

## Cinderella: The Untold Story

By Thomas James

Staring at the cold, ash-filled hearth, Ella could not suppress a sigh. Dustpan and brush in hand, she knelt, carefully adjusting her tattered, soot-stained dress in a somewhat futile attempt to keep the garment from acquiring further grime. Sweeping up a portion of the ashes, Ella dumped the contents into an ash bucket, causing a thin plume of soot to rise and settle on her dress, further obscuring the faded blue color. Ignoring the additional stains, Ella continued to sweep up the ashes. Her attention on the task, she did not hear someone enter the room.

"Ella!"

Startled, Ella missed the bucket, spreading ashes across the floor. Before she could stop herself, another sigh escaped her lips. Cringing, Ella braced for the venomous spew that was sure to come.

"You incompetent child!"

I shall be twenty-one in two days time and yet she insists on calling me child Ella thought, but knew better than to give voice to the notion.

"You know full well that Talbot pays good money for the ashes that you are being so careless about."

Ella knew Talbot the Ink maker paid well for the ashes, just as she knew that she would never see a farthing of it. Another thought Ella would not say aloud. Instead, she replied, "Yes mother."

Her face contorting, the woman screamed, "Stepmother! Stepmother! How many times must I remind you, you ignorant whelp?" Ella's stepmother raised a hand as if to strike her, but with a great deal of effort retrained herself. Women of class and good breeding never resorted to violence her stepmother had once scolded an eleven year old Ella, after she accidentally knocked over her sister (stepsister she silently reminded herself) while playing. As if women of class and good breeding would allow their home to become run-down, selling off the family's possessions to purchase extravagant gowns, Ella had wanted to reply, yet had remained silent.

Patting her rust-colored hair, that she kept in a severe bun in order to hide the gray, Ella's stepmother drew in a deep calming breath. "As if I could ever give birth to such an ugly child."

Stung, Ella lowered her head; raven-dark curls spilling forward, tears welling up in her soft blue eyes. Her rosebud lips quivered slightly as she attempted to stem the flow of tears. Unable to prevent it, drops began to fall, leaving tracks through the soot on her alabaster skin.

"Oh, stop that sniveling and finish cleaning the hearth," the stepmother said.

Composing herself, Ella replied, "Yes, stepmother."

"See child, you can learn."

Ella seethed inwardly at the child reference but as usual kept silent. As she resumed her task, with her stepmother droning on about the laziness of some people, Ella had a visual of a blazing hearth and her stepmother stumbling into said fireplace. A smile crept onto her face briefly, until Ella's overly guilty conscious wiped the smile away. Sighing to herself, Ella continued to sweep up the ashes, dumping them in the bucket and coughing as the plumes of soot settled over her. Wisps of smoke curled unnoticed in the fireplace, rising listlessly up the chimney.

The door to the cottage slammed open, causing Ella to miss the bucket once again. Thankfully, her stepmother had been too engrossed with her reflection in the only mirror in the house to notice the additional mishap. Looking over her shoulder, Ella groaned at the sight of her two stepsisters waltzing into the cottage, wearing the gaudiest gowns she had ever seen. Ella could not help but gawk at her stepsisters. Gangly Claudette dressed in yellow and green, giving her the appearance of a giant ear of corn. Corpulent Margaret draped in layers of bright orange lending to the look of an oversized pumpkin. Both dresses

had enough extra lace and ruffles to make a dozen outfits for Ella, who admittedly could use a new dress, not that she would be caught dead wearing such obnoxious clothing. Ella never understood her family's obsession with pretending to be well off.

Tearing her gaze away from the mirror, the stepmother said, "Ah, my darling daughters. Don't you look marvelous? Wouldn't you agree Ella?"

"I think marvelous does not begin to cover it stepmother," Ella replied, while thinking, ridiculous is more like it.

Eyeing Ella, almost as if reading her stepdaughter's mind, the stepmother said, "I do believe you are correct."

