

# ONCE — UPON A — WONDERLAND

Can Alice uncover the truth  
to escape her twisted fantasy?

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## Prologue

Mrs Huxley had finally deigned to take afternoon tea with Alice's mother. "How is it that Alice still resides at home? Shouldn't she be married at her age?"

Victorian values did not preclude Mrs Huxley from the occasional indiscreet or snide remark. If anything they required it. For Mrs Huxley knew only too well that she had answered her own question. Alice still lived at home for the very reason that she wasn't married.

Had Mrs Huxley asked that same question of Alice, the answer would have surprised her. Alice would have said that she was right where she was supposed to be. She had graduated from college and was preparing to travel the world in order to broaden her horizons. She had planned out her life in meticulous detail. Nothing or no-one was going to get in the way. If only she could save Jack from the Forest of Rooms, life would be perfect.

The Cheshire Cat would have given a different answer entirely. He would have said that three visits to Wonderland had left their mark on Alice. That the machinations of the Queen of Hearts and the Hatter had made Alice madder than a March Hare. Which, in his mind, was a good thing. He would have explained that Alice was like no other woman, especially since falling in love with the black-feathered boy, Jack, on her last visit. At least, the Cheshire Cat might have said all that had he not passed away at the end of Alice's last adventure. Alice had held his rank and rotting head in her hands as he had faded away for, as she understood it, the very last time.

As it was, Alice's mother wanted to reply that her daughter still lived at home because she was worried about her father, who had survived a severe illness several years earlier but who was now on the mend. That as a girl, Alice had suffered hallucinations about animals that talked in a place called Wonderville and had therefore led a relatively sheltered life. That her daughter was a little too fussy when it came to the long

line of suitors that had thrown themselves at her feet. In truth, Alice's mother was secretly proud of her daughter's rebellious nature. And yet, she said nothing.

Mrs Huxley sniffed loudly. "As I always say, it's a brave new world. Changes are afoot. I suppose that time will tell for Alice."

How right and wrong she was. One world in particular was about to change Alice's life. Wonderland was waiting and it was entirely new in every way. But not brave, unless Mrs Huxley meant it with an irony that was lacking in the remark made by Shakespeare's Miranda. And as for Time, where Alice was heading, it was about to be broken so badly that it would be in no state to tell anyone anything. So badly that a host of vengeful fairy tale characters would slip into Wonderland behind Alice. So badly that Alice would find herself getting younger by the day. So badly that Jack ... well, that would be telling.



## Chapter One

### That Sinking Feeling

“Size isn’t everything, you know,” said Alice’s mother, gazing ruefully into her porridge.

“You wouldn’t say that if you had visited Wonderland,” replied Alice, knowing what would follow next. But the usual reprimand never came. The ‘you’re too old to be going on about make-believe lands’ was left unsaid.

Alice gave more thought to the concept of size and looked down at her feet. Her mother was right - they were too wide and flat. Not dainty at all. Certainly not the kind of feet that men expected their wives to have. Alice allowed herself a wry smile. She hadn’t yet found a husband. And that was for three reasons.

Firstly, unlike her friends, she hadn’t been looking for one. She wasn’t even sure she wanted a husband. All the men she had met were stuffy and boring, loud and conceited, ignorant or ... *perhaps I don’t like men at all*, she pondered. *Wouldn’t that be a turn up for the books, the black sheep of the family would suddenly become even blacker*. In her head she heard the voice of Mr Barnett, her old Maths teacher: “A shape is either a circle or it isn’t. Something is either perfect or not. It can’t be almost perfect.” Alice had learnt her lesson. *I am either the black sheep or not. I can’t be blacker than black*, she silently scolded. There had been one young man, of course, years ago in a forest. Blacker than black. Jacker than Jack.

Secondly, it was quite evident that, even if she were to be married one day, her husband-to-be hadn’t made himself known to her. The only men that had declared their undying love for her were stuffy and boring, loud and ... circles within circles. Perfect ones. Concentric. *Concentrate*, Alice told herself, as she went on to wonder if there was such a word as husbands-to-might-be.

Alice's third explanation for not having married was that her parents seemed to proclaim to all and sundry that she was 'high maintenance', which was quite intimidating for would-be suitors. It wasn't the nicest description one could hope for from one's parents, but Alice had learnt long before, that parents stopped dishing out compliments the moment their children stopped being children. It made it easier for their offspring to become independent. Which suited Alice just fine. She had plans.

"You're like the princess and the pea," her mother had once said.

