

^{Disney}
Cruella

HELLO,

CRUEL HEART

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An original tale by

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For Gig. Thanks for all the music. It's been great.

1

ALL THINGS FOR ALL PEOPLE, EVERYWHERE

“**ALL RIGHT**, you,” a voice said.

Sixteen-year-old Estella turned and found herself facing one of the Harrods security guards, a red-faced man with a heavy mustache.

“I beg your pardon?” she said, aghast. “Please take your hand off me.”

She said it loud enough that several people turned. A tourist raised a camera, so the man pulled on Estella’s bag strap to maneuver her several feet away, out of view. The

guard had the right idea: Harrods, the great London department store, was not the place where one wanted to make a scene. Especially not in the thick of summer, when the store was swarming with tourists from all over the world.

“The bag,” he said. “Open it.”

“I will not,” she said shortly. “I’ll speak to your supervisor about this!”

“Open that bag.”

Estella sighed.



Things, admittedly, had gone awry.

Estella had been following along dutifully as a woman in a pink sheath, her ginger hair piled high and teased into a bubble dome, made her way from counter to counter, purchasing cheese, overpriced biscuits, candied fruit, and pickled nuts. They’d advanced all the way to the seafood counter, where the woman was grilling the seafood man about the freshness of his fish.

Harrods’ motto was, after all, “Omnia Omnibus Ubique,” or “All things for all people, everywhere” (though its motto should have been “All things for all *rich* people,

everywhere”). The “all” was quite literal: if one could dream it—and pay for it—Harrods would sell it to you.

Satin and furs? Of course.

Shoes, coats, and hats? Naturally.

A toy car? A real car? An airplane? A yacht? All available.

A coffin? A tiara? A lion? A gold bar? Harrods could accommodate.

But nowhere did the store take its motto more seriously than amid its large food halls, seemingly miles of elegantly tiled floors that supported the very best and most varied comestibles England—and the world—had to offer. There was the proud stink of the cheese counter, the swoosh of knives being sharpened by the butcher, and more than a rainbow’s worth of colors in the candy department.

And there was Estella, in her green school skirt and blazer. Her ginger hair was long and straight with fringe, in a fashionable cut modeled after the capital’s most famous redhead: Jane Asher, Paul McCartney’s glamorous girlfriend. Estella was enjoying the cool of the seafood counter, laden as it was with ice packed around the glassy-eyed fish on the warm Friday afternoon. She took her relief where she could get it.

“How fresh are your oysters?” the pink sheath-clad woman asked the man behind the counter.

“Extremely, madam,” the man replied. “Fresh this morning.”

The woman stared at the lumpy oyster shells as if she desired them to speak for themselves.

“Are you *sure*?”

“Quite sure, madam.”

The woman, engaged in her interrogation of the oysters, purse hanging limply from the crook of her elbow, paid no mind to Estella, unremarkable in her school uniform. The purse had a simple clasp top, the kind one could snap open in a second. Those purses were an absolute gift to the pick-pockets and petty thieves of the world. The man behind the seafood counter also paid Estella no mind, because Estella’s hair was as bright a shade of ginger as the woman’s. Who else could Estella be but this wealthy customer’s daughter?

Such a simple trick, and it worked every time.

Estella slid closer, making a great show of interest in a large lobster that rested miserably on the ice. Just a few inches more . . .

Then the tourists arrived.

“This way! This way!” A voice boomed from the entrance

to the hall. “This way, ladies and gentlemen! Watch yourselves, come through, come through, right this way.”

A man holding a small flag reading SWINGING LONDON TOURS led a group of about fifty people into the hall. The visitors marveled at the scene unfolding around them. They oohed and aahed at the endless counters of food. They raised their cameras and snapped photos.

The woman at the seafood counter turned sharply, and her purse went with her. It was between her body and the glass now, just out of Estella’s reach.

“Oh dear god,” the woman said, looking at the group. “Those ghastly people. Why do they let them in here?”

