



MOST PEOPLE THINK RATS ARE DIRTY, BUT THEY'RE REALLY NOT. They groom themselves frequently, licking their coats shiny and clean, and always have the good manners to eat any crumbs I leave for them on the attic floor. They actually make my job easier. Rats never leave petticoats crumpled in a heap beside their four-poster beds, expecting me to collect them, scrub them, and press them flat. They never pile dirty dishes and stained teacups on silver trays for me to wash later. And they certainly don't ring bells all the day long, screaming my name down the stairs, ready with yet another chore to add to my list.

When the royal carriage arrives, I'm sitting in the garret window seat, the shutters thrown open to catch a delicate spring breeze. I have my legs spread out, trying to stretch away the soreness in my calf muscles. It's midafternoon, and it's my first blessed moment of peace all day. The family are all asleep, napping off their lunches. My two favorite rats are with me: white-spotted

CHRISTINE CALELLA

Ermengarde sitting in my left palm as I feed her a nibble of hard cheese, and sleek gray Jacques resting patiently in my lap for his share, half-hidden in the folds of my blue skirt.

The carriage comes trundling up the drive, its golden accents glinting in the high sun. At first, it seems like a mirage in the desert—too beautiful to be true. Why would a carriage that fine be coming here? My stepmother rarely has visitors. I quickly move Jacques off my lap and set down Ermengarde so I can peer farther out the window. The breeze stirs the flyaway hairs of my braided crown, tickling the tip of my soot-covered nose. It rustles the climbing wisteria that circles the attic window and fills the air with sweet pollen.

I squint down in amazement as the carriage doors fly open. Four strapping guards in cobalt blue uniforms step out, followed by two additional young men: one entirely in black with a proud, haughty demeanor, and the other decorated in a splendid array of white and gold, whose shoulders are slumped in defeat.

The coachman produces a gleaming brass horn, trumpeting it as the young noblemen amble to the front door, hands tucked lazily in their pockets. The coachman raises his chin to the clouds and shouts, “Announcing the arrival of his royal highness, the crown prince of Holbein, Bayard D’Harcourt! Will the master of the house please present himself?”

There is no master of the house. Not anymore. Not after Stepmother was done with him.

Anyone else would be standing at this window in a stupor, staring down in awe at the crown prince. For there is no logical reason for him to be here. But I don’t have time for bafflement—that can

LIAR'S KINGDOM

only turn out badly for me. If my stepmother is blindsided, she'll strike at me like a viper, punishing me to make herself feel less small. I start to run, my worn soles clattering down the attic's spiral steps as I shout at the top of my lungs. "Stepmother! Amalia! Freida! You have to get up! There's an important visitor!"

I slam into my stepmother's locked bedroom door, thumping on it. "Stepmother! There's royalty outside! The prince!"

When she doesn't respond, I rush down the hall to Amalia. Her door is unlocked, the curtains of her bed pulled closed. I fling them open. "The prince! Get up. Get up, now!"

Amalia straightens against her pillows, the feathers that line her silk bathrobe drooping drowsily. She pushes a sleep mask from her eyes, mumbling, "What about the prince?"

I throw a pillow at her face on my way out the door. "He's *here!*"

Freida's door is also unlocked. She's somehow accumulated a new pile of laundry since this morning and dropped it all in the doorway, so when I rush in, the tip of my boot snags on a linen sheet and I fall to my knees in the dirty bedclothes. Freida is awake, sitting at her vanity and retouching her pale blond curls.

"Go fetch my afternoon tea," Freida says, sniffing in distaste as I pull myself out of her laundry pile. "The jasmine kind I like."

My heart thuds to an anxious stop. I momentarily forget all about the prince, remembering I was supposed to pick up more jasmine at the market today. I'd been so loaded down with the rest of the supply list, Freida's tea completely slipped my mind. If they find out I made an error—

CHRISTINE CALELLA

I lie smoothly, covering my tracks. “They were out of jasmine. I’ll have to go back early tomorrow.”

