirled around. “Your Highness! What brings you here?”

At that moment, they were standing in the kitchen, Maria mentally scrambling to find a suitable recipe. Vegetable soup? Too plain for a prince? What about pasta? Too starchy? Maybe a light frittata? She wiped her brow, feeling utterly exhausted. Given her druthers, they would be eating pancakes and scrambled eggs. She was weary to the bone.

“I’ve been looking for you.”

“Have you?” Maria asked mildly, taking out a mixing bowl. She would make the frittata. Darn royalty.

“I was.” He watched her intently. “I need the next steps.”

“Next steps?” she repeated blankly, paying less than full attention. Where was the zucchini? She had had two yesterday. Had someone taken it? Yes! She had used it for the quiche. Well, leeks and tomatoes it would have to be. Darn royalty.

“To making Lillian love me?”

Maria paused. “Oh! Right.” She nodded vigorously, cracking some eggs into a bowl. “Of course.” She cleared her throat. “Well, the *fourth* step is to write her a letter.”

“A letter?”

“Yes. A love letter.”

The prince shook his head. “I couldn’t possibly.”

But Maria was insistent. “You must! Just think of the possibilities. Shakespearean sonnets! Odes to ladies fair! Descriptions of her beauty and charm and heavenly grace!”

Erik laughed. “Maybe *you* should be writing the letter!”

Silence fell. He looked at her. She looked at him. “No.” Her voice was flat.

“Please?” Erik said.

“Absolutely not.”

“Pretty please?”

Maria sighed, wearily adding some pepper and garlic to the eggs. “Get a pen and paper.”

With a smile, the prince complied, soon returning and taking a seat at the table. A few feet away, Maria leaned heavily against the counter, absently rubbing her back. Seeing this, Erik frowned. “Are you feeling ill?” he asked.

Maria shook her head. “Just tired.” She looked at him, biting back a smile. “Given *my* choice, we’d be eating eggs and toast.”

Erik smiled. “So why not let Lillian cook? She’s cooked beautifully so far. Yesterday’s soup was simply outstanding.”

Maria laughed merrily. “What! Lillian enter a kitchen? You must be joking!”

A terrible silence fell. And in it, Maria suddenly realized her mistake. She instantly turned the color of a tomato.

“You mean that Lillian *hasn’t* been cooking?” Prince Erik asked hesitantly, his voice carefully blank.

But Maria would say no more. She had already said far, far too much. Still blushing deep red, she returned to the frittata.

“And the cleaning—” Prince Erik began.

“Lillian helps!” Maria said brightly. “And besides, you must remember all of the things that she *has* done! The orphanages and such.”

“They were schools,” Prince Erik corrected her.

Maria nodded vigorously. “Yes. You see? She does so much that I can barely keep it straight! And me? What do *I* do? I make frittata.”

At this, the prince relaxed slightly, a smile touching his lips. “You make *excellent* frittata.”

Maria glanced at him. “You haven’t even tried it yet.”

Erik shrugged. “I don’t need to. Well, provided that there’s no—”

“Beetroot.” Maria nodded. “I know. I heard you the first time.”

He smiled again. Then he raised his pen. “Frankly, I’m *glad* that you told me about the cooking.” He paused. “And the cleaning.”

“Are you?” Maria asked cautiously.

“Of course,” Prince Erik said. “It just means that I’ll be praising them a bit less.”

Maria sighed with relief. Thank goodness! No harm done. And so, with her dictation, the prince began to write the love letter that would win her sister’s heart.

When Lillian received the letter, her cheeks glowed with pleasure. “How beautiful!” she gushed. “See his turn of phrase! See how well he knows me!” She pressed the paper to her cheek. “To wed a man like this!”

Maria, who was then darning a sock, fixedly said nothing. “Uh huh.”

“Well, I must respond.” With this, Lillian rapidly grabbed a sheet of paper.

Finishing her sock, Maria nodded and stood up. “As you should.” And she turned away.

“Wait” Lillian cried. “What *are* you doing?”

Maria blinked. “Going to bed.”

“Now?” Lillian said, aghast. “But I need your help!”

“With what?” Maria asked, really not understanding.

“Don’t be a fool! I mean with the letter.”

Maria started. “You want me to help write the letter?”

“Yes!”

“To Prince Erik?”

“*Yes!*”

Maria shook her head disbelievingly. “You must be joking.”

