

### **A dream come true: The beast and the beauty**

Once upon a time there was a handsome prince who lived in a splendid castle at the top of a steep hill, surrounded by ancient forests.

One bright autumn day, an evil fairy appeared in the castle grounds. She took one look at the flawless prince and cast a wicked spell. In an instant he was turned into a beast – somewhere between a bear and a wolf and as ugly as sin. ‘There’, said the wicked fairy, ‘that will teach you to be so charming and so astonishingly good looking. No one will fall in love with you now. Ha ha. My spell is good and strong and can only be broken when a beautiful woman kisses your ghastly whiskers’.

The prince began to protest, but it was too late. The evil fairy vanished like mist at dawn. The clever jackdaw, who always followed the prince around, averted its beady eyes and looked sideways at the ground. This was quite some turn of events!

When the prince-who-was-now-a-beast caught sight of himself in the hall mirror he wept. Tears ran down his horrible furry cheeks and he turned away in disgust.



Days turned to seasons and seasons turned to years. Life went on as usual, but every night the beast dreamed of salvation. In his dreams a beautiful maiden appeared from the depths of the forest. It is always dark and stormy and the middle of winter. The beast would hear a faint tapping and when he opened the door there would be a lovely young lady wrapped in a threadbare cloak and a soggy woollen cardigan, desperate and soaked to the skin. Outside the wind would be howling and the sleet and snow would be whirling about. The maiden would recoil at the sight of him, but she would have no choice but to accept his hospitality, loathsome creature that he was.

Sometimes the beast would wake with a start and the hopelessness of his situation would stare him in the face. It was just about possible that an attractive woman would be out on her own and would lose her way in the forest on a dark and treacherous night, and there was a remote chance that she'd come to the castle, seeking shelter from the storm. But what then? She'd be terrified of her gruesome host and if she had any sense at all she'd escape as soon as she could. A kiss would be out of the question.

Sometimes the beast would dream on. In his fevered mind, the young lady would dine on the lavish provisions he'd laid before her. It was true she was scared of him - who wouldn't be? - but he'd keep his distance. He'd beg her to stay, but the more he begged the more adamant she became. 'No, sir, sorry sir, thanks ever so much for the delicious meats and the tasty carrot soup, but I must be on my way'. All hope vanished as he watched her disappear down the winding path. The beast would make his way back to his bare study and stare glumly at the decaying furniture. The jackdaw would hop around, oblivious to his master's anguish.

Still dreaming, the optimistic beast imagined another tap at the door. The beautiful maiden returned, dropped her knapsack on the tiled floor and threw her arms around the beast. He swooned as she parted his disgusting fur and gave him a smacking kiss. At this point the beast's subconscious finally kicked in. 'Come off it mate, that's not very plausible'. The beast had to agree. Ok, there was no tapping at the door, just the breeze in the trees.

Time passed and the beast became frail, pining for his lost youth, and for the future that the evil fairy had stolen. He often took to his bed. One evening he heard someone calling from outside. He hated visitors but curiosity got the better of him and he dragged himself down the grand staircase and opened the heavy wooden door just a crack..

To his astonishment, he saw the maiden of his dreams. 'Sorry sir, but did I forget my lucky cardigan? I must have left it here when I took shelter from the storm.' The beast was confused, the timescales were all wrong, and in any case the lady visitor had been a figment of his desperate imagination. She spoke again. 'Oh my' she said 'you don't look at all well'

The beast staggered and gripped the umbrella stand. The lovely young lady forgot about her lost cardigan and reached out to help him to a couch. This was not the beast she remembered. He was withered and weak and not in the least bit frightening. 'Oh you poor creature' she said. 'Let me get you some water'. She returned with a goblet of something stronger than water and the beast took a sip. 'There', she said, 'There there', and she smoothed his troubled brow. His eyes closed and he felt the softest, gentlest kiss.

As if by magic, the spell was broken. His fur fell away and features softened as he regained his human form. Despite all the odds, the beast's unlikely dream came true.