“See that you do,” Freida says, lip curling. “Or I’ll tell Mother, and you’ll be sorry.”

“Make me sorry *yourself*,” I snap at her. Cornered rats are known to bite. “Or are you only brave enough to hit me when Stepmother is watching, and I’m not allowed to hit back?”

Freida glowers at me. “That’s not how it is—”

The thought of the prince gallops back into my mind. I cut her off, knowing we have more important things to do than fight. “*Just get up*,” I insist. “Go downstairs. The prince is here. I don’t know why.”

Freida’s green eyes sparkle, our argument suddenly forgotten. “Naturally, we know why! The prince was charmed by one of us at the ball after all. He’s come to visit Amalia or me!” She bites back a laugh, rifling in her vanity’s drawers for more rouge. “I knew the harlot he danced with wouldn’t last. That’s a girl you give attention to for a night. But Amalia and I are of a higher class—”

“Oh, would you stop gloating and put on your face?!” My cheeks are getting hot. What if Freida’s right? If one of my stepsisters marries the prince, what will happen to me? Would Stepmother throw me out on the street when they all moved into the palace, or would I merely join the royal family’s legion of scullery maids, scrubbing flagstones until my knuckles bleed while my stepfamily is fed delicacies and bedecked in jewels?

I jab my finger at a vial of Freida’s lip paint. “I’d put that on too, if I were you,” I say. “You need all the help you can get to compete with Amalia.”

LIAR'S KINGDOM

Freida gasps, in part because she knows I'm right: She's never been as pretty as Amalia. But the truth can't protect anybody, so I know to duck before Freida throws her heavy silver hairbrush at my head. It misses me, hitting the wall hard enough to leave a chip in the paint.

I hurry from Freida's room before she can chuck something else at me. Stepmother sweeps toward me in the hall, adjusting her fashionably gray powdered wig. She is a legendary beauty, with skin as pale and smooth as cream, doe-like eyes, and full, sensual lips. These enviable qualities combine to disguise the venom in her heart at first glance—but anyone who spends enough time around my stepmother soon learns what she is capable of.

"Well?" she snaps, raising a threatening arm. "Are you just going to leave his highness standing on the doorstep? Idiot girl!"

"Apologies, Stepmother," I say, dropping my eyes to the floor. I hurry down the steps before she decides to let her hand fly.

I should have known. Stepmother would've been furious at me for letting him in before waking her, and now she's angry at me for making him wait. There is no way to win with her. There never has been.

"Stop!" Stepmother demands, changing her mind quick as an autumn wind. Her claw-like hand grips my shoulder. "Where is my new hat? I must be splendidly attired for royalty."

I gulp. This is not the moment I'd planned to discuss this, but my pre-prepared lie tumbles out of my mouth. "The milliner will not release the new hat until you settle your tab for all the old ones," I squeak. "With interest."

Stepmother's black eyes crack like ice. "That impudent man!"

CHRISTINE CALELLA

She raises her arm to strike me for the milliner's slight.

I wait, tense yet prepared. I knew it would come to this.

But her cunning gaze darts to the door. She doesn't want me greeting royalty with a bleeding nose. "Go!" she demands. "Answer it! I'll give you gold for the milliner when the prince is gone." I turn, but her fingernails press down on my shoulder, stabbing into my flesh. "And if I find out this is a fiction, you perfidious little liar, you will regret being born."

I pull away, tripping lightly down the stairs. I'm lucky we're not alone right now. Stepmother has never been above breaking one of my bones to teach me a lesson.

For the record, the milliner *is* asking Stepmother to pay her debt. Just not with interest. He's too afraid of his baroness to ask for interest. The interest is for me. For the escape fund I keep beneath a rotten floorboard in the attic. I'll get out of this house one way or another, even if I have to secret away stray coins for decades.

I reach the grand front doors, made of cedarwood and inlaid on both sides with carvings of leaves and various woodland creatures: squirrels, mice, a fox, and majestic deer. On the other side, I can hear the impatient coachman blowing his horn again. A voice drawls, "Perhaps there's nobody home."

