

DISNEY

*What if Belle's mother  
cursed the Beast?*



# As Old as Time

*A TWISTED TALE*

LIZ BRASWELL



AS OLD  
AS TIME  
A TWISTED TALE

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*For my husband, Scott. Without your support, love, and presence  
these books—and certain days ending in y—would be a whole  
lot harder.*

*And a gigantic, fluffy THANK YOU to my editor, Brittany, whose  
sense of fun and brilliant ideas made over a thousand pages  
seem to just fly by*

*—L.B.*

## MIRROR

*I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.*

*Whatever I see I swallow immediately,  
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.*

*I am not cruel, only truthful,*

*The eye of a little god, four-cornered.*

*Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.*

*It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long*

*I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.*

*Faces and darkness separate us over and over.*

*Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,*

*Searching my reaches for what she really is.*

*Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.*

*I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.*

*She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.*

*I am important to her. She comes and goes.*

*Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.*

*In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman*

*Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.*

—Sylvia Plath

# Part I



# Once Upon a Time

Once upon a time in a faraway land, a young prince lived in a shining castle. Although he had everything his heart desired, the Prince was spoiled, selfish, and unkind.

But then, one winter's night, an old beggar woman came to the castle and offered him a single blood-red rose in return for shelter from the bitter cold. Repulsed by her haggard appearance, the Prince sneered at the gift and turned the old woman away—although she warned him not to be deceived by appearances, for true beauty is found within. And when he dismissed her again, the old woman's ugliness melted away to reveal a beautiful enchantress.

The Prince tried to apologize but it was too late, for she had seen that there was no love in his heart. As punishment she transformed him into a hideous beast and placed a powerful spell on the castle and all who lived there.

“You have until the eve of your twenty-first birthday to become as beautiful on the *inside* as you were on the outside. If you do not learn to love another—and be loved in return—by the time the last petal of this rose falls, you, your castle, and all within, will be cursed and forgotten *forever*.”

Ashamed of his monstrous form, the Beast concealed himself inside his castle, with a magic mirror as his only window to the outside world.

As the years passed, he fell into despair and lost all hope—for who could ever learn to love a beast?

It was a very good story.

It often entertained the woman who lay in her black hole of a room, manacled to a hard, cold bed.

She had enjoyed its repetition in her mind for years. Sometimes she remembered bits differently: sometimes the rose was as pink as a sunrise by

the sea. But that never resonated as well as *red as blood*.

And the part at the *very* end, where the Enchantress is waylaid upon exiting the castle, thrown into a black carriage, and spirited into the night—well, it didn't sound as epic and grand. She never included it.

Almost anyone else would have run out of thoughts by this point. Almost anyone else would have given in to the finality of the oubliette until she forgot herself entirely.

A few of her thoughts *were* crazy, spinning around and around the dried teakettle that was now the inside of her head. If she wasn't careful, they would become too speedy, break free, and seek escape through the cracks of her mind. But that way lay madness, and she wasn't quite there yet.

Ten years and she had *almost* forgotten herself. But not quite.

Footsteps down the hall.

She shut her eyes as tight as possible against the madness from without that tried to intrude upon her black personal madness.

Chattering voices. Another set of footsteps. The swish swish of a rank mop against the endlessly slimy floors. The clink of keys.

“No need to do that one. It's empty.”

“But it's locked. Why would it be locked if it's empty?”

She had to scream, she had to shake, she had to explode—*anything* rather than let the dialogue repeat itself yet again as it had for the last four thousand days, in only slightly different iterations:

“Ooh, *this one's* locked. But do you hear something inside?”

“*This door's* closed. You think it's locked?”

“*The one down here is* locked—but I don't remember anyone being put down here.”

It was as if God were trying out all the different possible lines in the mummer's farce that was her life and still hadn't gotten it quite right.

The next two minutes were as predictable as the words from a parent to a child who knows she has misbehaved and chafes under the inevitability of the sentences hurled at her.

Turn of the key in the lock.