"Which am I, the princess or the pea?"

"Don't be facetious. You're the princess, of course."

*I'm not a princess, thought Alice. I became a queen when I crossed the last brook, much to the Red and White Queens' surprise.*

"Too clever by half," as Alice's mother liked to tell people. How much was half of the clever she was supposed to be, or the whole for that matter?

"Too lippy by far," said her father. How far was that? Despite being unable to quantify their daughter's character, her parents maintained that Alice was headstrong, stubborn, sharp-tongued and lived in a dreamworld. Alice could not disagree with their assessment and was secretly rather proud of the fact she wasn't inseparable from most other young women her age. And not just because she wasn't married. *I certainly use more double negatives than other people, she mused.*

Given all this, it was therefore surprising that Alice found herself in the drawing room of her parents' house, sitting opposite Gareth Monkton, who was trying to balance himself on one knee, while struggling to open a tiny box which, Alice surmised, enclosed a very expensive ring. Truth be told, Alice was curious to see the ring.

Gareth was dressed to the nines for his proposal of marriage. His brand-new morning suit was in stark contrast to the simple white frock and



red slippers that Alice liked to lounge around in every morning. She renamed his attire ‘moaning suit’ on account of the constant whine in its owner’s voice, as he implored her to consider his next sentence very carefully. Red-faced and perspiring profusely, he resembled a steaming lobster that had just been pulled out of a pot of boiling water.

Alice almost giggled, not at the idea of a lobster being boiled alive, but at the thought that the man about to propose to her really was, underneath his disguise, a lobster in a moaning suit. To keep a straight face, she stared at the long green drapes that stood like sentinels either side of the French windows. *Remove this man*, she imagined saying to the guards, which would instantly wrap Mr Monkton up in their folds and unroll him on the garden terrace to become the latest member of an elite group of rejected suitors. Alice was so busy considering the difference between the words enrol and unroll, that she completely missed Mr Monkton’s proposal.

As it was, Alice declined Mr Monkton’s offer of his hand in marriage – or her hand, she wasn’t quite sure which. To soften the blow, she feigned tears and ran from the room wailing, which was in many ways even crueller, as Mr Monkton was left without any kind of answer at all. *One has to be cruel to be kind*, she reflected, though once again she wasn’t sure she had it the right way round. Back in her bedroom, Alice thought about the proposal of marriage and burst into real tears. Not because she had treated poor Mr Monkton rather badly but for the reason that she could envisage only one man asking for her hand and he was trapped in a labyrinth of rooms in another world.



Alice’s father had intended the train ride down to Brighton as a way to cheer his daughter up after the exit of Gareth Monkton from their lives. He meant well but tended to interpret people’s feelings the wrong way round. Alice’s mother had thought that the spring sea air would do her husband the world of good as he had still not fully recovered from the illness that had threatened his life a few years earlier. She knew of the secret pipe smoking in his study but not about the cigars he puffed on

at his gentleman's club. Or the damage they had done to his lungs. Alice's parents also harboured a hope that the trip might help Alice re-establish the tight bond she had once had with her sisters.

For her part, Alice wrongly surmised that their trip to the seaside was a delayed celebration of her graduation from college. She rightly guessed that it was a chance for her parents to corner her long enough to have 'a serious discussion' about her future. Whatever the real reason for their trip, one rule was made very clear - a good time was to be had by one and all. Even Alice's two sisters did not have particularly high hopes for this. True, there was a sense of nostalgia about a family outing but the three daughters were no longer children and their interests had progressed far beyond sandcastles and ice cream.

While Alice's elder sisters delighted their parents by playing spot the farm animals through the carriage window of the train, Alice was lost in thought. A part of her was expecting – nay dreading – that the people in her carriage would turn into animals and she would be back in Wonderland. It didn't help that the train was the Brighton Express, the very same name of the miniature train that had transported her to Wonderland the last time.

*The more I worry about something bad happening, the higher the probability that it won't happen. So worrying is actually a good thing.* The thought of probability and logic made Alice sleepy and she closed her eyes. The air was stuffy and the train rocked to the clickety-clack rhythm of the wheels on the track. *I'll unlock a memory or two from Wonderland to pass the time, Alice mused, but I'll be sure not to let them take me there. For it all began with a train last time round.*

Shrunk to the size of an ant and sitting alongside elderly animals that talked, Alice had ridden the tiny Brighton Express train down the river and over the weir into Wonderland. Once there, she had trudged through the Winter Forest and had met Jack Door – a feathered boy – who was quite unlike any other boy or man she had ever met (and not just on account of his feathers). She had been forced to abandon him and trek across the marshlands to the town of Banbury, where the

persecution of animals and elderly people seemed at its worst. Apart from the Cheshire Cat and Humphrey Dunfry, the creatures had been different to the playing cards she had met down the rabbit hole and the chess pieces she had met through the looking glass. On her third visit, Wonderland had been overrun with nursery rhyme characters - not those from the safe and familiar nursery rhymes of Alice's childhood but from the dark backstories behind them.