I push open the doors. They're heavy, and I've been doing a lot of running around in the last few minutes, so I sound breathless as I greet them: "Hello, your highness. The DeBrun estate welcomes you and your retinue."

The prince—the boy in white and gold—is leaning against the stone wall of the entry, one arm up above his head, all but

LIAR'S KINGDOM

dead to the world. Then he seems to rally, glancing at me. His gaze doesn't linger on my face. It takes in my bird's nest of hair, my apron, my worn boots. "Thank you, miss," he says, inclining his head a half-inch to me. "Are the baron and his lovely daughters at home?"

I blink at him. "The baron has been dead six years. But the baroness is home."

The prince's companion, the one in black, raises a shining cane and uses it to brush me aside, clearing the doorway. "Then we shall enter." He gestures for the prince to go in ahead of him. "After you, Bayard."

The prince does enter, just as Stepmother descends the grand staircase in a violet gown with a high lace collar, its train fanning out behind her. She greets him with unctuous enthusiasm. "Your highness! This visit is as surprising as it is an honor. That you should favor us with your presence is most flattering—"

I examine the boy with the cane. He's tall. Thin, but broad-shouldered, with a loping grace and hair the rich color of the dark chocolate bonbons Amalia always makes me buy at market. My sense is he doesn't carry the cane for assistance with walking—he carries it to be able to push aside peasant-folk without touching them. I think I'm safe to glare as he glides past, because the prince didn't look me in the eye, and I don't expect his companion to, either. But the boy stops, doubling back to look at me. He smirks, and the cane rises again to rest on my shoulder. "Didn't anyone ever teach you to curtsy to your social superiors?" He presses the cane down gently, urging me to dip into a show of respect.

CHRISTINE CALELLA

I obey, blood pounding in my ears. I'd love to snatch that cane from him and beat him round the head with it. Years of degradation have never made the taste of it more tolerable to me.

"Good," the boy says, lightening the pressure on the cane. He removes it from my shoulder and enters the house, forgetting me in an instant. But I don't forget him, and I vow I never will. He may be as cool and impersonal as a passing shadow, but I'll resent his smug face for the rest of my life.

The guards stride past, and when they're all inside, I close the door, stealing one last look at the royal carriage. I imagine riding inside something so fine. Such a vehicle would make me feel like a prized jewel, held safe in a delicate, golden box. I picture myself running my fingers against the velvet cushions. See how I'd lay out on the seat and let the gentle sway of the carriage sweep me away, allowing me to doze through a journey that would take a peasant a week to make on foot.

I close the doors and lean against them, watching the scene unfolding in the foyer. Amalia and Freida are fully dressed now, each in their very best gowns, their stiff, ironed curls pinned atop their heads and adorned with ribbons. They rush downstairs to greet the prince so quickly that Amalia stumbles on her hem.

"May I present," Stepmother trills, "my gorgeous daughters, Amalia and Freida Tremoille?"

The prince has both my stepmother's hands in his. He raises her knuckles to his lips and kisses them lightly. She swoons. I remember the last time Stepmother's knuckles touched my lips. That scene had not been *anything* like this one.

"My dear Baroness DeBrun," the prince says, "I am sorry to

LIAR'S KINGDOM

intrude upon your household without advanced notice.”

Stepmother beams at him. “Surely your highness knows you are welcome in our home at any time. But what delight brings you here today?”

The young man in black clears his throat from his position by the unlit fireplace. He seems to have been running a gloved finger across the mantle to check for dust. “Tremoille?” he asks. “I thought this was the house of DeBrun?”

Stepmother’s face sours. “These are the children of my first marriage. And you are?”

At that reminder, the prince laughs gaily at himself. “Oh, how rude of me not to introduce my companion! Baroness, ladies—” He nods to my stepsisters where they hover at the foot of the stairs, afraid to draw nearer. “I am pleased to introduce his grace, Duke Maxim D’Arcy. He is a very dear friend of mine—but don’t let his youth fool you. He’s also a trusted adviser to the king. Our country is lucky to have him.”

