Of Embers and Glass: A Cinderella Retelling

People are often familiar with the Cinderella tales and retellings of a nearly-perfect, beautiful young woman, and yet think little of the fact that she subjected herself to being a servant for her family. For my master’s thesis, I wrote a Cinderella retelling featuring, Amelia, who is emotionally abused by her family, providing an explanation for her servitude with her low self-esteem. Cinderella is an ideal tale to retell in relation to finding one’s self-worth because of its rags-to-riches theme. While Amelia has a rags-to-riches tale of her own, the real wealth she acquires in the novel is realizing her worth and finding her confidence. Amelia builds her strength by moving from toxic relationships to healthy ones. In this way, the novel may encourage readers to move away from unhealthy relationships and find ones where love, acceptance, and help exist.

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Chapter One

Out in the lawn covered with snow, my father pressed his hunting gun to a poor man’s back. Or at least it appeared so from my view by the sitting room window.

At my gasp, my stepmother, Lady Fairbourne, asked, “What is it you’re so enthralled with, Amelia?”

“Lord Fairbourne has his gun to a man,” I said.

“What?” My stepmother had never moved with such quickness as she did dashing to the window. She pressed so close to the glass that her breath fogged our view of his lordship.

“Fairies’ picnic!”

As her ladyship rose from the window and scurried to the hall, so did my stepsister, Phoebe. Although I had not been instructed to come along, I followed them anyway, worried the situation would get out of hand. Lady Fairbourne and Phoebe had me put their fur-lined coats on them, while I grabbed my woolen one, still pulling my arms through as we departed outside onto the muddy-then-frozen-again path, toward the captor and prisoner.

When we stood parallel with the pair, the details began coming together. Lord Fairbourne’s brow pressed down, his jaw tight and finger ready on the trigger. The man in front of him had his hands on his head, a stream of blood descending from his nose and down his chin. His scuffed shoes had worn thin with holes, the same as his pants and coat.

Though this man must have done something wrong to incite such fury in Lord Fairbourne, I hoped my father would recoil his violence. Of course, I knew how his lordship would reply. *No wrong-doer can walk away free from what he did.*

“George! What is this about?” Lady Fairbourne clutched her handkerchief to her heart and leaned on Phoebe.
“This man is a poacher on my lands,” Lord Fairbourne said. “Martin is fetching the constable while I make sure this rogue does not escape.”

I examined the poor man beyond the grime and blood. He looked young, perhaps a decade older than my sixteen years. And skinny, as if a gust of wind could blow him over. My head must have been scrambled recently, because I couldn’t blame him entirely for his crime. Times had been hard for years, and the common people had even less means than we did. He probably had to poach, or die.

“I ain’t be taking nothing I don’t be needing,” the man said. “But I’m starving your lordship.”

“That is of no matter. I could have you hanged. I should have you hanged.” Lord Fairbourne drove the rifle closer to the poacher’s back. The man let out one sob, his head bent and grabbing onto his hair.

“Father, please.” I stepped forward past my stepmother and Phoebe, clasping my freezing hands together to my chest. “He’s scared and starving. Please, show mercy.”

Lord Fairbourne lifted his gaze from the man for the first time to glare at me. “Amelia, this is no place for you to interfere.”

I returned behind my stepmother, twisting my foot into the ground, the crystals on the thin ice breaking underneath.

“No,” my father muttered. “This man will be receiving no mercy from me.”

“Oh!” Lady Fairbourne staggered, while Phoebe kept her steady.

“Come on, Mama,” Phoebe said. “Let’s go back inside. This is the men’s business, not ours.”
My stepmother and sister began making their way back to Ratha Hall. I stayed by my father for a moment, hesitant, wondering if he might stay his hand with a woman present. But God had made Lord Fairbourne an earl for a reason, and so my father’s judgment over those he had been placed over would be correct. Nothing I did would change that, and yet…how could I leave him?

“Amelia,” my stepmother whined. “I need tea!”

And with that, her ladyship made my decision for me. I skipped two steps to catch up to the women, but stayed a step behind.

“Oh, I’m so exhausted,” Lady Fairbourne said. “I can hardly make it to the house.”

“It’s fine, Mama, we’re almost there,” Phoebe said as the two of them continued toward the back door, while I went through the servant’s entrance and into the kitchen.

