

# The Happy Stepsister?

by Robin Layne

Brunella stepped into the parlor, her face veiled. She wore a dress that resembled the one Cinderella had worn at the ball. On her feet she wore thin stockings and no shoes. She smiled at the prince's servant and said, "My dear prince hasn't forgotten me! Please excuse my voice. I have a cold."

The servant looked at her suspiciously. "You don't know how many times I've heard that kind of greeting today," he said. "They all say they are the woman our prince met at the ball. But are you really? Only this tiny shoe will tell."

Brunella hesitated. She stepped forward. She wore the veil to hide her face so no one would know she was not Cinderella, but also so they wouldn't know how plain her face was. It was so unfair! Pretty faces won everything! She had been so sure that keeping Cinderella covered with soot and rough-skinned from work would hold her back, at least.

She sat down in a chair at the servant's bidding. He held out the shoe and slipped it onto her foot. She couldn't believe her own luck when the shoe fit!

As the servant bowed before Brunella, Cinderella entered the room with a dust cloth in her hand. "Wait! That shoe is mine! My fairy godmother gave it to me!"

Brunella ignored her. She rose and let the servant kiss her hand. "The prince has invited you—you who fit the glass slipper—to come to his palace and be his bride!"

"B-but—" Cinderella protested.

"Butt out, chambermaid!" roared the servant. He took Brunella by the hand and escorted her to his coach.

Cinderella stood at the door, weeping as the coach rode out of sight. "How could this happen? I *know* her feet are not as small as mine! And the prince and I found true love at first sight. I've got to find out the answer. Fairy godmother? Where are you? Please, please come to me just one time more, and tell me what's happened and what I'm to do!"

The silence was overwhelming. At last, someone tapped her on the shoulder. She turned around. There stood her fairy godmother.

"There, there, child, wipe your eyes. I'm sorry things went this way. I thought you would realize what Prince Charming is like before things went this far. I didn't want to break your heart, but the magic doesn't work just the way we'd like."

"What in the world do you mean?"

"Ella, he may be charming, but if you'd gotten to know him instead of kissing him on the balcony all evening, you would have realized he's a tyrant. And I couldn't set you up before I set up your elder stepsister. It's in the rules. And you weren't allowed to know everything, or the magic wouldn't have worked at all. So I made your sister's feet smaller last night. She will be ruled by a tyrant, and he will marry one thing he can't stand—an ugly face!"

"I see," Cinderella said, trying not to sob. "But what about me?"

"Patience will win out," she said. "You can wait. And you have a magic of your own that's better than this cheap wand stuff. Let it out and see where it leads you. You're next in line. Look around and see who you want to marry—someone you'll know well before you take the plunge."

Meanwhile, Brunella rushed the prince into the ceremony, refusing to let him lift her veil until they were alone together. The prince was forced by his own laws to keep his word—to

marry the woman who matched the shoe. And so he and Brunella lived miserably ever after. As for Cinderella... we shall see.