But Lillian was deadly serious. And so, with a sigh, Maria resumed her seat and dictated words of such beauty, elegance and grandeur that, reading them, Erik was quite overcome.

“In all of my life,” he said softly, feelingly, “have I *ever* heard such beauty?”

Maria, who was milking Bessie again, glowered. “Yes. As a matter of fact, you heard such beauty three minutes ago. And, I might you add, you *also* heard it three minutes before that.” Saying

that, she grabbed a second pail. “Highness, you’ve now read that letter ten times. I’ll be dreaming about it.”

Erik bashfully pocketed the paper. “I’m sorry. I just—” He cleared his throat. “Well, never you mind. Could you give me the next step? Perhaps when you’re done milking the cow, we could, well take a walk or something.” He cleared his throat, sounding oddly hesitant. “Would that be okay?”

Maria shook her head. “I can’t. I’ve got to go to town.”

“To town?” Erik echoed. “But what could you possibly do there?”

Maria was reluctant to answer. Compared to the work that Lillian had done, travelling the world and saving babies and building hospitals, her help volunteering at a local school sounded a bit, well, mundane. And as for her time with Josie, well, *that* was none of his business, royal or otherwise.

Just at the thought of Josie, Maria began to glow. At long last, she had told the teacher about their Top Secret Project. And oh, how it had taken off! Everything had gone perfectly to plan. No, by now, there was simply no doubt it! This pageant would be the best ever!

The prince, seeing her glow, jumped to the obvious conclusion. “It’s a boy!” Erik cried.

“What?” asked Maria vaguely, returning to Earth. “Oh, no.” She smiled at the very idea. “A boy! Like her! “Not a boy at all.”

But the prince was convinced. “Who is he? What is he like?”

Maria shook her head, gesturing for another pail. When Erik was unresponsive, she frowned. “With all due respect, if you can’t help with the milking—”

“Get out of the dairy.” Erik nodded. “You’ve mentioned that.” With a sigh, he handed her the pail. She bit back a smile. And after that, Erik dropped the subject.

After dinner that night, Maria was feeling rather strange. It was the last night of the royal visit, meaning that she *should* have been quite glad. Instead, however, she just felt empty. As she brought Mama Gomez her frittata, she lingered by the window.

“Is everything okay?” Mama Gomez asked.

“What?” Maria replied, not having been paying attention.

“Has something gone wrong with the visit?”

“Oh, not at all,” Maria said, shaking herself. “Everything is going perfectly.” But even as she said this, though, the empty feeling grew worse. With a sigh, she turned toward the door.

“Where are you going?” Mama Gomez asked.

“For a walk. I’ll be back soon.”

At the lake, there world was silent enough that she could almost think. There, by herself, she roamed along the steep bluff, watching the moonlight sparkle on the water. All around her, a wind was picking up.

“Are you cold?” a familiar voice asked.

Maria whirled around, her heart slamming in her chest. And there, of course, stood Erik. In the cloudy, crackling night, he seemed to have an odd electricity. She shivered. Well, it *was* rather cold. December in the mountains certainly had a bite.

Without waiting for a reply, Erik draped his coat about her shoulders. Maria protested instantly. “I couldn’t!”

But Prince Erik insisted. And so, Maria giving a little sigh, they started to walk.

“I’m still missing three steps.”

Maria nodded, her gaze on the beautiful lake and the mountains beyond. All around them, the wind was rising. “I doubt that you need them.”

“But I *do*,” Prince Erik said softly. “Can’t you tell me?”

Maria shrugged, the thought giving her little pleasure. “As you wish. The fifth step has is to do something romantic. It has to be something perfect and fateful and completely unexpected. Something like, well, getting trapped in a closet together.”

Erik frowned. “What kind of closet?”

“I don’t know,” Maria said dismissively. “It doesn’t really matter. Any kind of closet would do.”

Erik frowned a bit deeper. “That doesn’t sound very romantic.”

Maria ignored them, getting into her story. “Or maybe getting caught in the rain. Just think about Jane Austen! Do you remember that scene in the gazebo? Just imagine Lizzie Bennett and Mr. Darcy, running across sodden meadows and taking refuge in a gazebo. Just *imagine* it! Imagine sitting there, listening to the rain pounding relentlessly down. Imagine how that would feel!”

At her side, Erik was smiling. “What’s the sixth step?”

“Well, it’s dancing.”

“Like a ball?” Erik asked.

