



**ONCE UPON A MIDNIGHT CLEAR by Michelle Miles**  
**Book 1, Enchanted Realms**

**BLURB:**

**A Christmas Cinderella Retelling**

**Once Upon a Time... in the holiday land of Rovenheim**

*A pair of enchanted glass slippers. A dark and dangerous queen. And the fate of a kingdom hangs in the balance.*

Ella Rose Tremaine lives a life of drudgery as a servant in her own home, catering to the whims of her stepmother and stepsisters. All she wants is a life to call her own, but with no way out, she's trapped. Even when the royal ball is announced, she is forbidden to attend.

Left alone on the night of the ball, a mysterious package arrives addressed to her. Inside, a pair of beautiful glass slippers. When she puts them on, she's transformed and whisked off to the ball by none other than her fairy godmother—but with a warning. Remove the slippers before the last stroke of midnight to break the spell and all will be as it was before.

Lost in the magic of the evening while dancing with a handsome stranger, she is heedless of her fairy godmother's warning. With the last strike of midnight, she is transported to the Christmas realm of Rovenheim.

Her arrival garners the attention of a dangerous queen determined to have the slippers for herself. She'll stop at nothing to get them by issuing an ultimatum—bring her the slippers or she'll destroy the enchanted realm and the Spirit of Christmas itself.

With time running out, Ella embarks on a perilous journey through the mystical realm on a quest to save it. She must embrace her destiny and discover the power of love and magic. But will it be enough to overcome the darkness that threatens to consume them all?

**EXCERPT:**

The chiming of the clock tower in Whitebridge clanged the early morning hour. It was a faint bong, bong, bong that Ella counted as she laid awake in her narrow, lumpy bed under the thin blanket dreading the coming day. Dread was part of her morning routine now.

Sunlight peeked through the shabby draperies at her window as dawn arrived. Even as another day of labor loomed, nothing killed the spirit of the season inside her. Not even her stepmother and stepsisters. Not even their nasty dispositions or the fact that her stepmother, Lillian, refused to decorate for Christmas.

Except for a sad looking tree in the foyer with a few decorations.

But Ella was not to be dissuaded. She dragged out all her mother's favorite decorations and placed them around her shabby third-floor bedroom, trying to make the drab appearance a bit more cheerful. She placed her favorite decoration on the top of the tree—a beautiful gold star.

She loved Christmas.

She shoved the blanket aside and walked to the window, pushing open the curtain to peer down at the estate that had fallen into disrepair. Since her father's disappearance on a merchant trip several years ago, Lillian squandered what was left of the estate's money on satin and lace, shoes and parasols for her two spoiled daughters. Meanwhile, the small manor they lived in needed many repairs.

In the distance, the offending clock tower stood tall and proud and ruled her day. From her window, the peak of it was clear as well as the high turrets and heraldry of Whitebridge Palace. What was it like living in a castle? Would she be a maid as she was here? Or would she find herself as one of the noble ladies wearing beautiful gowns and having her every whim attended?

She sighed when the rooster crowed. It was time to start the day. She looked out as the sun peeked over the horizon, illuminating the outline of the castle beyond and the dusting of snow on the cold ground.

“One day, Papa,” she whispered, “I will find my way out of here.”

She often spoke to her father, even though he'd been gone all these long years.

She dressed, tied her long dark hair back with a blue ribbon, and headed down to the kitchen for the day. She put a tea kettle on to boil. Outside, she fed the chickens and gathered eggs, petted the dog, and gave the cat his breakfast. In the distance, at the pond, geese honked their arrival. She smiled. Later she would walk out to the edge of the pond and feed them, too.

The servant's bell rang. Her stepmother. She poured hot water into the tea kettle, made a breakfast of porridge, eggs, and toast, and then carried it up to the woman's room. At the top of the stairs, she turned right and headed down the hall to the largest bedroom. She rapped twice and waited.

“Enter,” came the abrupt, muffled response.

Ella pushed open the door. Just as she did, the cat sprinted past her and hopped onto the oversized bed where her stepmother sat waiting for her breakfast. The woman's salt-and-pepper hair was tucked under her nightcap. Crinkles were at the corners of each eye and her mouth was drawn down into a permanent grimace. No doubt due to being unhappy for so many years. Her thin lips were a deep red, high severe cheekbones and a chin that ended in a point. She petted the cat, her long slender fingers ruffling the fur between his shoulders. Loud purrs emanated from the small feline.

“Good morning, Stepmother,” she greeted in her best pleasant voice.

“Where is my newspaper?” her stepmother asked.

“I’ll fetch it for you.” Ella placed the tray with the breakfast on the woman’s lap. She did a quick curtsy then dashed from the room.

She hurried down the stairs to the front door and pulled it open. The rolled-up paper was on the doorstep as usual. But even so, Ella saw the hint of the headline. Something about a royal decree. As she snatched it off the stoop, she heard Lucinda shouting her name.

“Ella! Where is my breakfast?”

Ella hurried back up the stairs to her stepmother’s room, her chest heaving a bit and her legs burning from her brief sprint. Jet had curled up next to her in the bed, eyeing the breakfast tray.

“Your newspaper, stepmother.”

She scowled as she snatched it from Ella’s hands, then opened it with a snap. She glowered at her over the edge of the paper.

“What are you gawking at, girl? Don’t you have chores?”

Another quick curtsy. “Yes, Stepmother.”

“ELLA!” Lucinda shouted again.

Ella hurried back down the stairs to the kitchen. As she arrived, the other two bells were ringing. One for Lucinda and one for Daniella. She quickly made their breakfast trays. It was a balancing act, but she managed to carry both at the same time back up the stairs. By the time she arrived at the landing, her legs were burning and her arms ached. She used her elbow to push open the door to Lucinda’s room.