"Thank you mother," the daughters replied.

Turning to Ella, Claudette asked, "Have you ever seen such gowns. The dressmaker assured us that she will never make dresses such as these again."

"Not even for the Queen herself," Margaret added.

"Not if she wants to stay in business and out of the dungeon," Ella muttered. Tuning out the inane chatter between her stepmother and stepsisters, Ella returned to her chore, wishing she had the nerve to voice her innermost thoughts or at the very least stand up for herself. Daydreaming as she went about her sweeping, Ella scarcely heard the knock on the cottage

door. Turning, she saw a royal messenger bowing to her stepmother.

"Good Morrow madam. I am charged by royal decree to search the kingdom and invite all ladies of marrying age, to attend a ball for his Royal Highness Prince Duncan, at which time his royal highness the prince will select one woman to be his betrothed."

Claudette and Margaret squealed in delight, while their mother clasped a hand to her expansive bosom, praising the royal family. Meanwhile, Ella could only shake her head at the notion of grown women willing to display themselves like some prize-winning ewe at market.

The messenger asked, "May I inform the royal family that you and your three daughters will be in attendance?"

"Three?" the stepmother asked.

As one Claudette, Margaret, and the stepmother turned to regard Ella. All eyes upon her, Ella felt the flush rise up her neck, turning her alabaster skin a warm pink. Standing, Ella became self-conscious of her appearance, adding to her already tremendous embarrassment. Hiding her soot-stained hands behind her back, Ella bowed her head, willing the flush to dissipate. The wisps of smoke grew thicker, while an ember flickered anew.

"Can you imagine, Ella in a ball gown?" Claudette asked.

"Can you imagine, Ella dancing with the prince?" Margaret returned. The sisters laughed uproariously.

The stepmother said, "She is only my stepdaughter and still a child at that." Claudette and Margaret continued their laughter.

Fuming at the child comment and the laughing sisters, Ella blurted, "I shall be twenty-one in two days time."

The fireplace roared into life, the bright orange flames heating the air uncomfortably. Surprised by the conflagration, Ella stepped back quickly, looking between the fire and her stepfamily. Realizing all eyes gazed upon her Ella flushed anew.

Stunned, Claudette and Margaret gaped at their normally docile stepsister, while the stepmother stared icicles at Ella.

Bowing her head, eyes glued to the floor, Ella tried to keep an image of the blazing hearth and stumbling family members out of her head, although seeing those horrid dresses ablaze would definitely be worthy of a smile. Before her stepmother could reprimand her, the messenger spoke.

"Excellent. The ball will not be held for two more days."

"But-"

"Madam, the royal family request that all eligible ladies attend."

"But surely they do not mean-"

"All eligible ladies," the messenger said, his tone carrying a note of finality. With this last statement, the messenger bowed once again, sparing a sympathetic glance for Ella, spun on his heels and departed.

Claudette and Margaret began to babble excitedly, but their mother held up a hand, silencing them without saying a word. Assuring herself that the messenger had departed, the stepmother closed the door and whirling about, began verbally assaulting her stepdaughter.

"How dare you embarrass me you ungrateful brat and in front of a royal messenger at that. After all, I have done for you. I never did like you. I should have packed you off to the orphanage years ago. You have been nothing but a burden I have had to bear for years. Well all that is about to change. Once the prince chooses one of my daughters for his betrothed, we shall live in the palace and you can stay here in this horrible little cottage."

Ella continued to stare at her feet, not daring to meet her stepmother's gaze. If only I kept my mouth closed, Ella thought. She could hear her stepsisters tittering in the corner, further adding to her embarrassment. Ella stood silent, awaiting her stepmother's dismissal.

"If you think that little outburst will get you into the ball, you are sadly mistaken. You will not attend the gathering. You will remain here."