The question was rhetorical, and the man behind the counter did not reply.

The tourists massed in the hall, taking up all the free space and air. They were dressed in formless traveling clothes—grim dresses and even grimmer trousers and shirts. Estella made a note of this because she simply couldn’t help it. She always analyzed every cut and every stitch of every outfit that passed her. Her mind was a whirling calculation of fashion.

Estella made clothes. Very good clothes. Possibly the best clothes in all of London—not that London knew it yet.

Some of the tourists approached the seafood counter.

“Would you look at that!” one of the men said with a broad American accent. “All that fish!” The group murmured in rapturous agreement, equal measures shocked and delighted by the fact that there was seafood at a seafood stand. They would never get over it.

“I’ll just get some smoked oysters in tins, then,” the ginger-haired woman snipped before striding off toward the tinned foods. Estella sighed and followed, growing bored. Why was it that the gingers, who provided Estella the best cover, were always the most particular and picky? Surely it wasn’t a *ginger* thing.

As she made her way after the woman, one of the tourists from the group waved at her. “Miss, would you mind taking a picture with my wife?” he said.

Estella should have said no. She was busy. She’d been tailing her mark for over twenty minutes, and the goal was close at hand. But the man looked so enchanted by her. There it was: the antidote to her ennui—the opportunity to perform. To be darling. Plan be dashed. Estella liked to live in the now.

“Oh!” Estella said. “Oh. Yes! Of course!”

“Look at your tie!” the wife exclaimed, practically

clapping her hands in excitement as Estella positioned herself next to her. “Girls wear ties here?”

“For school,” Estella replied politely.

“Do you guys want a picture with the British girl?” the wife shouted eagerly to her friends. “Millie! Jake! Just look at her! She’s wearing a *tie!*”

Estella stayed still for several minutes, losing her ginger-haired cover but gaining an entire cohort of loud, brassy American fans. She went from one to the next, smiling, posing—the perfect English teenager.

Then, suddenly, she saw a head in the distance, scanning, looking for her. Red face, sporting a big mustache, that she knew all too well.

Red Face’s eyes locked on to hers. It was time to go.

“Oh,” Estella said, “my mum. I’ve lost her. I have to go find her.”

“Of course.” The group waved her off. “Have a nice day!”

Estella worked her way through the crowd. At first, she was polite, saying “excuse me” in a moderate tone as she pressed toward the door. But then she became more insistent, and then she stopped asking altogether and simply pushed her way through. She was so close—the great heavy

doors just steps away. She knocked herself through them, taking a deep filling breath of the muggy London air as she made it outside.

Then she felt something pulling her from behind. Someone had the strap of her bag. She couldn't move.



“Open that bag.”

Estella's expression changed from one of righteous anger to something a bit more flinty.

“You're out of your jurisdiction,” she said, her voice no longer plummy and posh. Now it was pure rough London.

“The pavement under the awning is still Harrods property,” Red Face replied. “And I can call the police if that's what you want. There are loads nearby. Here . . .”

He used his free hand to fish a whistle from his pocket and raise it to his lips.

“Fine,” Estella said, flapping open the bag. “Here. Have a look.”

Red Face reached into the bag, examining the contents. There was a French book and a pencil case.

“Turn out your pockets.”

“I have rights, you know,” Estella said, but she emptied her pockets just the same. A small crumpled piece of paper fell out. Red Face bent over and picked it up.

“Now what’s this?” he said, opening it.

The paper read *I love coppers*.

Estella smiled widely at the guard’s ever-reddening visage.

“I do love the police,” she said, her rich, plummy inflection returning.

“What did you do with it?” he shouted. “I saw you!”

“Saw me what? Dirty old man, watching young girls like me.”

“I saw you take that tourist’s wallet,” he fumed. “I know I did.”

“The heat must be affecting you,” she said, fluttering her eyelashes.