“Oh no!” Maria said. “Balls are so commonplace.”

Erik laughed. “Hardly! Very few people ever attend one.”

“Not like *that*,” Maria said. “I just mean that *everyone* dances at balls. I mean, I’m sure that they’re lovely, fancy dresses and little sandwiches and all that.” Maria paused. “Well, if you’re into that stuff.”

“Are you?” Erik asked.

“Not a whit.”

“I didn’t think so.”

Maria sighed. “I’m just saying that dancing at a ball doesn’t mean much. Better to dance when you’re the only ones. Better to dance when there’s no music. Better to dance when—” At that moment, a fat, cold raindrop splattered onto her cheek. “Oh dear!” Maria said.

They immediately raced for the path, crashing through the trees and brambles. But the storm was too quick. As they emerged from the trees, the heavens split with a deafening roar and lightning flashed. Passing the stone gatehouse, they dove for cover.

Maria was mortified. Standing on the cold, dry stone, dripping rainwater everywhere, she was sure that this was a disaster. Here she was, looking like a drowned rat, having trapped the prince in a monsoon! She said as much. Prince Erik, however, shook his head. "It's perfect."

"What do you mean?" Maria asked, wringing water from her shirt.

The man just smiled. "Give me the last step."

Maria nodded. Slowly, carefully, she sank onto the floor, leaning against the outermost pillar. When she spoke, her voice was oddly subdued. "Love her."

"Is that all?" Erik asked.

Maria nodded, her gaze still on the pouring rain. "Love her truly, deeply, passionately, more than you've ever loved before. That's the last step. Once you've done that, well, there *is* nothing else."

When she looked up, Erik was staring at her. Another crack of thunder rolled. And there was a moment, just a moment, when Maria could have sworn that she saw something in his eyes. But just then, they heard a voice. "Erik! *Erik!*"

They glanced at the house. Lillian was standing on the porch, peering into the storm. Muttering a curse, Prince Erik grabbed her hand and they raced together from the gatehouse.

"What were you doing there?" Lillian demanded suspiciously, seeing the prince and her sister.

Prince Erik shrugged. "We got trapped." As he spoke, he took off his coat and hung it on a peg.

Lillian nodded. When she addressed Maria, however, her voice was cold. "Prince Erik will need food for tomorrow. See to it."

Erik, looking startled, began to protest. But before he could say a word, Maria nodded. "Of course." And without another word, she faded away.

The next day, Erik left.

Alone again, Lillian fell into a strop. "It's your fault!" she proclaimed furiously, rounding on Maria.

"Me?" Maria repeated, stung. "What did I do?"

"You sabotaged me!" Lillian fumed, beautiful and exotic and utterly enraged. "He left because of you! If you hadn't been so *impertinent!*"

Maria, who was standing in the master bedroom that Lillian used, glanced at her sister again. As she did so, her eyes filling with tears. Then she quietly put down the ivory hairbrush, then being used to groom Lillian, and turned away.

"Where are you going?" Lillian called after her.

"To my room," Maria replied.

"But what about my hair? It cannot possibly be left like this!"

For a moment, young Maria paused. Seconds ticked by. Several more followed. Then she shrugged and opened the door. “Then do it yourself.” And she walked away.

Over the following week, the house grew tense, Lillian fuming at Maria, Maria staying silent and Mama Gomez trying to keep the peace. Fortunately, as December wore on, a letter arrived that made everything better.

“The prince is coming back!” Lillian exclaimed. “He arrives *tomorrow!*”

“Tomorrow?” Maria echoed. She blinked. “That leaves so little time!”

“For what?” Lillian demanded suspiciously. “What do *you* need time for?”

Maria shook her head, returning to her sewing. “It makes no difference.”

Lillian turned away, starting to pace. “A visit so soon! What can it mean?” All at once, she froze. “Of course! He plans to propose! Time is running out. His birthday is in January. Just think! He has but two weeks to marry!” She nodded vigorously, resuming her pacing. “Yes. It becomes so clear now! He returned home to ask permission. That is, permission to marry *me!* Oh! The thought! Can there be any doubt?”

Maria bit her tongue. Since their row, she had become quite good at that. From the effort, her mouth was gradually filling with small, painful sores.

“But this is terrible!” Lillian said.

“Terrible?” Maria repeated cautiously.

“Yes! Don’t you see? I have nothing to wear!”

