

Chapter 1
Alice
Warneford Asylum, Oxford
September 15, 1888



Alice stared at the spoonful of red syrup. It may as well have had a note saying, “Drink me.”

Nurse Hazel said, “Open wide.”

Alice took the medicine into her mouth and let it pool under her tongue while she made a show of swallowing. The taste of nutmeg and something metallic, almost like blood, made her eyes water.

“That’s a good girl,” the nurse said. She wiped the spoon, capped the bottle, and left the room.

The lock clicked.

Alice waited until the nurse’s steps faded into the symphony of shrieks and moans that always rang down the hallway, and then she spat the medicine in the sink before her thoughts could curdle like an overheated custard.

She wiped her mouth on her sleeve and reached under the bed, wiggling the loose floorboard. Her tattered notebook lay in a cavity between the joists. She dusted off the cover and flipped past her drawings and recollections until she came to a fresh page.

Her hand itched to fill it, but she waited with her eyes closed. At last, he came to her, like he always did. She drew the White Rabbit, a timepiece in his paws, the chain dangling from his waistcoat pocket.

Chapter 2
Rosamund
House of Hearts, Wonderland
Lilly of the Valley II, Year of the Queen

A light drizzle misted the air while the drummers played “March-O Death-O.”

Rosamund, the Queen of Hearts, tapped her fingers to the beat.

So very appropriate.

Of course, Rosamund wouldn’t have expected anything else. All ways were her way, and whatever way she wanted, she generally got, even if only in the end.

Her perch on the tower balcony gave her the best view of Thomas as her guards led him to the block. Her lips melted downward when she saw the proud expression on Thomas’s face.

The traitor.

Rosamund wanted Thomas to look afraid, pathetic even, but he appeared exalted, as if he were walking to his coronation, not his death. It would be better if he acted a little remorseful, but that was Thomas’s problem—he never did what she wanted.

She bit her lip until she tasted blood. Tears sprang to her eyes, and Rosamund dabbed them ceremoniously with her handkerchief. She glowed with satisfaction as her people followed suit, shaking their heads and giving her their bravest faces.



Chapter 3
Alice
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Alice drew the last whisker on the White Rabbit. She sat back, admiring the likeness, and thumbed through her pictures of the Cheshire Cat, the Caterpillar, the Dodo, and the others.

All the creatures they said didn't exist.

"It was your imagination," her parents had told her. "You slipped in the river. You nearly drowned."

Alice gripped the leather edges of her journal.

She knew better. It was real. She had tried to tell them so, but her parents wouldn't listen. They refused to even acknowledge anything she had to say, telling each other over Alice's head that she'd grow out of it.

But years went by and she never did.

School was where she had the most problems. Headmistress Collins said Alice could not return until she "acted her age and stopped this childish nonsense." It was affecting the other students.

After that, her parents paraded Alice before every doctor in Oxford. She didn't mind too much at first. They listened to her talk about Wonderland in a way that her mum and dad never would, and they asked pertinent questions about what had happened. When the doctors weren't asking questions, the nurses—the magpies, as Alice thought of them—watched her

and scratched away in their books. Some of the nurses were pretty, and Alice believed it a shame that they wore such drab black dresses. If she were a nurse, she'd wear the brightest, most cheerful colors.

Her parents promised that Dr. Longfellow would be the last doctor. After he went through all the usual questions, she sat in his study, tapping her foot and gazing out the window, looking forward to finally being done with all these visits.

Dr. Longfellow adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses. "It's unmistakable," he said, addressing her mum and dad. "She's mad."

Alice jerked backward.

Mad?

She'd been called a lot of things. Inquisitive. Fanciful, perhaps. But mad? No, the doctor must have meant something else.

Her dad sat forward. "Are you certain, Dr. Longfellow?"

"Very." The doctor nodded. "It's rare for a child of..." He ruffled through his papers. "Of fourteen—"

"Fifteen," Alice corrected him. "Just turned."

"Yes, quite right," he said. "But as I was saying, it is rare for a child this age to exhibit these sorts of delusions. Perhaps it was the near drowning. She will have to stay here, of course."

"Here?" Alice gripped the chair. She heard her heart pounding in her chest and wondered if they could hear it too. "No, I won't. I couldn't possibly."

Alice expected her parents to be as dismayed as she was at Dr. Longfellow's request. Instead, they gawked at her as if she had arrived in a whiff of smoke—horrified and surprised.

"No, Mum. No, Dad. Please." Alice jumped from the chair and clung to their arms. "I'll be good. I won't talk about Wonderland anymore. I promise. I'll be good."

Her dad patted her hand and said to Dr. Longfellow, "I don't think that will be necessary. I'm sure we can make other arrangements with Alice at home."