Claudette said, "But mother, the messenger specifically stated -"

"I do not care what some lowly servant claims," the stepmother hissed. A malicious grin spread across her face as she regarded Ella. Pacing around her stepdaughter, she said, "I doubt that lowly messenger will even remember an even lowlier peasant such as you. And should he by chance inquire of your whereabouts, I shall simply inform him of your sudden illness."

"Come along my daughters. We have many preparations to make before the big day. As for you, you ignorant pest, take those ashes to the ink maker, my beautiful daughters will require new gowns. And put out that fire. Really, only a complete idiot would attempt to clean an active fireplace." With that said, stepmother and stepsisters left a hurt Ella alone and miserable.

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The night of the ball arrived, with Ella watching from the window as her gaudily dressed stepsisters and equally garish stepmother mount a hired carriage. Ella had no desire to be put on display like a prized horse, but she would have loved to attend a party with so many others from the village.



After they drove off into the night, Ella returned to her spot in front of the hearth, staring into the flames. Fire has such power and beauty Ella thought. For a moment, Ella imagined that she could see dancing figures in the undulating flames. She pictured herself dancing among the fire. If only I had a proper dress, I would go to the ball just to irritate that vile woman. A knock at the cottage door drew Ella from her musings.

Before Ella could rise to open the door, a stranger entered. At first, she thought the royal messenger had returned, until the stranger stepped into the firelight. Ella knew everyone in the village, and this woman definitely did not live in town. Firstly, as far as Ella knew, a woman did not enter into a home uninvited, secondly, a woman definitely did not wear men's attire (even if it was peach-colored), and thirdly, a woman in Ella's experience did not smoke. Rising to her feet, she stood silent as the strange woman eyed her critically.

Removing the tobacco stick and exhaling a blue-tinted cloud of smoke, the woman asked, "You Ella?"

Nodding mutely, Ella stood transfixed by the odd woman, whose raspy voice somewhat unnerved her. The stranger drew in another lung-full of smoke, exhaling it in smoke rings. Ella's fascination with the woman grew as the smoke rings linked to form a chain. After another minute of silence, the woman asked,

"Do your vocal chords work or am I going to ask questions that require only some head shaking?"

"They work."

"Good. Now let's get down to business, I have a lot of work to do tonight."

"Who are you?"

The strange woman dropped her tobacco stick, inspiring awe in Ella as it vanished before it hit the floor. Sighing, the woman replied, "You can call me Leona. I am your fairy godmother, so to speak."

Ella perked up. "Fairy godmother? You are not quite what I imagined."

"Well, I am not exactly your fairy godmother; I am sort of a fill in."

"Fill in?"

Reaching into her jacket, Leona removed another tobacco stick, tapping the end on her wrist. Placing it into her mouth, Leona snapped her fingers and the tobacco stick end began glowing. Drawing a breath, Leona exhaled the blue-tinted smoke, this time in the shape of a bat, which circled Ella twice before flying out the window.

Flicking ashes that also never hit the floor, Leona said, "I am here by court order. I have to do 100 hours of community

service. Now, how about you let me do my job so I can get the hell out of here?"

"Why would the king sentence you to provide service to the community?"

"He didn't, a judge in my land sentenced me and since the illegal immigrants working for me came from this land, he thought it appropriate that I work here."

"Why do you wear men's clothing?"

Grasping the lapel of her jacket, Leona said, "This is a Versace. Besides, the pants help hide the box."

"Box?"

Leona lifted the hem of a pant leg displaying a strange black box with a blinking red light strapped to her ankle. "GPS monitoring, also court ordered."

"GPS?"

"Never mind. Now can we get started?"

"Well, if you are not my fairy godmother, where is she?"

"She went to a Gamers Convention. Now if you don't mind-"

Ella stared, a look of utter confusion clearly stamped on her face.

Sighing, Leona said, "Gaming conventions, you know Magic the Gathering, Dungeons and Dragon's, etc. It's the largest gathering of virgins anywhere. Now enough with the questions. If you are going to make it to the ball we have got to get moving."