Maria looked up, momentarily leaving her sewing. “What do you mean? You have plenty to wear. Don’t you remember the furs and muffs and silks that you bought?”

“Those things!” Lillian said dismissively. “Don’t kid. I need something new! Something nicer. After all, how can a royal prince propose to a pauper? Someone dressed in *rags?*”

Maria frowned. “What does *that* matter? I mean, if he really loves you—”

Lillian rolled her eyes. “Foolish girl! There is nothing more important!”

Maria sighed deeply, resuming her work. “Of course not. But don’t expect *me* to help. I already gave you everything that we had. There isn’t a penny left.”

Lillian nodded moodily, lapsing into thought. After a moment, she changed direction. “Tomorrow will be a wash. He will arrive too late to do much. After all, it will be supper and to bed. But Friday, well, we must do something special! And *Saturday—*”

“Saturday I am busy.”

Lillian started. “You! Busy! With *what?*”

“It is the Aquinas Christmas pageant. I have promised to help.”

“Oh! They’ll never miss you. And it can’t be that exciting. After all, the school has little money to spare. The costumes will be nothing but rags and old boxes! Phooey!”

Maria shook her head. “We’ve been fundraising all year. We’ve got almost five hundred set aside, though most is for the stagehands.” Maria paused, glowing slightly. “There will be a real curtain and real lights! The whole town should be coming!” She started. “In fact, this reminds me. I must take the balance into town now. Mr. Evans will now expecting it.”

Without another thought, Lillian waved her away.

When Maria reached town, Mr. Evans was as delighted as ever. He accepted the money gratefully, locking it securely in his study. Then he and Maria had a cup of tea, discussing the plans for the pageant. As the principle of the school, he was quite excited at the progress. As Maria had said, everyone truly would be there! How *wonderful!*

When Maria returned home, she heard a sudden noise behind her. She whirled around, her heart clattering oddly. And there was Prince Erik! Unbidden, a smile lit her face.

“Your Highness!” Maria exclaimed.

Erik smiled back, lightly dismounting his horse. “I thought that I had broken that habit.”

Maria laughed merrily. “I must’ve forgotten.”

Prince Erik smiled again. “And how is everything? The house?”

“Still standing.”

“Bessie?”

“Needs to be milked.”

“Need any help?”

Maria grinned. But before she could reply, Lillian rushed outside. “*Erik!*”

Prince Erik nodded at her calmly. “Lillian.”

Blushing furiously, Maria returned inside. But as she turned to go, she heard Erik pay Lillian a compliment. “That is a beautiful dress.”

Curious, Maria turned around. And sure enough, she had to agree. It *was* a beautiful dress. Long and red and sleek, it made Lillian look more exotic and beautiful than, like a tropical bird caught in the mountains.

“Do you think so?” Lillian replied breezily. “It’s just something that I dug up. Found it deep in my closet!”

Maria shrugged. It was likely enough. After all, Lillian had a penchant for keeping old clothes. Her wardrobe could probably be used to outfit an entire regiment. So without thinking more about it, Maria left to make dinner.

That night, the Gomez sisters and Erik caught up. That is, Lillian chatted about the house and the plans for the weekend and the gossip from town. Erik sat and listened quietly, eating the supper that Maria had prepared. And Maria, for her part, remained silent, thinking mainly that the stew had been too salty. She should have been more careful. And would the last song be okay? In the pageant? She worried

about that one. But then, all at once, she pictured Josie. And suddenly, without meaning to, she started to glow.

“What are you thinking about?” Erik asked suddenly, interrupting Lillian.

Maria blinked. “What? Me? Nothing.”

“But you have it again,” Prince Erik said obstinately. “You have that goofy smile.”

Maria reddened. “Goofy smile? I’m sure that I don’t have a—” She stopped suddenly, feeling her face. Sure enough, she *did* have a goofy smile. She reddened slightly, smiling more than ever.

Lillian shifted impatiently, rekindling her monologue. What had she been saying? Oh yes. About Saturday!

After dinner, Maria was busy. Since she would be gone tomorrow, she would have to finish the preparations for the pageant today. And there was so much to *do!* All night, she was baking and cutting and rolling dough, flour coating her head to toe. And the next day, sure enough, she was gone at dawn, not returning home until the sun had set.

“Where have you been?” Prince Erik inquired at supper, reaching for a loaf of bread. “You’ve been gone all day!”

Maria nodded. “I had business in town.”

“Business!” Lillian scoffed. “But what business could *you* have? Was it the pageant?”