“Get out of here,” he said, reddening even further. “And if I see you back in here again, I’ll . . .”

“Turn into a giant raspberry? Do a dance? Grow wings and a beak? Do tell. What will you do?”

Red Face started to raise the whistle to his lips once more, so Estella broke free and backed up, making her exit.

“Goodbye, darling,” she said, blowing him a kiss. “I’ll never forget our time together.”

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When Estella had gone, a puzzled tourist approached the guard.

“Do you do that to everyone when they leave the store?” he asked. “Is that an English thing?”

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ESTELLA SLIPPED up Brompton Road, mixing into the crowd of students all dressed as she was, in emerald-green uniforms, green-and-gold-striped ties, and flat boater hats. Most of them had removed their blazers in the heat, and she did the same. Estella felt coursing through her the light, loose joy she experienced each time she got away—the closer the call, the bigger the buzz.

A double-decker bus bearing an advert for the new Beatles album, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, passed

by. The Beatles had taken to wearing fabulous new clothes—Edwardian military uniforms in lime green, fuchsia, electric blue, and peachy red. Something was happening now, this summer of 1967. London had become the coolest place on earth. The press called it Swinging London. No more stodgy gray clothes. No more somber expressions or polite restraint. No more rationing, no more quiet dignity. It was like *The Wizard of Oz*, when everything went from the black and white of Kansas to the sudden, saturated colors of a strange new land. London had the fashion, the music, the scene; the whole world wanted to see the show. Hence the large groups of tourists.

There was a rich fullness of life that could not be denied. It was everywhere—in the colors of the clothes and the buses and the trees in the park, in the smell of the earth turning over after the rain, in the feeling of the crowd of students Estella had fallen in with. She wasn't one of them, really, but she had slipped into their raucous, jostling current, their spirits buoyed by the schoolyear's approaching end. She felt almost like she understood their personal jokes, like they were letting her listen in. On that kind of day, you couldn't turn anyone away. The youth of London was one great, moving force, and everything was wonderful.

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The students headed for Hyde Park, as they did each day after school. They went to relax by the Serpentine, the little stream that ran through the park, where people could hire boats and generally lounge around on a fine afternoon like that one. Estella dropped onto the grass nearby, not with them, but close enough to feel like she might be part of their scene.

A few minutes later, two boys her age, also in school uniforms, came along and dropped down beside her. One was tall and lanky, with a sharply jutting chin and a shock of brown curly hair. The other, stouter and with a ruddy complexion, looked incredibly pleased with himself.

“Thought you had it that time,” said Jasper, the taller one. “Did you really have to start posing for photos? What are you, a pop star?”

“I didn’t want to disappoint the tourists,” she replied.

“Risky. He was right on you.”

“I knew where he was,” Estella said. “I had plenty of time to get away.”

Horace took her satchel. While it had appeared empty to the Harrods security guard, Horace reached inside a hidden lining and produced several items. He counted. “Six wallets,” he said, “a watch, some of these traveler’s

checks . . . no good, them . . . but at least fifty quid.”

“Oh, and this . . .” Estella reached into the waistband of her skirt and produced the slender leather wallet she had removed from the tourist’s pocket right by the door as she was rushing out. She tossed it to Horace, who eagerly went through it.

“There’s another thirty quid in here!” he said.

Jasper stretched out his long body on the grass and smiled up at the sun.

“I love tourist season,” he said. “Going to be a good one this year. Swinging London forever!”

“This keeps up,” Horace added, “maybe we can get a car! Imagine having a car!”

“What would you do with a car?” Jasper asked. “You can’t drive.”

“I’d learn. I’d drive around.”

“Probably into a post.”

“I wouldn’t,” Horace said, injured. “I could learn.”

“Please tell me you brought me something to eat,” Estella said.

Horace produced a paper bag that contained a sandwich wrapped in greaseproof paper.

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“Canned meat and mustard,” he said, handing her the sandwich. “Extra mustard, all full of pepper.”