I’m struck again by the stark differences between Prince Bayard and his “dear friend.” It’s the difference between the blazing sun and the foreboding cloak of night. The prince’s face is open and friendly, while the duke only scowls. Even their skin tones speak to lifestyle differences: Prince Bayard is aglow with a healthy tan, suggesting that he whiles away his days riding, while the duke’s complexion is a light olive, as if he spends all his leisure time in the shade.

Maxim slowly inclines his dark head to my stepfamily, as if a bow would be too much respect. He gives a patently false smile and says, “Ladies, the prince and I are here on a very important

CHRISTINE CALELLA

mission.” His black eyes glitter with malice, as if he knows exactly what an embarrassing tizzy his next words will send my family into. “A mission to find his bride.”

My stepsisters crow with delight, which after a stern glare from my stepmother, quickly transitions into peals of more ladylike giggles. Freida steps boldly forward, moving to obscure Amalia’s lithe figure from sight. She flutters her pale eyelashes at his highness. “But which of us have you come for, handsome prince?”

Prince Bayard glances at Maxim, his jawline hardening. He turns from the ladies momentarily, running a hand through his shining red-brown hair. He mutters to Maxim from the corner of his mouth, “They’re too tall. The girl at the ball was shorter.”

My breath catches in my chest. Now this is interesting. I look quickly to Stepmother, whose steel-sharp eyes don’t even blink as she watches the whispering pair. I doubt she heard what I heard.

Maxim smiles indulgently at the prince. “It’s possible you’re correct, but are you willing to give up so easily? Perhaps your memory is faulty. What’s the harm of having them try it on?”

The prince nods, closing his eyes. “You’re right, as always. Tell them.”

Maxim claps his hands, turning back to the assembled ladies and addressing Freida directly. “That’s a very astute question, mademoiselle. And I’m afraid it has no easy answer.” Here, Maxim reaches into his velvet jacket and withdraws an item cushioned in swaths of white silk. He unwinds the fabric to reveal a shoe made entirely of shimmering glass. It is fairy-made, as plain as anything.

Maxim continues speaking, chuckling as he explains, “At last

LIAR'S KINGDOM

week's masquerade ball, Prince Bayard met a young woman of astounding beauty. You may recall she arrived late in a gown of cornflower blue, drawing the attention of everyone in attendance. You may even recall how she and the prince danced the night away."

My heart beats faster, pitter-pattering in my chest like the scurrying of a rat's little feet against hardwood.

"The trouble is," Maxim says, full-on grinning now, "this young enchantress left the ball just before midnight, and the prince didn't obtain her name or where to find her. All she left behind was this slipper. And now the prince has vowed only to wed the maid who fits this shoe."

It is a *very* small shoe. Dapples of light from the chandelier overhead reflect off it, leaving spots on my vision. This is all so romantic and dashing. I can hardly believe the prince would be so faithful to someone he met for a single evening.

Bayard speaks up. His voice is gentle and thoughtful, like a caress. "We have been all over the kingdom, visiting the houses of the nobility in search of the girl who can wear this slipper. There are not many noble families left. I'm beginning to fear I will not find her."

"Worry not, crusading prince!" Stepmother cries. "My beautiful girls will surely fit the slipper. They have the daintiest feet." She winks in their direction. "I simply cannot believe one of them beguiled you at the ball and managed to hide it from her doting *mamá*." She waves a hand at Amalia, calling her forward. "Amalia, dear? You must try on the slipper first! Let's not keep the prince waiting. He has a wedding to plan."

CHRISTINE CALELLA

A guard drags forward the chaise lounge for Amalia to perch on. Maxim passes the slipper to Bayard, and the prince kneels gamely to slide the shoe onto Amalia's foot.

Amalia does have small feet, but not *that* small. The shoe gets stuck half a nail from the edge of her heel, and the prince stops pressing. "Oh no, my darling!" Stepmother cries, falling to her knees to help push the shoe farther along Amalia's foot. "You did so much work in the garden this morning, your feet have obviously swollen from the heat of labor!"

