

HEART'S DESIRE

By Janni Lee Simner

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PERFUME SCENTED the air as my stepsisters left the house, trading names of princes they longed to dance with at the ball. My stepmother, Vivienne, crossed the room behind them, taking Papa's hand with a small, elegant smile. "There's still time, Cinderella," she told me. "We'll hold the coach while you dress."

I shook my head, and Vivienne frowned. I knew what she was thinking. Ungrateful child—after all I do for you. She often spoke such words aloud, when my father couldn't hear.

I frowned back while Papa glanced between us, looking trapped. But he said only, "Be good, Cinderella," before following my stepmother outside. Papa spoke little, so I sometimes wondered how he'd found enough words to ask for Vivienne's hand.

I closed the door behind them, listening as the carriage bells faded into the night.

Alone at last! I reached beneath the sofa, grabbing the book I'd hidden there, and settled down to read in one of my mother's patched old dresses. I thought of Charlotte and Jeannette, squeezing tighter and tighter into their bodices. What was the point of clothes if you couldn't do anything in them?

I sighed. Six hours until they returned, assuming they left the ball at midnight as planned — six hours during which Vivienne couldn't snatch the book away, hand me a mop or dust rag, and tell me to make myself useful. My stepmother never complained when Charlotte and Jeannette wasted time fussing with hair and clothes, but reading wasn't time well spent to her. And Papa didn't even try to change her mind, though he used to read with Mama and me through the long winter nights. He talked more then, talked and laughed as we all took turns reading out loud. Now Papa only read his business ledgers, and that he did in silence.

So I read alone, while in the distance the castle clock struck seven, then eight. I read one of Mama's old books about a girl who ran away to live among the wolves. I could almost smell the forest around her, could almost feel the soft dirt beneath her

feet as she ran with the pack. I sighed again, knowing I could never explain to my stepfamily how a story could be worth more than a dance with a prince.

Someone knocked at the door. I ignored the sound. It grew louder. Irritated, I shoved the book under the sofa and stood. “Who is it?” I called.

“Cinderella?” The door opened and a woman in tailored silk stepped inside. Her shoes and gloves matched her dress, and her hair was twisted into a silver bun on top of her head. She looked me over, from my limp brown hair to my plain linen dress and bare feet, then shook her head.

“May I help you?” I asked, though I wanted to get back to my story.

“It’s been so long,” the woman said. “I almost didn’t recognize you.” She forced a smile. Her skin was stretched too tightly over her face, as if someone had ironed out the wrinkles. “I’m your fairy godmother. I was at your christening, but you’ve no doubt forgotten.” She shrugged, a graceful gesture. “I’ve come to grant your heart’s desire. Three wishes ought to do the trick.”

Sure they would. I’d made hundreds of wishes in the dark, where no one could hear them, and nothing had ever changed. I wasn’t about to share my wishes with this stranger, though. I didn’t like the way she kept staring and shaking her head, as if she felt sorry for me.

She pulled a wand from the empty air. I blinked at that; I’d read about magic, but I’d never seen any outside of books.

“I’ve come to grant your heart’s desire,” she repeated. I began to hope—but then she said, “I’ve come to help you get to the ball.”

I should have known better than to expect anyone to know what I really wanted. My fairy godmother waited, but I said nothing. She shrugged again and waved her wand. “We’ll start with proper clothes.”

There was a puff of smoke, a smell like burning leaves. I pitched abruptly forward. Swinging my arms for balance, I looked down.

My mother’s dress was gone, replaced by a shimmering silver gown laced tightly about the bodice. The gown flared out from the hips, ending just above a pair of hard, clear, high-heeled shoes. I took one teetering step, then another. The shoes pinched my toes.

“Careful,” my fairy godmother warned. “They’re glass.”

I looked up, startled by her magic, but angry, too. Even Vivienne knew better than to tell me how to dress. I tugged at the bodice. I could hardly breathe.

“Hair and face next.” Another wave of the wand, another puff of smoke. My fairy godmother pulled out a mirror. “Look!”

Stiff curls framed my face, pale blond as only dye could make them. The rest of my hair was piled on top of my head, twisted into a bun so tightly that my scalp hurt. Diamonds dangled from my ears, and powder highlighted eyes that had changed from brown to sparkling blue. I looked just like Charlotte, Jeannette, or a hundred other court ladies.

“Lovely,” my fairy godmother declared.

“No.” My voice was low and fierce. I rubbed at my face. The powder didn’t even smudge. “Change me back.”

“You’re beautiful,” she said. “Fit for a prince.”