Door creaking open.

A hideous face, hideous only in its familiarity, the same look of surprise as always and every day since forever began. The face's owner carried a tray with her in the hand that didn't have the keys. Behind her, in the hall, stood the woman with the mop. And behind *her* stood a large and silent man who

was ready to subdue any of the prisoners not tied down.

The prisoner found herself opening her eyes, curiosity getting the better of her survival instinct. Today's tray had *four* bowls of broth. Sometimes it was five, sometimes it was three. Sometimes there was only one.

"Lucky for you I got an extra," the one with the tray said, settling herself down in a filthy tuffet of skirts and aprons.

*This* line never changed. Ever.

The prisoner screamed, unable to contain herself, unable to keep herself from looking forward to that one thing each day—the thin gruel that passed for nourishment.

The woman with the mop muttered indignantly.

"I didn't hear nuffink about a new one, I can tell you that. Thought they done a right good job clearing these sorts out of the world."

"Well, there's one now. There you go, finish up now."

The woman said it with the same false tenderness she expressed every time. The bowl tipped faster, broth trickled down the sides of the prisoner's neck and, despite herself, she got desperate, straining against the chains and sticking her tongue out to get every last drop before the bowl was removed.

"This one is old enough to be a mother," the gruel woman said without a trace of emotion or sentiment. "Think of that, them having children and raising them and all."

"Like animals, all of them. Animals raise their children, too. I don't know why they keep them around. Kill 'em and be done with it."

"Oh, soon enough, soon enough, no doubt," the broth hag said philosophically, getting up. "They don't last long around here."

Except, of course, it had been ten years now.

This time the hag didn't bother to toss some platitude over her shoulder as she left; the prisoner's existence was forgotten the moment she touched the door and was on her way out.

It would be all new again for her and her horrible companion tomorrow... and the next day...and the day after that....

The prisoner screamed one last time, finally and uncontrollably, as the darkness closed in.

She had to start the story again. If she just started the story and played it through, everything would be all right.

*Once upon a time in a faraway land, a young prince lived in a shining castle...*

# Before the Beginning

Once upon a time, slightly longer ago than before, there was a kingdom whose name and very existence have long since been forgotten. While the rest of the world was fighting for control of new lands across the seas, inventing ever more deadly weapons, and generously gifting their own religion to foreign people who didn't want it, this kingdom just splendidly *was*.

It had fertile croplands, dense hunting forests, a neat little hamlet, and the prettiest postcard castle anyone had ever seen.

In happier years, because of its removed location in an out-of-the way valley, it was a lodestone for the artistic, the different, the clever: *les charmantes*. They fled there as the modern world closed in on the rest of Europe. The little kingdom passed the Dark Ages and the Renaissance peacefully and uneventfully. Only now were the diseases of civilized man finally catching up.

Even so, here there were still fortune-tellers who could actually tell your fortune, farmers who could pull water from stone during a dry season, and performers who could really turn boys into doves. And sometimes back.

The kingdom also drew those who didn't have *powers*, precisely, but their own unusual natural talents and quirks—those who felt comfortable among the other folk. Misfits and dreamers. Poets and musicians. Nice oddballs, finding refuge there in a world that didn't want them.

One was a young man named Maurice. The son of a tinker, he had both the will to wander and the skill to fix and invent. Unlike his father, however, he felt a change in the ancient air of Europe. Wonderful, mechanical change: a future filled with weaving mills powered by steam, balloons that could carry people to far-off lands, and stoves that could cook meals all by themselves.

Determined to be part of all this, Maurice looked to both the past—the steam engines of Hero—and the present, desperately chatting up anyone who

had a firsthand account of the marvels he had read about. His longing took him all over, chasing down gears and pistons and demonstrations of science.

But he realized that a life of wandering would get him nowhere; he needed someplace he could sit and think for a while and tinker with really big things—machines that required huge fires and mighty smelters. Someplace he could store all his junk.

In short, he needed a *home*.