In ten minutes I returned to the sitting room with the tea for my stepmother. Phoebe arranged a ribbon onto her bonnet near the fire, head bent away so all I saw was her midnight black hair. Although only a year older than me, she had the body of a fully-grown woman, the high-waisted silhouette of her dress emphasizing this. Lady Fairbourne lounged on the couch, a hand to her forehead and feet dangling off the side, the gold in her curls catching the afternoon light.

I served the tea, two sugars in my stepmother’s, three in Phoebe’s, and none in mine. When I was a child, my nurse always denied me sugar, even in tea, since wicked children do not deserve sweets. My father continued to hold that attitude. Besides, we couldn’t afford to waste anything.

“Where do you suppose Judith is?” my stepmother sat up so that I could hand her the tea. Judith, my second stepsister, never did anything properly. She departed the house just after dawn
and never returned until dark, her petticoats and skirts coated in dirt, her hair loose and more fit to be a bird’s nest than anything.

“Wherever it is that she goes every day,” Phoebe said.

“Well that answer is of no use!” My stepmother’s hands shook, cup and saucer rattling. “It can’t be safe for her, wherever she goes, not with poachers wandering the woods, shooting at anything that moves.” Her voice wobbled. “What if she were hurt? Or killed? Oh, this must stop. I shall have to speak to her and make her stay with us.”

“Judith’s always been wild. I doubt you’ll be able to control her,” Phoebe said, tugging her thread through the ribbon. “Just let her be, if she’s foolish enough to put her life in danger, then let her.”

“Oh!”

I sipped my tea, silent on the subject. I was here to act as her ladies maid, not as another daughter.

Before I had time to clean up our drinks, my father came into the room. Lord Fairbourne had incredible stature to him, with shoulders as wide as a carriage door, as trim and fit as when I was a child. His dark hair had begun to gray around his ears, though that seemed the only thing to age him.

“Well, husband? What’s to become of the poacher?”

My father held onto the back of a chair. “The constable is a weak man. He didn’t want to pursue a hanging, and merely wanted the criminal to go to jail.”

“But you would not allow it?” Phoebe asked.

“No. He has to pay retribution for what he took from me, what he may have been taking for several weeks, though he denies ever doing this before. The constable and I came to an
arrangement. The man will work for us, with no pay, for a year. It’s not death, but at least he will stop living. And perhaps I could convince the constable to extend his sentence.”

“How fortunate, though, for now we have another hand,” her ladyship said. There was so much under her words. It was how fortunate we have five servants now, perhaps we will look better to our company than when we only had four.

For the past six years, our staff and way of living has slowly whittled down along with everyone else’s in the country. When King Richard refused to acknowledge Queen Margaret as the legal ruler of Nevicata, she put an embargo on all of the goods shipped from Camien. And over the years, as she’s conquered several smaller countries surrounding her, they, too, can no longer exchange with us.

“Not as satisfactory as a hanging, but quite convenient to have someone dedicated to the stables rather than splitting his time with the horses and the grounds,” Lord Fairbourne said. He pulled out his pocketwatch, looked at the time, and then at me. “Are you forgetting something?”

I had already straightened up the bedrooms, mended my stepmother’s petticoat, and sewn the button back on Phoebe’s coat, and no one would change their dress for another hour, at least, when Mrs. Duckworth or Miss Brooks might call.

“I…don’t believe so, my lord,” I said, though from his upturned nose I was sure I had forgotten.

“What is the time?”

The clock on the mantle read one thirty.

“Oh!” I gasped. “Nuncheon!”

“Yes, nuncheon.”

“I apologize, my lord. I’ve been very busy this morning with—”
“Yes, yes, you always apologize, always claim you are busy with something. But how are you to ever become good if you do not perform your duties on time? Apologies only mean that you are failing.”

I bowed my head. “I’m sorry for my weaknesses, sir. I shall try to improve myself.”

“Yes, yes, just go on now.”

I stood and made my way down to the kitchen, where our cook Martha was pulling a fresh loaf out of the oven.

“It’ll be a few minutes still, m’lady,” Martha said. “Today’s been quite a tizzy, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll take it up whenever you’re ready.”

That’s when I noticed the poacher, huddled in a corner with a bucket of water scrubbing his hands, blood now smeared all around his face. I think my father must have hurt him more as soon as Lady Fairbourne left, because there hadn’t been that much before. I approached him cautiously, not wanting to startle him.