I shoved the mirror away. “I was beautiful before.” Mama had always said so, every day as we worked together in the garden, ignoring the dirt that stained our skirts and faces, and every night as we read with Papa beneath thick quilts. Mama had said so, and I believed her, even now.

“Wait until you see the coach,” my fairy godmother said, but she sounded suddenly uncertain. A third time she waved her wand. Outside, carriage bells rang. Farther away, the castle clock struck nine.

Three hours. Only three hours until my stepmother returned, leaving me alone in a house full of strangers once more.

I pulled at the bodice straps, untying knots, ignoring the way the straps bit into my fingers. My fairy godmother could change my eyes and my clothes and my hair, but she could *not* change me. I kicked off the glass slippers, and they shattered against the floor.

Reaching for my book once more, I curled up on the sofa, ignoring the way my fairy godmother stared. I leafed through the pages, thinking about how the girl and her wolf pack survived the long winter, how her family found her at last, how the problems that made her run off were swept away like magic. Tears stung my eyes, blurring the words. A story, I thought. Just like getting your heart’s desire is a story.

My fairy godmother cleared her throat. “Your wishes have been granted,” she said.

I didn't look up. "Those weren't my wishes. They were yours."

Silence. Then, "That's true. I just assumed—given the situation—" The woman sighed. "Very well. What do you wish for, then?"

Books, I thought, setting my own book down carefully, but I know that wasn't it. People to read with. A place to read in. A life in which both my books and I once again belonged. "I want—," I began. My throat tightened. "I want my mother back." I looked up, daring this woman, this stranger, to grant my heart's desire.

She seemed uncomfortable. "I can't bring back the dead."

I kept my eyes fixed on her. "Then take my stepsisters and stepmother away instead."

"I can't kill the living, either."

That wasn't what I'd wished for, but it didn't matter. I knew she wouldn't give me anything I truly wanted. I asked anyway. "Change my father back to the way he was, before Mama died."

My fairy godmother glanced at the shattered shoes, hundreds of tiny glass shards. "I can't make anyone do anything against their will."

"Then what good are you?"

Silence, longer this time. At last my fairy godmother waved her wand. The broken glass disappeared; my clothes and hair returned to what they'd been. I brushed dark strands from my face and looked at her, waiting, hoping, knowing better than to hope.

"Three things for you," my fairy godmother said, "none of them wishes. First, a gift." She waved her wand once more, pulling a book from the air. "The sequel to the one you're reading. Not even published yet."

She was right—that wasn't one of my wishes, but still I smiled a little. I took the book and started flipping through the pages. My fairy godmother cleared her throat. I glanced up again.

"Second, some advice." She tossed her wand into the air, and it was gone. "If you have problems with your family, talk to them about it, not me."

Would my father listen? Would Vivienne? I brushed my hand across my face but said nothing.

"Third, a promise." My fairy godmother started for the door. "I will not knock at your house again. I leave you to handle your own troubles in your own way."

My fairy godmother nodded, as if she'd figured something out. She leaned forward to hug me, then drew back as though she'd thought better of it. She smiled instead and stepped out into the night. I followed, but she was gone.

"Thank you," I called, not sure whether I meant it or not.

I stood outside for a long time, thinking as I stared into the dark.

That night the king's oldest son asked for Charlotte's hand in marriage. Vivienne was so busy planning the wedding that she hardly noticed me at all, for a time.

Several months later Charlotte was married. After the ceremony, she danced with her prince, Jeannette flirted with his cousins, and my stepmother gossiped with the court ladies. No one noticed Papa and me talking as dancing went on around us. Papa spoke softly, in spite of the loud music, as if not quite used to using words again.

"You're so like your mother," he said to me.

And later, "I loved her, you know. I love you. And I love your stepmother, too."

Since the wedding—I want to say everything has changed, but not everything has. Vivienne still complains about my forgotten chores; there are more of them now that Charlotte is gone. I tried to explain about reading, about chores, about lots of things. Vivienne and I talked, too. I don't know whether it helped or not. We are so very different, my stepmother and me. It is a strange thing that Papa can love us both.

But he does. And in the long evenings, when I curl up with my books, sometimes now he settles beside me with a book of his own, or else we read to each other once more. At times Vivienne joins us, for she loves Papa as well, and sometimes she just silently turns to her own work.

Charlotte is very happy with her prince, and Jeannette has grown fond of his younger brother. In the book my fairy godmother left me, the wolf girl finds a wolf boy, and they run through the forest together. Sometimes, when I'm not reading or doing chores, I wonder if there's a quiet, book-loving prince waiting somewhere for me. I suspect not even my fairy godmother knows. All I do know is this: wishes or no wishes, prince or no prince, I'll find a way to live happily ever after.

Just as the books all say.