

opening extract from

tales of beauty & cruelty

written by

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Authors' Note

Love, hate, jealousy, greed, vanity, pity . . . these are the timeless themes that pervade the stories of Hans Christian Andersen, and which explain why they have endured for nearly two centuries.

As children, we both read and re-read the stories from old-fashioned hardbacks. Caroline's was illustrated with beautiful colour plates by Edmund Dulac; Kate's by Margaret Tarrant. We continued reading them well into our teens: 'The Little Match Girl', 'The Nightingale', 'The Snow Queen', 'The Emperor's New Clothes', 'The Little Mermaid', . . . whether humorous, forbidding or compassionate, they combined tales of the human condition with haunting imagery – shards of a broken mirror, drops of ruby-red blood, a flock of wild, changeling birds – and imagination, which is what makes them so timeless and compelling.

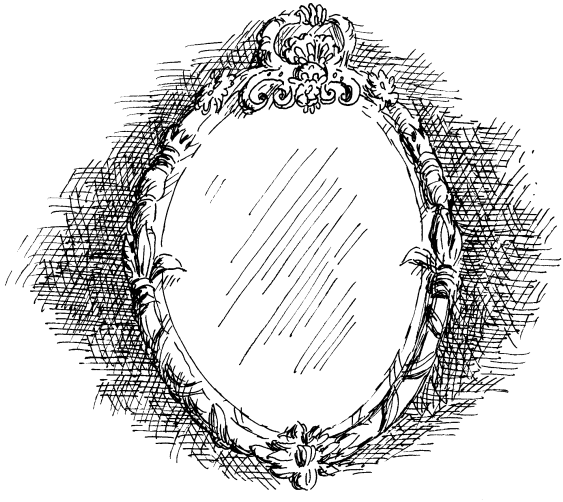
When discussing the bicentenary of Andersen's birth, we remembered how our teenage selves had remained enchanted by these age-old stories, how they still had the power to thrill us even though we had moved on to more adult reading. We wondered if the themes would translate to contemporary teenage life**:** love, hate, pity, jealousy, vanity – of course they would! So we set about finding our

modern-day princes and princesses, our little match girls, our pompous emperors and our tragic mermaids. It wasn't difficult, as they walk among us just as they did over a hundred years ago. Our aim has been to bring them to life for a new generation, both as a tribute to the great storyteller, and because good stories can never be told too many times.

We hope you enjoy them.

Kate Petty and Caroline Castle
London, 2005

Swan



I'm so pretty, sometimes I take my own breath away. I know it sounds vain, but it's the truth, plain and simple. Mum thinks that any good-looking person who says they don't know it is lying. Spot on.

I find it difficult to pass a mirror without looking at myself. So when I'm around people I have to make a special effort; have to practically force myself not to look. And all the time I'm catching little accidental glimpses – there's this girl with the shining, gold hair (OK, highlights, but who's gonna know?), long neck and little upturned nose reflected in the window glass – and I think, wow! That's

me! But there's something else that tells me I'm gorgeous. And it doesn't lie. It's the way people look at me. No mirror can compete with your own loveliness reflected back at you in people's eyes. Boys drool, men sort of melt and girls, well – they just look sick with jealousy.

So, I was standing in front of my bedroom mirror, looking at myself sideways, my head slightly tilted. I think I look my best in pale colours – sky blues, violets and pinks – sweet, but sexy. I was getting ready for a night out with the team: Rosa and May-Ann. We're all of us good-looking, but in different ways, which suits me fine. Rosa is tall and willowy with never-ending legs and long, brown, curly hair. She's flat-chested though, which drives her mad. I always act sympathetic when she goes off on one of her rants, but really I'm pleased. I hope she doesn't get a boob job. May-Ann is half Chinese, with beautiful honey-coloured skin and a curtain of silky black hair – she's the smallest, and really cute, but not really sexy, like me. We suit each other fine. When the three of us walk down the street together it's like a starburst.

So there I am, applying the finishing touches to my make-up when in she comes. The geek. And sits down on my bed in her stupid cut-off jeans that no self-respecting human being with an iota of style would wear.

'Get off my bed, Dork-Face! And get out of my room. Can't you see I'm getting ready?'

'Where're you going?'

'None of your business. Now push off.'

Here it comes . . .

'Can I come?'

'*Can I come! Can I come!*' I echo in her pathetic, whiny voice.

'You must be joking. Look at you! We don't want some kid hanging after us, cramping our style. Go do some homework or something.'

And then, like it's in the script, the watery eyes. The whinge. 'I am nearly *fourteen,* Katie – I wouldn't be a nuisance or anything.'

