

## A CINDERELLA STORY

**Michelle Seaton**

Forget the girl for a moment. Consider, first, the fairy godmother, this older, wise woman who wields magic and who could change anything with the wave of one glittery, star-topped stick. She could upend a dictator, in theory, or feed those who starve or heal the sick or tame a violent storm or shout out to any of the world's bullies to stop and cower before justice. But, no, she does none of these things. Instead, she gives a pretty girl a bath and a dress and a pair of fragile pumps and a ride to a party where the girl will be a stranger to everyone, especially the rich guy whose lust she must stoke in order to change her life. All this the godmother offers in exchange for a curfew she knows cannot be met; she knows the girl will run out of the party early and alone to walk home in shame. What storyteller could condone this stunning lack of vision, this crooked mania for matchmaking, and pass it on to her daughters and her daughters' daughters for all eternity?

And what of this girl who has just spent the afternoon scrubbing hearthstones and sorting lentils from grains of rice? She now holds the hem of this new dress out of the mud as she watches a squash swell into a carriage and thinks, *Well, at least this is different*. Maybe she

wonders aloud about the possibility of food at this party or an open bar. These are sensible questions. If hard work and abuse have brainwashed this girl, leaving her addled, well then, she can be forgiven for trotting off in that fake carriage to tart herself before the king's son on the off chance that a young man suckled on entitlement will be a kinder roommate than a gold-digging stepmother and two vapid sisters.

The Cinderella to root for is the one who smiles with cool gratitude at the old gal with the magic stick, while considering how best to seduce her. She rightly assumes that anyone who takes such a keen interest in the sex life of a beautiful young stranger might herself be tempted by willing flesh. If successful, this girl would gain access to the wand, which would offer so much more pleasure and power than a drafty castle and a tiara and a royal mother-in-law. This girl steps forward, caresses the cheek of her benefactor, and makes a single bold suggestion.

Too bad for the godmother that she cannot give in to her desire, which leaves Cinderella with one option only. She steers that silver carriage away, as far from the palace as possible, toward the marketplace. There she sells it to the first merchant she sees, someone with aspirations. A four-in-hand can fetch quite a price, even if the buyer is shrewd enough to cheat her a little in the belief that a blonde with an updo, who is wearing shoes made of glass, is none too bright. She takes his gold and wastes not one moment of guilt on the surprise that awaits him in the morning. A girl who has slept in ashes knows that life's not fair. The dress, too, she sells to the merchant's daughter, who hopes to catch the eye of a prince. The glass slippers she throws away because they won't fit anyone

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else. Sneaking into a barn, she mounts a horse, not well-secured, and rides off at full gallop. On and on she rides, past a castle where a party is just breaking up, and a prince stands on the front steps between two ugly sisters. He goads one against the other and enjoys their competition. Cinderella blows them a kiss of pity as she rides by. With gold in her pockets and not one plan for the future, she rides, staying just ahead of the wave of grief that chases her. She rides, feeling the wind loosen the last of the pins in her hair.