"But I am not going to the ball I -"

"Listen, you are going to the ball, you are going to marry the prince and I am going to be done with this damn community service."

"But I do not -"

"Enough already!"

Removing a strange device from her jacket, Leona began touching its surface. Ella could hear Leona muttering under her breath, complaining about her dislike of blackberries and her desire to buy an apple. Ella preferred blueberries herself, but thought better of saying anything.

"Okay let's see. You'll need the gift and a prom dress."

"What is a prom?"

Leona banged the side of her device, muttering, "Damn, BlackBerry." After a moment she said, "Prom. Ball. Same difference. Okay, here we go." Leona pulled a long rod from her jacket. Pointing the wand at Ella, Leona began chanting. Before Ella could protest, a spark leaped from the wand tip and struck her in the forehead, engulfing Ella in a cocoon of sparkling azure. A warm tingling sensation spread throughout Ella, like heat from a blazing hearth. After several seconds, Leona withdrew the wand. The sudden cessation nearly dropped Ella to her knees.

"Okay, gift applied. Now for the dress. Let's see, I think something from the Chanel line would be appropriate." Flicking her wrist, a golden light spread from the wand, bathing Ella in its soft glow.

Staring in disbelief, Ella gasped at the white, strapless gown enveloping her body. The form-fitting, silk dress displayed more than it hid, causing a slight flush to creep up Ella's alabaster skin. The slit along the side caused Ella an abundant amount of discomfort. Raising the dress hem, Ella displayed her bare feet.

"Oops, can't forget shoes. Let's see, we need something special." Touching the screen of her device, clicking her tongue as she went Leona paused, saying, "Glass slippers? What are they nuts; you'll shred your feet. Ah, here we go a lovely pair of Gucci open-toed sling backs." Another wave of the wand and Ella found her feet crammed into a pair of impractical shoes.

Eyeing her work Leona declared it a success. "Off we go."

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Arriving at the palace steps, Ella glanced back once, contemplating the strange conveyance speeding away with a dragon's roar. She could not fathom a carriage that did not require horses to pull it and Leona's assurance that a Mustang, with a 351 Cleveland engine contained more than enough

horsepower, did little to clarify things. Steeling up her courage, Ella sashayed past the gaping guardsmen and into the palace.

A soft melody floated on the air, wending through the gathered people, intertwining with their conversations. An elderly man, bearing a brass-shod staff, entered the room, effectively silencing all who saw him. Three loud taps on the marble floor silenced the remaining guests.

In a surprisingly rich voice the chamberlain announced, "His Royal Highness Prince Duncan."

All heads turned to witness Prince Duncan's entrance. The prince strolled into the ballroom, bowing respectfully to his parents, before taking his place by the king's side. The chamberlain motioned the musicians to resume their playing and then he took his place beside the prince. Conversations began again but the musicians scarcely played five notes before stopping, the conversations soon followed.

The crowd took a collective breath, with awe stamped on every face, staring at Ella as she entered the ballroom. Nervously, Ella strolled to the center of the marble floor, her dress clinging with every movement. Stopping, Ella surveyed the room, (admiring the wall sconces, the dual 1000 candle chandeliers and a fireplace large enough to walk into), with her

attention finally resting on the prince. Smiling, Ella curtsied as best as the tight dress would allow.

The prince rose and went to Ella, extending a hand, which Ella took. Signaling to the musicians, the prince and Ella began to waltz about the floor. From an alcove, three sets of eyes burning with malice stared at the dancing couple.

"What is she doing here?" Claudette hissed.

"Where did she get that scandalous dress?" Margaret screeched.

"Quiet. You will not embarrass me," their mother said.

"It is not fair," Claudette complained.

"We are supposed to be dancing with the prince," Margaret cried.

"Enough. The two will cease dancing and when they do, I will drag the little trollop home and you two will entertain his royal highness," their mother said.