'You *are* a nuisance, Fat-Face. See, look at me – and look at you. You – fat little stumpy kid, me – well see for yourself.' I turned and gave her the pose, the hands on hips, full-on attitude. She crumbled. She slunk out with her tail between her legs like the pathetic bundle of spots and puppy fat that she is.

I turned back to the mirror. That was better – a clear, uncontaminated view.

Katie got the beauty and Rianna got the brains. I overheard my nan say this when I was ten. I knew it anyway, but it was good to have it confirmed. Beauty or brains – no contest. Give me beauty every time, although of course I wouldn't say I was *thick* by any means – I mean, if I wanted to I could do better at school . . . I just think, what's the point? I mean, why kill yourself studying a load of boring old stuff like . . . I dunno . . . like the destruction of the rainforest, or calculus, whatever that is.

That's why I couldn't care less when I came home yesterday and everyone was dancing around the kitchen as if we'd won the lottery or something. And Mum screeched, 'Oh, Katie! Katie! You'll never guess what! Rianna has won the Year Eight French prize. Our Rianna! A six-week study trip to France.'

Pathetic! Rianna was practically beside herself just

because of some geek prize that sounded as boring as hell. I mean, who in their right mind would want to spend their precious holidays on a *study* trip? Although, I must admit, I wouldn't mind going to France – to Paris, say – to check out those gorgeous clothes and have all those fit boys drooling over me.

Rianna, little show-off, was all fired up and alight. Like she had fireworks going off inside her. For a moment she looked almost pretty, although I knew it was just a trick of the light plus all the excitement giving her a momentary glow. I knew what to do with that.

'Great,' I said, smiling my smile that said: You may think you're great but really I could not care less and anything you do is absolutely pointless because in the end it just doesn't count. See, look at me. This is what counts. Long legs, tiny waist, big blue eyes, killer smile. Rianna was looking at me for something. Some kind of 'well done' thing, but I ignored her.

'That's nice,' I said to Mum. 'What's for tea?'

I flicked my hair back and glided over to the fridge, swaying my hips a little. I could feel Rianna shrinking behind me. And yes, when I turned, any hint of prettiness had gone. She was back to her pitiful, chubby, little ugly self.

So, Rosa, May-Ann and I were hanging out in Wicked – checking out the talent – or they were checking us out. Every few seconds, someone would look our way, or would walk past and do a double-take. It was only a matter of time before they started coming over – making jokes – trying to join in. We liked to play it cool, act as if we couldn't care less, although the reason we were there was leaning against

the bar, deep in conversation with a girl in a blue micro-skirt and a black top cut oh-so-low. Cheap. But Rosa swore, with a hissed 'Don't look now but . . .' that he was checking us out every time he got the chance.

Sean Black. Even his name was cool. He'd suddenly appeared from nowhere a couple of weeks ago. Tall, dark-brown hair, dark eyes – almost black. Slim hips that looked fantastic in jeans. He hung around with some of the guys from the college and we figured he'd moved here to start a course in September although we didn't know for sure and were too cool to ask. We were just planning our next move when May-Ann hissed, 'Quick, geek alert!'

Oh no. Rianna in her stupid cut-offs suddenly loomed into view across the street. Then – horror. She stopped and squinted at the window.

'Quick, hide!' I almost yelled, ducking under the table as if I was looking for something. I was thinking, she wouldn't *dare* come over, would she? She knew me and my friends were out of bounds to her at all times – she knew the rules.

'I can't believe it!' hissed Rosa. 'She's coming over!'

'She's not! She's *not,* is she?' I was frantic. I had seen Sean shoot a sharp little look my way. I was convinced he'd clocked me and was interested – I mean, how could he not be? All I needed now was some fat little fashion-challenged nerd claiming me for a sister and it would blow everything.

'She's crossing the street,' May-Ann groaned in disbelief. 'And she's wearing sandals – with socks!' This was the end. I stayed hunched up under the table. I prayed silently to myself: 'Go away. Go away. Go away.'

Too late. God wasn't at home, or else he had some warped sense of humour, because I heard the door swing

open and the ominous sound of sandals squeaking across the floor. It couldn't have been worse.

'Katie?'

I had no choice but to sit up, and anyway my back was killing me.

I looked daggers at her. Perhaps there was a chance that the force of my stare would somehow make her disintegrate. But no. She just stood there, large as life.

'You forgot your mobile,' she said, taking it out of her pocket. 'Mum sent me after you. You're to phone her and let her know what you're doing.'

This was *unbelievable*. How *could* she! I was cringing all over. Little pinpricks of embarrassment were shooting up and down my arms. Not only did it look as if I had Princess Nerd for a sister, but my *mum* was on my case. God! I glanced quickly at the bar. He was looking at us! My God.

I snatched the mobile. For a moment she looked as if she was going to sit down. This was beyond anything. 'Push off!' I snarled.

'I was only being helpful. At least you could say thanks,' she said, not budging.