Following his heart and rumors, he wound up in a corner of Europe that was just a bit out of sync with the rest of the world.

First he stopped at a tiny village on a river that was perfect for powering waterwheels. But after observing the provincial little lives of the people there and enduring their horrified looks at his handcart filled with goggles and equipment and books, he realized that it was not the right place for him.

He crossed the river and went on through the woods, winding up in the strange kingdom where it wasn't unusual for someone to be seen whispering to a black cat—and the cat whispering back—or having a drink at the local pub, still covered in silver soot from the day's work and wearing dark mica goggles. Where he would fit in.

Maurice immediately struck up a friendship with some local lads and ended up renting a place with one of them. Alaric, more into animals than machines, managed to get them a cheap room at the back of one of the stables where he hired himself out as a groomsmen.

While the lodging itself was tiny and reeked of horses, it did include access to a large common yard. Maurice immediately set about constructing a forge, kiln, and tinkering table.

He happily betook any hard labor that would bring him closer to getting the right bits for his latest project. While he picked rocks out of fields or hauled sheaves of grain on his shoulders, his mind was far away, thinking about the tensile strength of different metals, the possibilities of alloys, and how to achieve the perfectly cylindrical, smooth shape he needed for the next step.

“Old Maurice Head-in-the-Clouds,” his fellow strong lads would say, clapping him on the shoulders. But it was always said with a smile and respect, the same way they called Josepha the tavern maid “the Black Witch.” Her punch was strong—and the shocks she could deliver with a snap of her fingers to irksome customers even stronger.

At the end of summer, all of the able-bodied young men were working in

the fields—even Alaric, who preferred horses to the oats they ate. Sunburned and with aching backs, they staggered into town every evening, throats parched but still singing. And, of course, they made their way directly to Josepha’s.

One night, while his friends piled into the tavern, Maurice hung back to dust himself off as best he could—and to get a better look at a bit of a commotion occurring just outside.

A giant and solid-looking man stood with his legs spread aggressively and a dangerous look in his eye. This was interesting, but not as intriguing as what *else* was going on.

Sticking her face into the man’s was one of the most beautiful women Maurice had ever seen. She had the poise of a dancer and the body of a goddess. Her hair glowed golden in the sunset. But bright red spots of rage flushed her beautiful cheeks, and her eyes flashed green with indignation.

She waved a slim alder wand in the air for emphasis:

“*Nothing is unnatural about us!*” Her words were perfectly formed and accented; it was emotion that caused her to nearly spit. “Anything God makes is natural—by definition. And we, all of us, are the children of God!”

“You are the children of the devil,” the man said calmly, lazily. Like someone who knew he was going to win. “Put here as a test. You shall be wiped from the earth like the unnatural dragons of old, you mouthy hag. Unless you purify yourself.”

“*Purify?*” The girl *actually* spat this time. “I was baptized by the monsignor himself—so that is at least one more bath than *you’ve* ever had, you son of a pig!”

The man made a movement, a very slight one, reaching to his waist. As good-natured as Maurice was, he had traveled enough to know what that signaled: a knife, a pistol, a backhand across the face. *Something* violent. He acted immediately, moving to run over and help her.

But it was all over before he took a single step: there was a flash brighter than lightning, completely silent. Everything went stark white.

After a few moments, Maurice could see again. The girl was storming off angrily but the man still stood there. There was indeed a pistol in his hand that he had meant to use. It fell to his side, now forgotten. More pressing business occupied the man’s attention. Where his nose had been, there was now a bright pink snout.

“*Son of a pig...*” Maurice repeated slowly, beginning to smile. “*Pig!*”

He chuckled to himself and finally went into the tavern.

He found Alaric with the usual gang, along with someone new: a thin, drawn-looking young man who folded his body over and brought his shoulders together like an insect, a very unhappy one. His clothes were dark and the expression on his face nervous and dour—in every way the exact opposite of the fair-haired and sunny groomsman.