“Hello,” I said, standing a few feet from the man.

He jumped and curled away, head down. While my father had the strength to give the punishment necessary, I was not. Though this man was a poacher and deserved his sentence, and according to my father even more, he seemed so pitiful sitting there, bloodied and beaten.

“We have some ointment for cuts,” I said. “It stings, but it helps it heal quicker. Would you like some?”

He hesitated. “It’s not from a witch, is it?”

I shook my head.

“I don’t trust ‘em. But even honest folk will use their stuff when it comes to sickness.”

“I assure you, it is not a magical remedy.”
He nodded, and I dashed to retrieve the ointment so he would have time to apply it before getting called to work.

“Thank ‘ee,” he said, taking the bottle from me. He took his rag and dabbed some ointment on it.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Thomas. Go by Tom.”

“I’m Lady Amelia.”

At my name, his eyes flicked up and down my figure. “You’re his lordship’s daughter?”

“Yes.” Though I think he’d prefer it if I weren’t.

“Then why’re you getting him his nuncheon?”

“We’re short of staff.”

Tom put the ointment to a cut on his cheek, then drew in a sharp breath. “But don’t he have other girls? Stepdaughters, I mean?”

“Two. Miss Baxter and Miss Judith.”

“Why don’t they do it then, if they ain’t ladies like you?”

Because I was sinful, a killer. I had been born early and in a blizzard. The fairy who would have been able to stop all of the blood pouring out from my mother wasn’t even able to get word of the delivery before I came. With the assistance of fairies in human births, very few women died in labor. My malicious entrance that killed my mother made me a murderer, morally less than any in my father’s house. It was part of my penance, being the one of the family to lower myself in station.

I didn’t feel like telling Tom this.
“’S fine, my da don’t like me neither,” Tom said. “Kicked me out ’fore I was much of a man. Queen Margaret’s embargo hit my family hard right away.”

“What did you do?”

Tom shrugged. “Worked for a tanner. Don’t much people want to put up with the stink. But then the tanner’s nephew be needing an apprenticeship, and I got the boot.”

Tom put the cloth back in the bucket and stood. I examined his improved cleanliness. He’d need a full bath before being in the same room with Lady Fairbourne or Phoebe, though I doubted Judith would mind, if she ever met him.

“I need to get Lord Fairbourne his nuncheon,” I said. “Good to meet you, Tom.”

When I returned to the sitting room, my father was no longer there. There was only one other place he’d probably be: his study.

To get to my father’s study meant walking down the hall of lords and ladies. Here my forefathers and foremothers kept continual watch over Ratha Hall through their portraits. Each earl and countess of Fairbourne were numbered, including my father and stepmother. And, right beside the door to the study, hung my mother’s painting.

Before knocking, I stopped to look at her, as I did whenever I had reason to come to this part of the house. My mother had a gentler look than I did, with pale skin and a full figure and a heart-shaped face, while my skin is browned, my limbs sticks, and my jaw square and mannish. We were so dissimilar, I would often wonder how I came from her, until I took in the soft black hair and moss-colored eyes she had given me. Had I gotten anything else from her, something one couldn’t find in a portrait?

The door to the study whisked open, and I flinched back.
“There you are,” Lord Fairbourne said. “It is a quarter after two! What has been delaying you so much?”

“Martha was still preparing the food, and then you had left the sitting room, and—” I stopped myself before going any further.

But my father had caught it anyway. “And what?”

“And I was looking at the portraits, my lord.”

“At your mother?”

The jelly quivered on the tray, and I wondered if I looked anything like it to my father.

“She was a beautiful woman.” My father said. “Prettier than your stepmother, though I’d never admit to it to anyone else, since no one would believe you if you claimed I said it. I imagine she must be even lovelier surrounded in the divine light of heaven.”

I wished he would take the tray, or else tell me where I may put it down. Hearing him talk of my mother and her beauty always made me feel ill, and I wouldn’t have time to steady myself before needing to whisk off somewhere else.

“I suppose you wish that you might have known her.”

I nodded, and my father dipped a finger in the jelly so that his fingertip dripped in the red stuff. He put it in his mouth and sucked his finger clean.

“If you have any hopes of meeting her in heaven, then, you must do what I and your stepmother say, and *bring my nuncheon on time.*”