Ella and the prince whirled about the ballroom, lost in a world of their own making. Lords and Ladies gathered about, whispering excitedly amongst themselves. The king took the hand of his queen, smiling broadly and nodding his approval for all the court to see. As the music ended, the onlookers began applauding. The stepmother made to retrieve Ella, but found her path blocked by the chamberlain.

"May I be of assistance madam?"

"Thank you, no. I am retiring for the evening and wish my daughter to accompany me home."

"Ah, the young lady with our prince. She is your daughter?"

"Yes. Now if you will excuse me, I will-"

"I believe you refer to the young lady as your stepdaughter."

Surprised by the sudden appearance of the royal messenger the stepmother was at a loss for words. Adding to the stepmother's further discomfort was the fact that the messenger wore the tabard of the prince's personal guard. Seeing their mother thoroughly entrapped, Claudette and Margaret quietly slipped away.

Offering Ella his arm, the prince led her off the floor, amid the growing whispers. Ella's mind spun. The music, the dancing, the clothing, and of course the prince. It was a most magical event. Ella sighed to herself, thinking this to be the best night of her life.

A page interrupted the couple, informing the prince that his father the king wished to speak with him. Prince Duncan excused himself with a bow, declaring that he would return shortly. Ella promised to await his return. The prince had stolen her heart.

As Ella awaited her prince, a passing cupbearer carrying a platter laden with goblets of Elderberry Wine tripped over the



outstretched foot of Claudette. Ella stared in horror as the liquid splashed over her silk dress. A hush fell over the court, with Ella's silent scream etched upon her face.

A smirking Margaret said, "Let's see how the prince likes you in your normal attire."

"We never liked you either," Claudette said, laughing. Soon others followed.

With the mounting laughter ringing in her ears, something in Ella snapped. Fueled by hurt and humiliation, years of docile living washed away under the deluge of pent up rage rushing through Ella, culminating in a scream of pure fury.

A tremor ran through the castle, as large cracks appeared on the marble floor and walls. All laughter ceased, turning into wails of terror as several stained glassed windows imploded, showering the courtiers with colorful shards of glass. Marble columns shifted, the chandeliers swayed and Ella continued screaming.

All pretenses at decorum gone, terrified courtiers fled towards the exits, only to have the doors slam shut. Tremors continued to wrack the castle; cracks appeared on the ceiling, raining dust and debris on the frightened guest.

The king cried out, "Guards! Seize the witch!"

At the guards approach, Ella ceased her screaming. Gesturing to the oncoming guardsmen, Ella snarled, sending them

sprawling across the ruined floor as if struck by an invisible hand.

Her breathing coming in great gasps, her raven locks dancing as if possessing a life of its own, Ella turned her attention to her cowering stepsisters and stepmother.

"For years I have suffered at your hands. Let me show you the true meaning of misery."

Advancing on the hated trio, Ella halted as a drop of hot wax splashed her arm. She looked up in time to see a wrought iron chandelier dropping towards her. Inches above her head, the candle-laden chandelier came to a halt, hovering in the air without any visible means of support. Ella turned to regard the support rope, finding instead the prince with sword in hand. Her anger ebbed.

Saddened and hurt Ella asked, "Why?"

"You are a witch! You must be stopped!"

The mixed look of fear and loathing on his face renewed Ella's fury. A coldness sweeping through her, with a mere thought, Ella sent the chandelier spinning across the room, catching the bewildered prince head on.

The queen fainted at the sight of her mangled son. Ashen-faced, the king cried out, "Archers!"

On the balcony surrounding the ballroom, archers appeared, sighting their bows on Ella. Passing the great hearth, Ella

called forth serpentine gouts of flame that coiled about her lithe form, shielding her against the onslaught of arrows. With an unspoken command, Ella sent the snake-like flames spiraling upwards, setting alight banners and tapestries, before consuming the archers.

Screams of pain and terror rebounded off the castle walls, adding to the chaos. Once again, Ella marched towards her adoptive family. Standing before the cowering trio, her face an emotionless mask, Ella regarded her stepsisters and stepmother. The three women cringed before Ella, their faces pale with fear and shock.