Maurice moved toward them slowly, still thinking about the incident outside. Not the flash or the fight or the pig's nose, but the way the setting sun had gleamed on the girl's tresses.

Alaric impatiently pulled him down into a seat between himself and the brooding fellow.

“Here, sit already! Have you met the doc yet? I don't think you have. Frédéric, Maurice. Maurice, Frédéric.”

Maurice nodded absently. He hoped he wasn't being rude. Without being asked, Josepha placed a tankard of *cidre* down in front of him.

“Pleased to meet you,” Frédéric said crisply, if gloomily. “But I am not a doctor, I keep telling you that. I was *meant* to be one, once...”

“What happened?” Maurice asked, trying to remember his manners. Frédéric, he noted, had a tiny glass of something expensive. He must have come from some learned, professional background.

“My parents sent me away before I could complete my studies. They sent me to this...*lovely* little place. They paid me off to come here.”

“Frédéric here has a talent,” Alaric said meaningfully, tugging on the end of his cap. “He can see the future.”

“Oh, aye?” Maurice asked, impressed.

“Not really, not always, only a little,” Frédéric protested, shaking his head. “Just enough for my family to exile me here...to be with ‘people like myself’ who would ‘understand it.’ Or, possibly, remove it with more magic. I was in university. I was going to apprentice to a great surgeon. I was *going* to be a doctor.”

Alaric caught Maurice's eye above Frédéric's head and made a face.

“I've been trying to get him to move in with us,” the groomsman declared, taking a swig of beer and then wiping the foam off in one easy, well-practiced motion.

“I don't need to,” Frédéric said, but not meanly. “I have money and I don't wish to live with animals, thank you very much. Also, I already have a bit of an additional income. The king and queen summoned me to attend to



their royal infant. A *cold*,” he added quickly. “Nothing else wrong with him, and nothing I—or a real doctor—could fix. *Ignoramuses!* Anyway, they have hired me as their occasional consulting physician, and I do not require your charity, thank you.”

“C’mon, don’t you want to bunk with a couple of lads your age who can show you around? Rather than rent a room all by yourself at the top of some widow’s drafty attic?”

“Thank you for your concern,” Frédéric said, again, not unkindly. It was more like he didn’t know any way to be other than perfectly polite. But it left a strange hole in the conversation.

“Alaric, that girl...” Maurice began. “Outside the tavern before...there was a beautiful girl with golden hair...she turned a man’s nose into a pig’s snout...”

“Oh, you must mean Rosalind! That one’s a card!” Alaric said, laughing.

“It’s a bit excessive,” Frédéric said, making a sour face. “That’s the problem with witches.”

“He was being very insulting,” Maurice said, finding himself rising to the defense of a girl whose name he hadn’t known a moment before. “He was accusing her of being unnatural, and saying that magic was impure.”

Alaric clicked his tongue. “Ah, there’s a lot of that these days, I’m afraid. Before you came, there was a terrible row. Two boys, a *charmante* and a normal one—like us—fought over a girl. It came to blows and the *charmante* won and the other boy died. By magic. The palace guards were sent to break up everything and there was a bit of a riot, accusations being flung back and forth. Some of the guards got caught in the crossfire...with rather more permanent afflictions than pigs’ snouts...which, knowing Rosalind, she will remove the next time she sees him.”

“You can hardly blame the *normal* ones, ‘like you,’” Frédéric said with bitterness. “Here these people are who have powers and can do things that you can’t. There’s no control over their behavior and nothing anyone—palace guards or people with muskets—can do about them. They...we, I suppose... need to be controlled. Or made less dangerous.”

“It was two boys fighting over a girl,” Alaric pointed out patiently. “It happens all the time. Boys die over that sort of thing in normal duels. This one just happened to involve magic. You can’t get all worked up about it.”

“At the very least, if there must be...unnatural things...people should hide it rather than flaunt it. Besides, magic always comes back on itself.

Everyone knows that. *She* should know that. Rosalind, I mean.”