Maria shook her head. “It was something else.”

“What pageant?” Erik asked.

At that moment, Lillian realized her mistake. But by that time, however, it was too late. Maria smiled. “It isn’t much. It’s just a little collection of skits and songs. But the whole town will be there.” Though she tried to keep her voice flat, her excitement bled through. It was so soon now! After so many months!”

“It sounds charming!” Erik said. “When is it?”

“Tomorrow night.”

Erik turned to Lillian. “We must go!”

Lillian shifted. “But we have plans.”

Erik shrugged. “Can’t the plans change?”

For a moment, Lillian glowered. Then the glower smoothed into a sweet smile. “Well, of course they can.”

At the other end of the table, Maria beamed. “The kids will be *so* thrilled!”

With a grin, Erik reached for another dish. When he did so, he froze. “It’s asparagus!” he said, surprised. “But how on *Earth* did you find asparagus in December? Why, you must’ve searched all—” Erik paused. He slowly glanced at Maria, remembering that she *had* been gone all day. And all at once, he became very, very silent.



When he had taken his share, he passed the plate to the girls. As Maria served herself generously, he flashed her a wry smile. “I thought that you hated asparagus.”

Maria shrugged slightly, not quite meeting his eyes. “I’ve changed my mind.”

At that moment, Lillian cleared her throat. “Did I ever mention that school in Nepal?” she asked loudly. “The one that I helped to found? With the teacher that smelled like a stovepipe?”

Erik nodded. “I believe that you’ve mentioned it.”

Lillian frowned. “Oh.” She coughed. “What about the time that I challenged the Countess Ivanova to a magical duel? Did I tell you about *that*?”

Prince Erik sighed. “I must have missed that one. *Do* humor me.”

Lillian smiled, triumph in her eyes, and launched into her tale.

The next day, Maria left early for town. Although the pageant was at eight o’clock, there were many preparations left to be done. But when she reached town, a cruel shock awaited her.

“It’s been cancelled!” Mrs. Jones said tearfully.

Maria froze. “What?”

“The pageant has been cancelled!”

“But why?” Maria asked.

“No money! The money that we had to pay the stagehands and rent the room, well, it’s all gone!”

Maria shook her head. “But that’s absurd. It was there two days ago! I gave it to Mr. Evans myself!”

“Then someone stole it! Someone must have seen you two. And after he locked his study, someone broke in! When he went to retrieve it today, there was nothing left.”

Maria continued to shake her head. “It can’t be. It can’t be.” She thought about the costumes. She thought about the violins and the trombones and the trumpets and the noble cello. She thought about the little set of bells. She thought about Josie. And she started to cry.

When she reached home, she flew to her room.

“What’s going on?” Erik asked, instantly worried.

“Who knows?” Lillian replied indifferently, turning the page of her magazine. “She has the pettiest tantrums. It’s really best to let them go.”

But Prince Erik felt otherwise. In a matter of moments, he was climbing the stairs. “May I come in?” he asked quietly, knocking a few times.

A moment later, the door opened. Maria was sure that she looked a fright, a red, blotchy fright. But just now, she could care less.

“The pageant is off.” Her voice was hoarse from sobbing.

“But why?” Erik asked.

And so she told him. She told him everything. She started with the reading lessons and the trips to town and the idea for a Christmas pageant. And she finished with Josie.

For a long time, Erik was silent. Then he jumped up.

“Where are you going?” Maria asked.

Prince Erik shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll be back soon.”

A few hours later, Maria heard a knock on the door. It was six o’clock at night. “Maria! Maria!”

Surprised, Maria glanced up and saw—“Mrs. Jones! What is it?”

The old teacher was shaking with joy. “The money has been returned! The pageant is on!”

With a cry, Maria leapt to her feet. “How is it possible?”

“I have no idea! It simply reappeared a few hours ago! And the thief was generous. There was even *more* than we had originally!”

“But how—”

All at once, Maria realized what had happened. “Erik!” she breathed.

“Yes?”

When she looked up, the prince was standing in the doorway, one shoulder leaned casually against the doorframe. “What’s going on?” he asked lightly.

Maria was laughing and crying at the same time. “You know very well!”

Erik shook his head. “I’m sure that I haven’t a clue.”

“The pageant is on!” Mrs. Jones trumpeted to the world. Then, turning to Maria, she beamed again. “Well, we really must go! There is *so* much to do!”