I can't help it. The absurd thought of Amalia toiling in the garden is enough to break me. I let out a huff of laughter. Maxim's dark eyes flicker to me again, an expression of begrudging amusement crinkling the corner of his mouth.

"Mother," Amalia squeaks, her eyes screwed up with pain. The shoe has now reached the edge of her heel but is scraping up her skin, peeling it horribly and causing a great bubble of blood to rise up where the edge of the glass digs in.

Prince Bayard stares at my stepmother's grasping hands like he's envisioning a monster's claws. "Madame, I do not think the shoe belongs to her. Please, let her take it off."

Stepmother laughs shrilly. "Of course, you're right! It is obviously Freida's, not Amalia's." She wrenches the shoe from Amalia's foot and shoos her from the chaise. Amalia limps away, tears streaking her artfully applied makeup.

Freida hurries to take Amalia's place, and this time, Stepmother doesn't even allow the prince to touch the slipper. She knows Freida's feet are bigger than Amalia's, but perhaps she suspects that strong Freida will bear the pain better.

LIAR'S KINGDOM

She's right, at first. Freida plasters on a wooden smile as Stepmother forces the shoe onto her foot, and does not so much as wince until . . . *Crack!*

Everyone in the room reacts physically to the crunching of bone as Freida's big toe folds in on itself. Freida lets out a baleful howl. The guards roar in disgust. My stomach turns, and I slide against the door down to the parquet, my knees dropping out from under me. Maxim turns away, lips pursed. Prince Bayard covers his mouth with his hand like he's going to retch.

"Enough!" the prince commands, shooting to his feet. "This *hideous display* is not helping anyone."

Stepmother's face twitches with barely restrained rage. My stomach knots with my lower intestine. The moment these men are gone, she'll take this out on me.

Maxim crosses the room, seizing the slipper from my stepmother's slackened hands. He dabs Amalia's blood off the heel with the white silk, staining it red in the process. He glances apologetically to Bayard. "You were right after all, my friend. They were too tall."

The prince puts a weary hand to his chin. "Where do we go from here, Max? There are no nobles left. Perhaps a foreign princess attended without telling us? That would explain why she refused to give her name."

"If it is a foreign princess," Maxim presses, "what do you intend to do about it?"

Bayard shrugs. "What *can* I do?"

Maxim's eyes flash. "No, Bayard. You're not giving up on this. We've already crisscrossed the country looking for your mystery

CHRISTINE CALELLA

girl. You can't throw up your hands as soon as it gets difficult. Whatever happened to your speeches of true love? Surely, you could travel abroad to seek out the girl."

Bayard's look brightens. "I suppose I could. Father wouldn't be happy."

Maxim raises an eyebrow. "And what does your father know about love?" He claps Bayard on the shoulder, enthused now. "You must try everything. And perhaps we are not out of nobles yet." He sweeps an arm imperiously at my stepmother. "Are there any other eligible young ladies in the house? You are the Baroness DeBrun are you not? Are there no sweet girls here by that surname?"

Amalia lets out a whimper, her eyes darting instinctively, guilelessly, toward me. Freida, hunched sideways to put her weight on her uninjured foot, elbows Amalia hard in the rib.

Maxim lets out a long, slow laugh, charting the trajectory of Amalia's gaze to me. "Not the scullery maid, certainly?"

Stepmother's coal-black eyes widen in outrage. "Not Ell! She didn't even attend the ball!"

The prince's gaze has returned to me. Again, he isn't looking at my face. Oddly, I realize I haven't seen him stare into Amalia's or Freida's face either. Doesn't he know what his perfect bride looks like? Instead of looking at my eyes, or the shape of my mouth, the prince is looking at my hair. At my frame. At the boots on my feet, which indeed, are obviously oversized.

"Those shoes are too big for you," the prince declares. "Ell, is it? Ell DeBrun, by any chance? The old baron's daughter?"

