

## Excerpt from Chapter Eight

# Come out, Come out, Wherever you are!



Alice stared at the creature before her without any sign of fear. “You’re the Beast, aren’t you? You were a prince who was turned into a beast by an enchantress. To overturn the spell, you had to find love before a magic rose dies.”

“Excuse me,” said the Beast, bearing its enormous incisors. “That’s superstitious nonsense. The fact is, I suffer from a rare condition called hypertrichosis, which means I’m covered in hair. I have some dental problems too.”

“Of course,” said Alice. “Silly me for thinking that there could be some truth to the fairy tale.” She was becoming comfortable with sarcasm.

“It all depends on which version of the story you believe.”

“If you’re the beast I think you are, you fell in love with a beautiful village girl called Belle when you held her prisoner in your castle. It’s the ultimate love story. Belle put up with your tempers and saw through your ugly exterior.”

“Thanks for that.”

“And in the end, her love for you broke the spell and you became a prince again.”

The beast looked slowly at the matted fur that covered his arms and legs.

“Well, it may not have happened yet, but it will,” said Alice. “Love conquers all.”

“Excuse me, for asking,” said Jakob, the mediaeval estate agent, “but since you are a formidable sight, why don’t you demand that people call you by your real name instead of the Beast?”

“My real name is Colin and I hate it.”

“And we couldn’t very well have a fairy tale called Beauty and Colin,” added Alice, helpfully. “The whole idea was to have a horrific contrast to Belle’s beauty and kindness.”

“Let me get this straight,” said the Beast, “is the Belle you’re talking about the same girl, whose father was sacked from his job, got caught trying to steal from me, then was so scared that he offered up his own daughter, just so that he could return home to his pipe and slippers?”

“You make her father sound like a criminal. All he did was take a rose from your garden.”

“It was my prize rose! In any case, no-one ever talks about the silverware and valuable paintings piled up on his wagon outside the gates. Stealing the rose for his daughter was an afterthought.”

*Quite a nice afterthought though,* thought Alice but said, “I didn’t know that. And it wasn’t nice of him to make his poor daughter pay for his crime.”

“Ah yes, the sweet daughter. Is this the same Belle that read books all the time while others worked for a living? The girl that looked down on her fellow villagers and ridiculed peasant girls that married local farmhands and became homemakers?”

“I suppose so.”

“The same Belle whose brothers and sisters tormented me and tried to kill me?”

“Could be.”

“The same Belle that demanded a new dress every day that she stayed in my castle, refused to eat anything but a non-glutinous, high-fibre diet, wouldn’t help me weed the garden and demonstrated a classic case of the Stockholm Syndrome?”

“I’m sure it is. Though I didn’t know about the diet or the weeding. Or that she liked Sweden.”

“And the nagging. Don’t forget that. ‘Wash your paws when you come in from the garden, stop licking your bottom, use a knife and fork when you eat! Do this, do that!’” The Beast’s voice boomed as his temper rose.

“But!” interrupted Alice. “At least she stayed with you.”

“Yes, because of my money. And because she had dreams that a prince came to her bed every night.”

“And were they just dreams?”

The Beast suddenly looked sheepish and his leathery brown cheeks grew red. He changed the subject. “Anyway, she didn’t stay. She went back home when her father fell ill.”

“But she returned to you.”

“Eventually. First, she sent her brothers to beat me senseless. She only came back to make sure they’d done the job.”

“Wasn’t it Gaston, Belle’s would-be suitor, whom you fought with?”

“No. That’s another fabrication. Gaston and I bickered, yes. But he was the only one who truly understood me. He took me on face value for who and what I was. I shouldn’t have let him go.” The Beast opened a heart-shaped locket that was hanging on a silver chain around his neck. He showed Alice and Jakob the contents - a miniature image of Gaston.

“Beautiful,” said Jakob, admiring the decorative metalwork.

“He is,” replied the Beast. “And take it from me, he wasn’t interested in Belle.”

Alice was confused on many levels. “In any case,” she continued, “I think it was so romantic that Belle wanted to marry you despite your ...”

The Beast’s fangs were showing. “Yes? Despite my what?”

“... size?” Alice blurted out, not wanting to hurt the Beast’s feelings. “And the fact that you were constantly grumpy.” *I never seem to be able to bite my tongue*, she thought.

The Beast used his sharp green claws to pick between his teeth, paying particular attention to the cleanliness of his incisors.

“We’re not scared of you,” said Alice, which solicited a look of protest from Jakob.

“No-one is scared of me after five minutes. They soon find out I’m a softy. Look, have you eaten? I’m staying at Halfway House. It’s no more than five minutes’ walk away. I’ve got a wild boar roasting by the fire. You’re very welcome to join me.”