“Of course!” Maria said instantly, reaching for her coat. But before she could, Erik grabbed it and held it away. “Not so fast.”

Maria was bewildered. “What? Why not?”

“Have you eaten supper?” Erik asked.

Maria rolled her eyes. “You must be joking! I don’t have time for that!”

But Prince Erik was unmoving. “There’s *always* time for supper.”

Maria stared at him. He stared at her. And then she relented. “But I haven’t had time to make anything.”

Erik nodded. “I know. That’s why I cooked.”

“*You* cooked!” Mrs. Jones and Maria said together, equally surprised.

Prince Erik grinned. “I hope that you like eggs and toast.”

Maria started again. And then she glanced at him, an odd expression on her face. When she did so, she saw that *he* was watching *her*. Closely. In response, she turned a fascinating shade of fuchsia. His grin grew wider.

When the curtain opened that night, the audience was full. The first act was a number of skits. They involved fables and fairytales and Dickensian stories about grouchy bosses and kind spirits. They involved singing and dancing and miming and prancing about. When it was over, everyone cheered. It was the second act, however, that everyone had anticipated. That is, the school chorus. A combination of

singers and musicians and faculty, the recital was meant to be a rousing rendition of Christmas carols, both old and new.

As the curtain opened, the room fell hushed. People strained their eyes, staring at the stage. And then, quite suddenly, there they were! Oh! Were they not *lovely*? Wearing their uniforms, the students looked smart and fresh and exuberant. They stood stoutly onstage, tightly clutching their instruments and grinning madly at the audience.

Without a doubt, *all* of the students were beautiful. *All* of the students were happy and proud and confident. But in sheer joy, the sort that comes straight from the heart, one girl stood out particularly. Standing in the front row, one girl had a smile that captivated and thrilled the audience even more than the others. That girl, of course, was Josie White.

Oh! How proud she was! Standing beside the chorus, happily ringing her bells, she was simply one of the group. For a moment, the cold, stone bench was forgotten. The reading lessons were a distant memory. The lurches alone and failed tests and jeers were a thing of the past. She was no longer clumsy, lumbering, slow Josie White. She was just, well, a kid. And when the curtain dropped, signaling the end of the show, the applause was deafening.

For a moment, the children stood there, just drinking it in. And Maria, standing in the front row and crying openly, clapped loudest of all. When Josie flashed her a smile, giving her a big thumbs up, she smiled back. And if it was a goofy smile, well, who cared? She, like Josie, had never been happier in her life.

Standing beside her, Erik gently touched her shoulder. And then, unable to help himself, he reached down and—

At that point, Lillian snapped. Sitting behind them, she had been slowly simmering and seething throughout the show. But when Eric bent to kiss her sister, she rocketed to her feet, pointing accusingly at Maria.

“It’s all her fault!” Lillian cried.

The room slowly hushed. “What was that?” Mrs. Jones asked warily, her gaze darting between Lillian and Maria.

“The money!” Lillian shrieked. “She took it! Maria did!”

Mrs. Jones frowned, glancing at the younger Gomez. “But that’s absurd. Why would she take it? She’s worked harder than anyone on this pageant!”

“But who *else* could have?” Lillian yelled. “Who *else* knew that the money was there?”

“Where?”

“In Mr. Evan’s study! Who *else* could have done it?” Lillian said again.

The silence grew even deeper. Then someone called out—“How did *you* know?”

Lillian turned white. “What do you mean? Everyone knows that now. It’s common knowledge now.” But as she did this, she swallowed, taking a step back.

Mrs. Jones shook her head. “We haven’t told anyone yet. It’s still under investigation.” And judging by her tone, that investigation was about to take a new direction.

Lillian grew even whiter. “You’re missing the point!” she yelled frantically. “Maria’s to blame! Don’t you see? *Maria’s to blame!*”

By that time, two policemen were grabbing the elder Gomez. Maria jumped up. “Please!” she yelled. “That’s my sister! She would never do such a—” All at once, she paused. She remembered the new dress. She turned to Lillian, stunned. “*Did you?*” she asked quietly, her voice trembling slightly. “*Was it you?*”

Lillian sneered. “Well, I needed *something* to wear! What was I *supposed* to do? Dress in tatters? How was *that* going to impress a prince?” Turning to Erik, she was imploring. “It was for you! Don’t you see? *Everything* was for you! The traveling! The hospital! *Everything!*”

“Weren’t they schools?” Erik asked suspiciously.