“*Rosalind*,” Maurice said, trying the name out on his tongue.

“Oh, no,” Alaric said with wide eyes. “Maurice! Say it isn’t so! Not so soon in our relationship!”

“Her hair,” Maurice said thoughtfully, “is the exact color of the inside of my kiln, when it is hot enough to melt iron.”

“Oh, good, we’re all safe then,” Alaric said with a sigh, shouldering Frédéric companionably. “With lines like that, we don’t need to worry about coming home to find a ribbon on the door and being forced to find another place to stay the night.”

“I have said I am not rooming with you,” Frédéric repeated patiently. But Maurice was no longer listening.

# The Girl Is Strange— No Question

Belle always forgot to take the hidden path to Lévi's bookstore. Either she was reading or dreaming or singing to herself, or just genuinely interested in what the world was like outside her house and the quiet life she and her father led. So she always wound up on the route directly through the village, and therefore talking *to*—and being talked *about* by—the villagers.

And if she was honest, she might have done it a little on purpose. It was pleasant but lonely on their tiny farm. Belle was always eager to start conversations and always disappointed by how they ended the same way, every time.

“That’s nice, Belle.”

“Buy a roll, Belle?”

“Think it’s going to rain, Belle?”

“Why don’t you stop reading and...fix up your hair?”

“Isn’t my baby beautiful, Belle? She’s just like the other six—”

“Have you said yes to Gaston yet?”

She wished, just once, someone would show an interest in the same things she did. But that just wasn’t possible in the tiny village with the same hundred or so people who had always lived there—and always would.

Today at least everyone was a bit more subdued, and there seemed to be fewer villagers milling about, gossiping. Maybe someone’s batch of *cidre* was finally ready, or some cow had given birth to a calf with two tails.

*No, even that would be too exciting to happen in this place.*

She sighed and stepped into the bookstore, fixing a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

“Good morning, Monsieur Lévi.”

“Good morning, Belle!” the old man said brightly. He always had a kind

smile for her, and was always glad to see her, no matter how many times she visited. “How is your father doing?”

“Oh, he’s putting the last touches on a steam-powered log chopper for the fair,” she said, spinning daintily on her toes to look around the shelves. Her brown ponytail lifted behind her and for a moment she almost felt like a child.

“Wonderful!” Lévi said, his mouth breaking into a big toothy grin. “He’s a man who deserves a prize. Or some recognition of his genius!”

“You’re the only person here who thinks so,” Belle said with a sad smile. “Everyone else thinks he’s crazy, or wasting his time.”

“Everyone thought I was crazy for opening a bookstore here, of all places,” Lévi said with a smile, pushing his spectacles up his nose and looking at her over them. “But it’s certainly quiet without so many customers. I can get quite a lot of reading done.”

Belle gave him a smile back, the half-sarcastic one that she was famous—or infamous—for.

“Speaking of reading—”

“Nothing new this week, I’m afraid,” he said with a sigh. “Unless you’d like to read one of these religious pamphlets that Madame de Fanatique ordered.”

“Are they philosophical?” she asked, desperate for anything. “Like, responses to Voltaire? Or Diderot? I wouldn’t mind reading opposing views.”

“Ah, no. They’re the usual sort. Not even any songs or hymns. Really fairly boring. I also have some...rather morbid...treatises for Monsieur D’Arque to pick up and take back to the, ah, asylum,” he said, mouth pinched in extreme distaste. “But I’m afraid I can’t let you even touch those. He’s very particular.”

Belle sighed. “All right. I guess I’ll just borrow one of the old ones, maybe?”

“Feel free,” Lévi said with a smile, indicating his whole shop. “Any book.”

She would have to make it a good one. Life would be even sleepier and quieter with her father gone. She saw nothing between now and his return other than bright, cold autumn days, feeding the livestock, and the occasional disappointing long walk to the village.

Belle needed something fantastic, something exciting to last her until her papa got back—or until life finally began to happen.