Rosa looked as if she might explode. 'Get away from us!' she hissed. 'Can't you see you're embarrassing us?'

For a moment, Rianna looked as if she was going to cry. Then she looked sort of crestfallen. But she still didn't budge. All the time I was watching the bar. Drastic action was needed.

'For God's sake. Look at you! We're having a private conversation. We don't want some kid looking like rubbish hanging around us. *Shove off – now*, and I mean it!'

A fat tear appeared in the corner of her eye. She was

about to blub. Good. She'd finally got the message. She shot us a pathetic look and turned to go. '*I was only doing you a favour*,' she whimpered.

'Well, you've done it. Thanks. Now bog off, if you don't mind.'

And that was it. I watched her shuffle down the road with her head down. I looked up at the bar again. The tarty girl had disappeared and Sean was now talking to a really tall, skinny boy in a leather jacket. I felt him look at me just before I turned away. Who knows what damage had been done? On the other hand, beauty conquers all – as they say.

I flicked my hair back. It was looking particularly good that day. We all huddled around for a bitch about what a pathetic little pain Rianna was, and how she was going to get it when I got home and all the usual stuff and then May-Ann suddenly looked up and screeched. 'I don't *believe it*! He's gone! He's gone!' This was the pits. Our plan had been to make a night of it, like a military campaign. To follow him on to the next scene and on again if necessary. But he'd slipped away without us even noticing. God knows where he was now. Little cow. She'd managed to screw up my evening twice over.

Next day I caught her as she was coming out of the bathroom. I pushed her back in and held her against the wall. 'Don't you ever do that again, you stupid little *cow*. How many times do I have to tell you to get it into your *thick head?* Stay away from me and my friends. OK? We don't want you near us. No one wants you! Geddit?'

'But Mum . . .'

'*But Mum* . . .' I mimicked. 'But Mum nothing – you didn't have to *come in*, did you? In those stupid clothes, my

God, I thought I'd die! You could have called me outside, couldn't you? You're just trying to mess up my life, on purpose! You want everyone to know I've got a stupid, fat, little geek-brain sister hanging on to my every move. It's a good job you're off to France or God knows what'd happen.'

Tears, tears. Well, good. At least that meant the message had hit home.

Monday, she went to France. Mum and Dad wanted me to go to the airport with them to see her off. 'Come on, Katie, surely you want to say goodbye to your sister?'

I could have laughed myself silly. Why should I want to see any more of her than was absolutely, unavoidably necessary? As soon as she was out of the house wasn't soon enough for me. But parents, they don't get it. You have to play the game.

'Sorry!' I called down the stairs. 'I want to, but I've, I've . . . I've – uh – promised to help May-Ann with some homework . . .' You'd think she was going off on a lone expedition to the South Pole, the way they were fussing over her. God, they never fuss over me like that. 'Have you got your sun cream, you must be really careful, you know? Don't forget to phone, every day to let us know you're all right. Now have you got your passport – you're sure . . .?'

I watched from the top of the stairs. She stood there like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. She'd pulled her hair into a ponytail, with two little hair slides. Trying to make herself look cute. She looked up at me. 'Bye, Katie!'

'Bye, Rianna!' I called sweetly. 'Have a good time.'

I came down and waved the car off from the doorway. I hope you just drop dead, was my last thought.

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That evening the gang met up at Rosa's house. We raided the fridge and found a couple of pizzas and some Coke which we polished off to celebrate Rianna's departure and the start of our full-on Sean campaign. Then we set off in search of our prey. Rosa was wearing this red Lycra micro-skirt which made her legs look as if they went up to her armpits and then some. It was a bit much, I thought, although I would never say. The worse she looked the better, as far as I was concerned. Just made me look more cool, in a sexy, understated way.

We started off at Wicked. May-Ann squinted at the window. 'He's there! *He's in there!*' she screeched. God! Sometimes I think I'm growing out of these two. I mean, really, there's cool and there're screeching baby teens who practically faint at the sight of a half-decent male creature. But I had to admit, Sean wasn't just anyone. There he was, hanging out at the bar with the gang from college. He looked gorgeous; dark and broody, in a black T-shirt and a pair of Ikos. My heart actually missed a beat.

'Calm down,' I hissed. 'Be cool.' I grabbed Rosa's arms and the three of us swept in and glided past the crew at the bar to our usual spot by the window. A few heads turned, I can tell you; and some of the guys – well – their mouths practically hit the floor when Rosa sat down and crossed her long legs.

'It's almost as if he is *deliberately* ignoring us,' Rosa said, furious when her little ploy didn't even get a sideways glance from the adored one. I pretended to commiserate but really, I knew why. I knew he wouldn't be interested in that sort of cheap move. He was deep. A cut above.