"Quite right." Her mum nodded. "Our daughter is fanciful, certainly, but leaving her here? Do you think that's really necessary?"

Dr. Longfellow pressed his hands together. “This is not a passing fancy. You’ve said so yourself that you thought she’d grow out of it, but she shows no sign of improvement. Alice needs proper care. She will receive it here in the asylum.”

Alice searched her parent’s faces, but they were as empty as drained tea cups. Her stomach knotted as if she’d swallowed a mouthful of bugs.

“For how long?” her dad asked.

“Until she is cured. Treatment can’t be rushed. It all depends on Alice.”

Her dad cleared his throat, and her mum dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. They wouldn’t look at her. It was like she was invisible, like they’d already agreed to let her disappear.

Her dad glanced over at her mum and nodded.

Alice felt her insides crack. “No. No. Please. I’ll be good. *Pleeeeaasssse.*”

A blur of magpies surrounded her in their black gowns and white aprons. Their fingers bit into her flesh, holding her tight. The birds dragged her down a hallway with gaping doors, took her to a damp room, and shoved her into a crate.

“In you go,” one of the nurses said as she pushed Alice’s head down and slammed the top shut. The nurse leaned down peered at Alice through the slates with eyes as dark as raisins. “The crib should calm you down a bit, deary.”

The nurse walked away, following the others, and left Alice alone in the cold dark.

Alice screamed for her parents. After a while, she even screamed for the magpies. She said she’d be good and promised a thousand promises. Then she called for the White Rabbit—only quieter. It was two days before the magpies finally let her out. By then, her voice was so hoarse that it hurt to ask for water.

After Alice was moved into her own room, Dr. Longfellow’s treatments started: the bleeds, the baths, and the insulin shocks that made Alice twitch for hours. At first, she tried to fight them, but fighting made it worse. If she closed her eyes, eventually, she’d go somewhere else, somewhere they couldn’t touch her, and in that place, nothing could make her stop believing

in Wonderland.

Alice tried to behave like a good girl. But no matter how polite she acted, Dr. Longfellow kept on and on with the medicines and the treatments. She grew silent. She stopped talking—at least to herself—and ate when instructed. Doing so pleased Dr. Longfellow and the magpies, and, at that point, that was all that mattered.

Dr. Longfellow came every morning. He flashed a light in her eyes and tapped her knees. He asked if she had seen any rabbits lately, and she shook her head, but she always saw the White Rabbit, waiting in his waistcoat, every time she closed her eyes.

Her parents came to visit—her mum mostly. She took Alice out of her room and sat her before the fire or out on the grounds if the weather was pleasant. Her mum acted as if Alice weren't at the asylum at all but on some holiday.

Alice should have felt something—pain, despair, anger at her parents for what they'd done, for betraying her like that, but the medicine didn't allow her to feel anything, so she stopped taking it. Then, when her mum visited, she felt the embers of hatred growing in her belly.

Alice sketched a rose and threw her pencil against the wall. "I'm not mad!" she yelled. "I'm not."

Alice cupped her hands over her mouth as if she could push the words back down her throat. She hadn't meant to scream like that. Screaming caused bad things to happen.

Click.

She whirled her head toward the door. Its hinges yawned as it swung open.

Someone had heard. Despite all the other wailing in the asylum, she'd still been caught. It had to be Nurse Hazel. She had never liked Alice and must have been listening at the door. Alice shoved the journal under her mattress and sat as still as a candlestick while she waited for whatever was going to happen.

Several moments went by and nothing happened. Something wasn't right. The bedsprings squeaked as Alice got up. Part of her wanted to slam the door shut, but another part—the one

that always seemed to get her in trouble—wanted it opened more. Maybe it was a test. Or a trap.

Alice stepped toward the door, expecting Nurse Hazel to come flying into the room at any moment. She wrapped her hand around the handle, its cold metal stinging her palm, and peeked outside.

Her eyes widened. She'd expected to see the gray stone of the asylum. Instead, she saw a familiar green-paneled hallway with portraits and paintings hung along the walls.

It was her home.

Had Dr. Longfellow given her a treatment and she hadn't remembered leaving? Or maybe it was a dream, and she was asleep in the asylum. Alice tried to find a reasonable explanation for why she was home, but she decided it didn't matter.

Still in her hospital gown, Alice stepped into the hall. She turned to shut the door and gasped. It wasn't the room at the asylum but her old room. She hadn't realized how much she'd missed all her things. Her trinkets and books with plenty of pictures. Agnes, her dolly. Even the ruffled blanket on her bed. The more she looked around, the more she realized she really was home—it wasn't a dream.