In the market town of Banbury, Alice had finally got to the bottom of what was troubling Wonderland and had liberated the townsfolk. She had left the aged residents of Sweatlands care home in the safe hands of ex-mayor Jackson MacDonald. Yet things had not ended well. She was forced to leave Jack behind as it made him sick to step outside the Forest of Rooms. The folk of Banbury had been bribed to hunt Alice down. To cap it all, the Cheshire Cat had apparently vanished for the last time ever. Worse still, there had been a horrible battle as the animals had tried to save Alice from the angry inhabitants of Banbury. She had escaped the mayhem and saved Wonderland by summoning a colossal tidal wave. That was the moment she had woken up by the riverside back in her own world.

Alice had said very little about her last adventure in Wonderland. She had learnt her lesson from earlier disbelief and ridicule of family and friends. She had detested the 'professional help' her parents had arranged for her - 'a friend to talk to'. Someone who was paid to listen, more like. Now she was older, she had to admit that her Wonderland adventures sounded fanciful. Even she doubted that cake, drinks and mushrooms had made her larger and smaller. "I concede that at least some of it may have been a hallucination," she told Bluebell, her new kitten. On the other hand, Alice couldn't bear the thought that Wonderland didn't exist at all and that it had been an elaborate dream.

Regardless of just how much of her earlier escapades was true (Alice arrived at a conservative estimate of 87%), Alice had hidden the memories of her third visit deep inside her, allowing them to surface only when she was alone by the river or in her bedroom with Bluebell.

There was only one memory from her third visit to Wonderland that she kept near the surface, close to her heart (which, she had been told, she wore on her sleeve). It was of Jack Door, the feathered boy still trapped in the white rooms, deep in the Winter Forest; the smart, modest, unassuming young man, who had saved her; the beautiful youth she had given her heart to, even though she could no longer conjure up his face in her mind. He was the real reason she had not found a husband in her world and probably never would. Alice had kept the black feather he had plucked from his chest and given to her. She now stroked it between her thumb and forefinger. It instantly calmed her as it had on countless other occasions.



*Alice rested her head on Jack's shoulder as a cool breeze blew over them. Birds searched frantically in the park for twigs or a secluded bush or branch, in which to build their nests. By contrast, Alice was at peace.*

*"I still can't believe how lucky I am to be with you, Alice," said Jack.*

*"Nonsense. You would have eloped with the Queen of Hearts had she been the one to free you from your prison in the Winter Forest."*

*"That's not true!" he protested. "Oh, I see. You're teasing me again."*

*It was all too easy to tease someone who had only recently discovered what a joke was, or what Christmas was, or what a city was. But Alice was never mean to Jack. He was too beautiful a person to damage. And he was hers. For now. For always. Her friends and family had warned her not to fall in love with this strange boy, lest he break her heart. She wasn't worried. She knew that their love would last, that she would have children with Jack, that they would grow old together. If that was tempting fate then so be it, but for now, she was content. Jack had left Wonderland to be with her and his sincerity and charm had won her parents over so completely that they had invited him to live with them.*

It was a lovely but fanciful dream that Alice liked to play over in her mind, all too often. She would tweak various aspects – a different setting, a different dialogue each time – but the gist was always the same; Jack and her together, in love, as much as any couple ever had been. Real life was different, of course. She told herself that she knew the difference between the two.



To Alice's relief, the fellow passengers on the Brighton Express didn't turn into animals and Alice's family arrived on the south coast early afternoon on one of the first truly warm days of the year.

"Your father and I need to take the suitcases to the hotel and check in," said Alice's mother, giving their daughters the impression that their presence at the hotel was neither required nor desired. "You are not to do anything your father and I would disapprove of," she added, looking directly into Alice's eyes. Alice's mother loved her dearly but feared for her more than she did for her other daughters. They would marry soon, Alice wouldn't. Alice had it all worked out – a future that featured a career, travel, meeting people and no marriage. Her mother knew nothing of Jack. What she did know was that her daughter was facing disappointment. One couldn't plan one's life like that.