I nod.

LIAR'S KINGDOM

“Come forward,” Bayard commands. “Try on the slipper.”

I can hardly ignore a prince's orders. I step forward, sitting on the chaise lounge as my stepsisters had. Stepmother strikes like lightning, stepping between the slipper and me. “I tell you,” she snarls, “Ellain has no business trying on the shoe. She did not attend the ball. We left her at home.”

“Were not all ladies of noble birth requested to attend?” Maxim draws.

“She was left home as punishment for her deceit and disobedience.”

“I want her to try on the shoe,” Bayard says simply. And that is that. Stepmother has to step aside.

I unlace my shabby right boot, letting it fall to the marble floor. I pull off my dirty sock, with its shameful holes in the toes and heel. My face burns with embarrassment, and with the knowledge that Stepmother will seek revenge for this.

The prince accepts the shoe back from Maxim. He takes my ankle in one hand, then slides the slipper onto my toes and easily up over the heel. It fits like a dream.

The prince chokes in surprise, as if he'd been fighting for me not because he thought I was the girl, but merely to uphold my honor. The smug smile slips from Maxim's face as he stares at me in disbelief.

I keep my own jaw rigid and set as I look up into the livid face of my stepmother. “Well,” I say softly, “isn't that something?”

Then the prince launches to his feet, pulling me up as well. He wraps his strong arms around my waist, swinging me about in a dizzy, giddy circle that makes laughter bubble from my throat.

CHRISTINE CALELLA

“It’s you!” he cries. “I’ve found you, my love!”

I’m dreaming. Surely, I’m dreaming. But of course—one cannot feel pain in dreams, so when Stepmother grabs me by the hair and rips me from the prince’s arms, throwing me to the cold floor, I can be certain this is reality.

I cry out, covering my face in case she aims a kick at my teeth. Some small territory of my scalp burns from the sudden absence of roots, and as I peek out through my fingers I see a clump of dirty blonde hair tangled in my stepmother’s clutches.

“You bully!” the prince roars. “You brute!”

The guards dash forward, wrestling Stepmother to the floor. Prince Bayard rushes to me, lifting me to a sitting position, cradling my head in his hands to check for damage. My stepsisters squawk, running to their mother’s aid, but Maxim steps neatly between them, flinging out his cane as a barrier. His tongue clicks. “I wouldn’t, if I were you.”

I’m safe in the prince’s arms, and he smells wonderful, like soap and saffron. He whispers to me. “I will never let them hurt you again. Ell, dear Ell. How wonderful to know your name. How sublime. You will leave this place today and come home with me.”

Lightheaded, I reach up to touch the curve of the prince’s strong jaw with my fingertips. He is really *very* handsome, with those bright, expressive eyes. That hair like burnished bronze. “That sounds lovely,” I say.

“Oh, why would you ever return here?” Bayard asks, pressing a kiss to the top of my hair. A greedy shiver runs through me—it has been a long time since someone touched me with affection.

LIAR'S KINGDOM

“Why come back into the clutches of these monsters, when you might have stayed behind with me? I was so in love with you the night of the ball I would’ve married you then and there.”

Dimly, I realize I have to come up with a good answer, or this strange sequence of events could all fall away. I lick my lips, blinking the stardust and romance from my eyes. My voice is hoarse. “I was afraid. Afraid that when you saw what I really am . . . just a scullery maid . . . you wouldn’t care for me anymore. That I couldn’t live up to what you deserve.”

Bayard chuckles, stroking a strand of hair behind my ear. “You thought me that inconstant?”

I force a pained smile. “I was a fool to believe so. Can you ever forgive me?”

Bayard laughs again. “My dear Ell, if only you’ll marry me and make me the happiest man in the world, I could forgive you anything.”

I smile, closing my eyes to enjoy the sensation of being wrapped in his strong arms. Protected. “Then that’s what we’ll do.”

But a worm turns in my gut. For I know there is certainly one thing the prince would never forgive me for, if he found out.

I am not the girl he met at the ball.