She unwrapped it quickly. She was starving. Estella liked strongly flavored things, lots of mustard, so much it almost made her sneeze. She liked pepper most of all. She put it on everything, loads and loads of it in amounts that would make other people cough and gag.

Jasper and Horace went on about the things they might do with all the takes they were sure to haul in that summer, all the things they would get. A proper telly. New shoes. Estella ate her sandwich and felt the sun on her skin. It had been a good day for them. Takings like this would keep them well. Tourist season was always good, but now that London was the most popular place on earth, things would be even better.

The students around them were having a good time, laughing, talking, gently pushing each other. One of them had a portable radio that was playing a song the announcer had introduced as “Everybody’s Sun” by a group called the Electric Teacup. By the squeals that erupted from some of the uniformed girls, Estella gathered this was a popular band, or at least a popular song. The lyrics were a bit cloying—something about tea and the sun belonging to

everyone. But there was something about the tune that caught her imagination. There was a happy piano jangle, but underneath was the echo of an organ—a deeper, more shadowy version of the same melody. The bass line snaked through, hypnotic. The song might have been squeaky clean on the surface, but there was something else going on, something dark and playful, like a shared joke intended only for those who opted to hear it.

“I love this song,” one of the girls said. “They’re better than the Stones.”

“You’re mad,” another protested.

“I’m not. He’s got a better voice than Mick Jagger.”

The group debated the merits of various bands while Estella watched them subtly. What would they do that evening? Some would go home to their nice houses. Some would go away for the weekend. She supposed a lot of them would go out at night to one of London’s many clubs to listen to music and dance. They seemed so happy all together. A pair of them were side by side on the grass, the boy’s head dipping toward the girl’s as they whispered intently to each other. What did she care about that romantic couple whose young love was surely doomed? Or, for that matter, the students in general? After all, a long time ago it had

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become painfully clear that school—and the kids who went there—was not going to work out for Estella.

In fact, that was how it had all started.



It was not Estella's fault. Truly. Mostly everything that had gone awry in her life to date could be pinned on her hair—her *real* hair—black on one side, white on the other. It made her stand out, and not in the way she meant to stand out.

Estella was a visionary. A genius, if she was being honest. She should have been noticed for being the most gifted, creative person in school. Instead, she was the scholarship charity case with skunk hair.

It didn't matter how many times her mum, Catherine, had told her she had as much right to be at her posh school as anyone else. They came for her as soon as she arrived—the bullies.

To repeat, it was not Estella's fault.

If they spat at her—and they did—there would be repercussions.

If they framed her for a mean prank on a teacher—and they did—she would be forced to take action.

If they chucked her into the rubbish bin—and they did—she would need to respond. Even if being in said rubbish bin did result in Estella’s happening upon Buddy, her dog and most trusted companion.

Estella had taken care of those bullies. She had plotted her revenge carefully, even though Catherine begged her not to. And the revenge had been sweet. It had also marked the end of her school career. Fortunately, Estella’s mum had pulled her out of the school before they could expel her—about five seconds before they expelled her, but it still counted.

The truth of the matter was that Catherine had seen it coming, even if Estella had not. Catherine, who had taught Estella how to sew at a young age, had at first encouraged her to follow the patterns and cut along the lines, but it soon became apparent that Estella could follow no pattern but her own. Her designs were better, more inventive. Catherine knew that Estella needed a bigger stage, a chance to make it in the world. So when Estella’s short and scandal-ridden school career came to an abrupt end, Catherine figured she would give in to the fates and use it as an opportunity to greet the inevitable. She would give Estella’s talent a chance to flourish as it deserved.

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Catherine had packed their possessions into their shabby little car, and the two—plus Buddy—had set off for London. Estella had felt a momentary pang of sadness as she and her mum left their little house for the last time, but that faded quickly as they pulled onto the motorway and she saw the first sign pointing the way toward London.