"How do you like me now?"

"Ella please. We are your family. I am the only mother you have ever known."

"Tsk-tsk. As you so often remind me, you are my stepmother." A pause. "Or were."

A cruel smile dancing across her lips, Ella called to the flames once more.

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Ella sat upon the steps leading up to the throne, her dress a mockery of its former beauty. Sighing, she poured herself a cup of Elderberry wine. Savoring the unique bouquet, her eyes drifting over the wreckage, a shaft of sunlight coming through the shattered stained glass drew Ella's attention. Dust motes

swirled in the sunlight, spinning faster and faster forming twin orbs, one of burgundy, the other a kaleidoscope of colors. Captivated, Ella downed the rest of her drink and tossed aside the empty cup, as the orbs evolved into figures.

Although now dressed in a rich burgundy outfit, Ella recognized Leona. From the silvery hair, entwined with poesies, violets, daisies and babies breath, to a dress of riotous colors and bare feet, not to mention the iridescent wings protruding from her back, Ella guessed the second figure to be the absent fairy godmother.

"See. There she is, safe and sound," Leona said.

"Humph. She should be home awaiting her prince," replied the fairy godmother. To Ella she said, "Hello my dear. I am your

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"I know who you are," Ella interrupted. "So now that your little excursion is over, you thought you might pop in."

Her face turning red, the fairy godmother surveyed the fire-scorched walls, burned tapestries, and shattered windows. "Seems there was quite a ruckus last night." Drawing in a steadying breath, she asked, "Wh-Where is everyone?"

Stretching catlike, Ella stood and sauntered to a nearby pile of ash. Scooping up a handful, Ella allowed the ashes to sift between her soot stained fingers. "Allow me to introduce my stepmother."

Horrified, the fairy godmother said, "Oh you poor dear."  
Whirling back to Leona she said, "This is entirely your fault."

"My fault? If you were here instead of off trying to find out how many virgin nerds can dance on the head of a pin, none of this would have occurred."

"And if you did not use illegal immigrants to work your salt mines, you would not have to do community service."

"It is a diamond mine. Besides, I only hired seven of them and they were happy. Hell they even whistled while they worked. Imbecile."

"Who are you calling an imbecile you barren hag."

"New age hippie freak."

"Enough," Ella said.

Both women turned to regard Ella, painting false smiles on their lips. Leona spoke first, "Sorry about the mix up."

"Mix up?"

"Yes dear," the fairy godmother said, "You see, although you do possess an innate ability with the elements, the gift was not meant for you, but for a Carrie White." Then she muttered, "Hope Mr. King does not find out about this."

"What was that?"

"Nothing to worry yourself about, at least I can relieve you of this horrid burden."

"I think not," Ella replied.

"But my child, look about you. There is nothing left but cinders Ella."

A flush rising up her neck, Ella screeched, "I am not a child."

Taken aback, the fairy godmother reached for her wand, but never got a chance to use it as she was engulfed in a ball of flame, disappearing in a shower of gold and blue sparks. Ella returned to the throne steps and poured herself another cup of wine. Sipping the wine, Ella studied the shaken expression on Leona's face.

"Going somewhere?" Ella asked, stopping a slowly retreating Leona.

"Er, I uh- that is -

"Tell me. The seven workers. Are they about this tall," Ella said, holding her hand four feet above the floor.

"Um, yes, yes they are or were anyway."

"Were?"

"Mining accident, tunnel collapse." A bead of sweat blazed a trail through Leona's heavy makeup. Clearing her throat she asked, "W-Were they friends of yours?"

"Friends of my cousin, Snow White. She may be a sanctimonious bitch, but at least she is true family."

"Look I'm sor - A fireball cut off her apology."

Still sipping her wine, Ella mimicked the late fairy godmother, "There is nothing left but cinders Ella. Cinders-Ella. Cinderella. I like that."

End.