She closed her bedroom door and went down the hall. The farther she moved away from her room, the stronger the pull was to go back. It all felt wrong somehow. The same paintings remained on the wall: fields with multicolored flowers, watery ponds with lily pads, the occasional bowl of fruit, and the portraits of Queen Elizabeth and Mary, Queen of Scots. But while everything looked as she remembered, something about the way it was all too perfect that made her feel like she was inside a photograph.

Alice came to the top of the staircase. "Hullo?" she called. "Hullo? Is anyone here? Mum? Dad?"

There was no answer.

Alice swallowed, trying to cool the dry itch in her throat. "Hullo?"

She couldn't hear anything. Not the tick of a clock, not the shuffle of feet, nor the mumble of voices. Alice was alone; at least she thought so, but one couldn't be entirely sure of those

things.

Her hands trembled as she crept down the stairs and into the parlor, where a fire burned in the fireplace. She stared at the backs of the two chairs with the patterned violets and lilies. Her mom had specially ordered them from France. She'd been awfully proud when they'd arrived and wouldn't let Alice sit on them until she was old enough and didn't drip her tea anymore. On the table between them was Alice's chess set, the pieces untouched, and a puff of steam swirled in the air from a tea cup. Was it her mum's or maybe dad's?

Alice leaned forward until she could see past the wingbacks. Both the chairs were empty, except for a ball of yarn on one cushion and a folded newspaper on the other.

Curiouser and curiouser.

Alice brought her attention to the mirror on the mantel. Before she left for the asylum, she'd spend hours with her chin resting on the edge as she peered into the glass. Now she saw her face and recoiled.

It wasn't her—not really. Not like how she remembered. Alice touched her cheeks. She pulled back her hair. She puckered her lips. But it wasn't that—it was her eyes. Something was different, almost vacant, as if she were locked somewhere far, far behind them. She shook her head. It had to be a trick of some sort. Mirrors did that sometimes. She was still Alice. She hadn't changed much. Taller, maybe.

The smell of cooking meat distracted her. She went to the kitchen and found a meat pie on the counter. Melted butter dribbled down its flaky crust as if it had been brushed on moments before. A fork lay beside it, and, despite herself, she tore into it, taking bite after bite, potatoes and gravy sliding down her chin. After she took the last bite, she looked around guiltily. The pie had to have been meant for her parents. Where were they?

A dragonfly floated across the window. Outside, lemony sunlight pierced through the clouds, washing the flowers in light.

"Maybe Mum and Dad are having a picnic." The moment she said it out loud, she regretted piercing the house's silence.

It seemed dangerous.

Alice hurried out the main door and off the veranda. Shielding her eyes from the sun, she went past the old sycamore tree with the swing and toward the bed of daisies. She grabbed a handful, pulling them from their stems much the same way little boys pried the legs off spiders, and held them to her nose.

Bees hummed from flower to flower. Alice followed their movements along a well-worn path, dropping daisy petals like breadcrumbs. Before long, she was standing before the river in the very spot she'd first seen the White Rabbit all those years ago. She glanced over her shoulder and saw the tree her sister, Katherine, had decided they'd sit under as they waited to be called to tea. It felt like ages ago. Dinah chased butterflies around the trunk all afternoon, a kitten huntress.

Alice hadn't seen much of Katherine since that afternoon. Her mum told her Katherine had gone to the university—a place of learning. Alice imagined it as a place of books with no pictures, and she never understood why anyone would want to read any of those.

Katherine had visited her once at the asylum. She entered Alice's room with her lips curved upward ever so slightly. "They say that you are not yourself," she said. "That you are unwell."

Alice had embraced her with delight, but her sister's arms remained lifeless.

"You'll tell them that I'm not mad, won't you?" Alice asked. "You saw him. I know you did."

"Who did I see, Alice?"

"The White Rabbit, silly." Alice shook Katherine. "He was right in front of us both. You can tell them I'm not mad, and I can go home."

Katherine grabbed Alice's hands, squeezing them hard. "I didn't see anything," she said. "There was nothing there. Stop all this nonsense, Alice. It's so maddening."

Alice didn't understand why her sister would treat her this way, like she was nothing more than a trinket she didn't care for anymore and had tossed it aside.

Katherine didn't come to see Alice again after that. Perhaps it was just as well.

Alice stared at the river as the water churned and rolled as if it were a swarm of snakes. It used to be one of her favorite places, but not anymore. She threw the daisies and watched them disappear under the surface before turning to go back to the house. She didn't feel like being outside anymore and would rather sit next to the fire and wait for her parents—wherever they may be.

Alice stepped through the slick rocks and wiped her wet hands on the sides of her hospital gown. She hadn't gone far when a familiar voice said, "You're late."