London. The capital. The place where everything happened. The future. Something had bubbled up inside Estella then—an excitement so pure that it felt like it was buoying her up, carrying her out of the car and lifting her all the way up to the clouds. She and her mum shared a smile, both feeling the magic of that moment—the misting rain a magical silver, a theatrical fog that would soon part to reveal the marvelous thing beyond. Everything was ahead of them.

If only they had driven straight to London, things would have been fine.

“I need to make a stop,” Catherine had said, “on our way into the city. Ask a friend for a little help to get us on our feet.”

“What friend?” Estella asked.

Her mum did not give a direct answer. Instead, she pulled the car through a set of massive gates. Estella saw a strange symbol on them—a family crest with a three-headed

Dalmatian, like the hound that guarded the gates of hell, but in the form of the black-and-white spotted dog.

It was weird.

Estella soon forgave the oddness of the crest when she saw the house the drive belonged to. It was grand on a scale Estella had not been aware of. She would never forget the sight of the old mansion against the night sky. The outline of the building looked like teeth. Every window was lit from within with an almost otherworldly glow. She heard music flowing from inside, filling the air around the manor. Other cars pulled up along with theirs, but they were expensive. And out of them stepped the most extraordinary people. (Well, possibly the most ordinary people in the most extraordinary clothes. Estella was awed into silence all the same.)

Everyone was dressed as if they were in the court of Louis XVI—the women in tall powdered wigs and incredible massive dresses of chiffon and fur. And so many colors! That shocking pink with the trails of sky blue. Violet with gold. A delicate leaf green with a buttery yellow.

“Stay in the car,” her mum had instructed.

That was the only thing she had to do—stay in the car. So simple. And Estella wanted to be good; she really did.

But the moth must go to the flame. Nature demanded it.

Estella had to get a better look at those dresses. Every part of her screamed and ached to see them up close, or at least a little closer. So she stepped out of the car, Buddy in tow.

Getting into the house was no problem. Estella trailed some servers bringing in supplies and slipped through a massive kitchen, lost in the flurry of activity. Twelve-year-olds, after all, could easily make themselves invisible in the world of adults. They barely had to try.

From the kitchen, she was able to get into the main part of the house—if it could be called a house. Most houses did not have grand ballrooms of swirling marble with sweeping staircases. Most houses could not stage fashion shows with large catwalks, where models strutted up and down, showing off the latest season's creations. As Estella watched the proceedings, rapt and openmouthed, a woman who was dressed more beautifully than anyone else in the room, and who appeared to be more important than any of the other attendees, was lowered from the ceiling on a swing. "Let them eat cake!" she cried. She landed gently on the staircase, where a trio of Dalmatians awaited her.

There was, indeed, a massive cake, and all the attendees

cheered. The scene was so utterly overwhelming that Estella temporarily forgot her mum, her order to stay put, and everything else in her life.

And it was in that moment that it all went wrong.

It wasn't Buddy's fault, either. How could he resist chasing a dress trimmed in whole squirrel furs? Calls of nature such as that must be obeyed.

He leapt up onto the runway, and Estella had to chase him. She tried to get him to heel, to no avail. It was, if she was being honest, very funny to see the models go flying and the staff running after her. And who could resist knocking over such a massive cake?

It would have been one of the highlights of her short life, except that in the next moments those ferocious Dalmatians were coming after her and Buddy. The pair ran from the house into the night, where they took refuge in the shrubs.

All right. Maybe she should have stayed in the car.

Then Estella saw something that made no sense: her mum and the regal-looking woman from the swing were outside together, having some sort of heated discussion. They were right on the edge of a cliff, lightning flashing overhead. The Dalmatians appeared again, tearing across

the lawn. But they did not head for Buddy and Estella. This time, they turned toward Estella's mum and the woman.

The last image Estella had in her head of her mum was of the Dalmatians heading straight for her, and Catherine's graceful, lithe form tumbling over the side of the cliff.