“Whatever!” Lillian shrieked. “*They were all for you!*”

A moment later, the policemen dragged her away completely. As this happened, the audience cheered. Looking mildly stunned, Maria turned to Erik. “Did that just happen?”

He nodded.

Maria shook herself. “I’m so sorry. She’s not usually like that. It must have been all of the stress—”

He stopped her. “Are you actually *defending* her?” he asked incredulously. “Do you really think that I still want to *marry* her?”

Maria looked doubtful. “Well, if you really love her—”

Prince Erik smiled and shook his head. “Shhhhhhh.” Without another word, he took her hand.

“What are you doing?” Maria asked dazedly. As she spoke, he leaned forward.

“What I should have done a long time ago.”

“Which is—”

And he kissed her. When he broke away, she, a girl who always had an answer ready, was momentarily speechless. “What on Earth was that?” she whispered.

He smiled tenderly, leading her toward the stage. “Do you want to dance?” he asked suddenly.

“What?” Maria asked, still dazed.

“You heard me. Do you want to dance?”

Maria blinked. “But there’s no music.”

He grinned. “All the better.”

Maria laughed, realizing hitting her. Then she followed him toward the open space.

As it turned out, the point soon became moot. Unwilling to disperse, the crowd of happy, sated, cheered onlookers started to sing. In a matter of moments, then, a medley of Christmas carols filled the December air.

Maria shook her head, swaying on the crowded floor. Around them, other people had joined in, the entire auditorium suddenly filling with smiling dancers. “I still don’t quite understand,” Maria said slowly, confusion on her face.

The prince nodded. “Well, that’s because I’ve done it all backwards.”

“Done *what* backwards?” Maria asked.

“The seven steps.”

“What?”

“Well, you’re *supposed* to do them sequentially, steps one through seven. And with Lillian, well, I *tried* to make them work. I *tried* to do everything right! But when I got to number seven, everything just fell apart.” Saying this, Erik slowly, gently lifted her chin. “But with you, I *started* with number seven. And after that, well, nothing else mattered.”

“You mean—” Maria said, the world shifting underneath her.

“That I love you truly, madly, deeply, more than I’ve ever loved before.” He grinned. “You betcha.”

Maria swallowed. “But what about your goals? Eyes and power and heart? I’m certainly not beautiful. You said so yourself.”

Erik cringed. “I was a fool. At that point, I didn’t know you.”

“And now that you do?” Maria asked.

“You’re the most beautiful girl in the world.”

“But what about power?” Maria asked. “I’m certainly not magical.”

“That’s not true,” Prince Erik replied.

Maria shook her head miserably. “It *is*. I can’t do a single spell. I can’t light a fire.”

“So what? I’ll give you matches.”

“I couldn’t turn a toad into a pumpkin.”

“The toad appreciates it.”

“You’re not being serious!” Maria said, growing frustrated.

Erik grinned. “I *am* being serious! *You’re* the one being silly. Sure, you haven’t got *that* sort of magic. But who really cares? You’ve got something better. You’ve got mundane magic.”

“Mundane magic?” Maria asked dazedly.

Prince Erik nodded. “You remembered about the asparagus. You taught Josie to play the bells. That’s what mundane magic is. And as far as *I’m* concerned, it’s the most powerful magic in the world.”

Maria swallowed, feeling tears prick her eyes. Then, rather gingerly, she reached up and kissed him. “I’m thinking something by the sea.”

“For what?”

She grinned. “Our honeymoon.”

“Our honeymoon!” Erik repeated, surprised. “But I haven’t even asked you to marry me!”

“So you don’t want to?” Maria asked casually.

“What? No! I didn’t say that.”

Maria laughed. “I’m just trying to help. After all, don’t you have a week left?”

Erik became serious. “Maybe. But who cares? Forget all of that. Take whatever time you need. There are more important things.”

But Maria shook her head. “I don’t need more time. I’ve known from the moment that I saw you.” She paused. “I simply have one condition.”

Prince Erik smiled. “Anything.”

“I choose the band,” Maria said, now grinning wickedly.

“The wedding band?” Prince Erik asked.

“Uh huh.”

For a moment, Erik looked puzzled. Then he glanced at the school choir, singing merrily onstage. He glanced at Josie, happily ringing her bells and beaming, beaming, beaming at the world. And he smiled.

“As you wish.”