

After the Ball



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CHAPTER ONE



12:01 a.m.
(Once Upon a Time)

“Well, that’s that,” Ella sighed, looking up the road at the hilltop castle, still lit up like New Year’s Eve for the king’s ball. She rested her chin in the heel of her hand, her elbow on her knee. “It was beautiful though, wasn’t

it, Henry?” Ella cast a sideways look at the muddled goose flapping its wings along the edge of the road.

“Honk,” Henry replied.

“You’re right,” Ella answered in a hushed tone, “I could never have imagined it.” She glanced at the small party snuggled by her bare feet in the roadside dirt—some field mice and one sturdy, round pumpkin—and sighed again.

“We knew it couldn’t last, eh, friends?” she chuckled. “I suppose we’d better start walking! I’ll carry you in my pocket, little ones,” she offered the small, brown mice, stooping to pick them up. She stopped short though, when a glimmer in the moonlight caught her eye.

“What’s this?” Ella asked Henry, reaching for the shimmering object in the dirt. “My shoe!” she cried, delighted. “That’s impossible! I mean, slippers made of glass are impossible enough, but how in the world did

this slipper last when everything else disappeared at the stroke of midnight? It's wonderful, don't you think, Henry?"

Ella shook her head in disbelief, putting the shoe in her left pocket and the field mice in her right. She was immediately grateful she'd added such roomy pockets when she'd made her skirt.

"Clever girl," Ella said, giving herself a well-earned pat on the back. "Oh, what a night!" she squealed. "Field mice, a goose, a pumpkin, a ball, and a fairy godmother. I'd pinch myself awake, but this slipper seems to prove I'm not dreaming."

Ella spun once and clapped her hands. "Truly, never could I have imagined anything like this! And who would believe me? I can hardly believe myself." With that, she straightened her skirt, picked up the hefty pumpkin with a grunt, and stepped onto the moonlit road to begin her long walk home, Henry strutting by her side.



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