Something inside Estella told her to run. She raced across the grounds with Buddy right beside her. There was a vehicle coming; she saw the headlights. Estella and Buddy managed to jump onto the back of the lorry.

Estella's next recollection was of the sounds of traffic. She peered under the canvas and saw she was in London. The lorry was passing by Regent's Park, a landmark she'd pointed out to her mum in the guidebook she'd been paging through in the car, so when the lorry stopped at a red signal, she and Buddy jumped off. She walked to a fountain, which splashed gently. It was so soothing, and she was still so exhausted, that she stretched out next to it and returned to sleep.

When she woke again, there was a small dog with an eye patch staring down into her face. Then a tall boy started walking toward Estella. She snapped her eyes closed and pretended she was still asleep. She could sense the boy was standing by her.

“Morning,” he said.

Estella did not move.

“So,” said another voice, “what’s she?”

“Watching us,” said the tall boy. “But pretending to be asleep.”

“Undercover copper?”

“Too scared-looking to be a cop.”

That was too much for Estella.

“I’m not scared,” she said, still squeezing her eyes closed.

“Also,” the boy added, “looks to be only around twelve, so possibly too young.”

That was *really* too much to take. No one told Estella she was scared, and no one made light of the fact that she wasn’t yet fully grown. She sprang to her feet, facing the two boys down. She was pleased to see the alarm in their faces at her sudden movement.

“Stay back!” she said.

Buddy growled in her defense. The strange little one-eyed dog took up position in front of the boys.

“I’ll just take her out,” the second boy said.

He stepped toward her. Estella immediately kicked him

in the stomach. The first boy squared off with her, his hands raised.

“Look, luv,” he said with a thick London accent. “The cops come by at eight a.m. every day, like clockwork. You should come with us.”

The second boy, still gripping his stomach, looked at his friend in disbelief.

“No way! Go back to your family, little girl.”

“She has no family,” the first boy said.

She has no family. The words rang inside Estella’s head. He was right. Her mum was gone, disappeared off the side of that cliff. That was why she was there.

She was alone—alone in the world. She had no one except Buddy, who pressed his furry body against her shins, sensing her pain.

“How do you know?” the second boy asked.

“I recognize the look.”

His perceptive kindness was too much. She would not start crying. She would *not*. Because if she did, she would never stop.

Just then, the police turned up.

“Five to eight,” the tall boy said. “That’s unfair.” He

turned to Estella. “You need to run. We all need to run. Now!”

That was the first time Estella ever ran from the police, though it was certainly not the last. The two boys were Jasper and Horace, and they had all been together ever since that moment. The trio had soon grown inseparable. Jasper and Horace became more than Estella’s friends—they were her family, filling the Mum-shaped hole in Estella’s life as best they could. They were all she needed. With them, she was content and happy. She didn’t miss anyone from her past life—except for her mum—and she definitely didn’t need anyone else.

Definitely.



“If we take in enough, we could even buy a motorbike . . .”
Horace was saying.

Estella blinked once, then again, having gotten lost in staring at the pair on the grass. They weren’t kissing. They were talking. It was intense. In some ways, it appeared more intimate than kissing. What were they saying? What did

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you say to someone when you were that close to their face?

What was that important thing, that secret, that—

“O!”

A crumpled bit of paper hit the back of Estella’s head.

“You with us?” Jasper said. “Want to head home?”

Estella popped the last bit of sandwich into her mouth, then stood up. She brushed the dirt off her skirt and, with her head bent down, snuck one final, covert look at the couple. They didn’t notice. A monster could have emerged from the Serpentine and they probably wouldn’t have seen it.

“Come on!” Jasper said.

Estella shook off the sudden feeling of disquiet that had overtaken her. She was not going to let herself get bogged down staring at other people and thinking about what they might have, or who they might have, or the choices she’d made in life that had set her apart from them.

London was swinging that summer, and Estella was going to swing right along with it.