"You're so very sure of yourself, Alice," her mother had once warned.

"Is that a bad thing?" Alice had replied. "If I can't be sure of myself, then what can I be sure of?" Alice was now in her twenties and her mother still treated her like a child. "I know you want the best for me, mother, but what's wrong with knowing what I want in life?"

"Wanting and having are two different things, my young lady. Life isn't like a book. You can't write the pages of your life out in advance. Unexpected things happen, which turn everything upside down. That's why security and stability are so important."

"You're talking about me finding a husband again."

“You don’t need to find one. Perfectly good men seem to be falling over each other to go down on one knee. And you leave them dangling.” Alice was about to point out that it was difficult to dangle while kneeling but her mother hadn’t finished. “Sometimes, I don’t know what they see in you, really I don’t.”

That had upset Alice. She didn’t want to hurt people. It’s just that people could be infuriatingly stupid. She herself feared rejection, so she knew it wasn’t fair that she rejected others. On the other hand, she didn’t want to end up like her mother – trapped in a gilded cage, waiting hand and foot on Alice’s father.

Now, on Brighton Beach, Alice’s mother was giving her that same look. A look of mistrust, disappointment, betrayal. As if she already regretted granting her three daughters their freedom. Alice had learnt to ignore her mother when she assumed the role of martyr. Fearing they may be called back, the sisters needed no more than a few skips to disappear among the throng of beachgoers that paraded up and down the promenade, like animals on their way to the Ark.

“Where did we go wrong? I do hope they’ll be all right,” said Alice’s mother, who felt her daughters were still not old enough to walk around in public without a chaperone. “Especially Alice. She seems so lost half the time.”

Her husband rolled his eyes. “My dear, our daughters are quite capable of making their own way back to the hotel. They are smart and know the difference between right and wrong. And although you don’t think so, Alice is the most independent of them all. What could possibly go wrong?”



Despite Alice’s reservations, she ended up enjoying the company of her siblings more than she had expected. And without her sisters, Alice knew that her mother would never have allowed her to explore Brighton Beach, walk above the sea on West Pier and see the other sights. As it

was, Alice's day out became a kaleidoscope of one spectacle after another.

At the turn of the twentieth century, most visitors to Brighton saw the sights on foot or by horse and carriage, although occasional steam-driven trams rumbled like metal dinosaurs up and down the beach road, which was lined with fortune-tellers, fish-and-chip shops, public houses, theatres and shops that sold everything one would never need. Alice even saw a motorcar, the gigantic vehicle that some eccentrics (like her father) said would replace the horse and carriage one day.

Alice hadn't seen or heard so many people since London's Oxford Street, not far from where she had studied History. However, to its credit, Brighton was without London's acrid odour of horse dung, dirt and soot. The salty sea winds swept all of that inland. The town sounded different too. The beach road screamed joy at the top of its voice to drown out the backstreet grime. And the forlorn call of sea gulls gave the cries of the crowd an ethereal quality. There was magic in the air.

Before the three young women could decide what to do first, a man stepped in front of them, shouting, "Welcome to the eighth wonder of the land!" With all the different noises going on, Alice thought that he had said "Welcome to Wonderland". That's why she resisted when he began to pull them through the small side door of what looked like a funeral parlour.

"Oh come on, it'll be fun!" said one of Alice's sisters. Alice failed to see how the undertaking business could be in the slightest bit amusing until she realised that the establishment in question was, in fact, a fortune teller's and her palm was to be read.

"You will take a boat journey and meet a tall, dark stranger. Beware!" said the old Romany woman. One of Alice's sisters was promised luck in horse racing (presumably betting as opposed to riding) and the other would marry well before the New Year. The three sisters whooped and cackled at the prophecies like the witches from Macbeth. Alice's sisters had been right - it had been harmless fun. It seemed nothing could spoil their

merriment. Not even when the fortune-teller grasped Alice's wrist and hissed, "At the end of the day, seek the truth!"

Outside, thousands of people strolled along the promenade, while still more were packed onto a broad and raised pebble beach that forced the sea to surrender in waves. The women carried parasols, the men umbrellas. Parents were unfurling blankets or towels, trying not to crease their dresses and suits, as their children ran along the shore with butterfly nets or built castles in the sand. Other children raced each other across loose stony ground while their parents sauntered casually a good distance behind, trying to find the right balance between having a few moments peace and not losing their offspring.

In and amongst the hordes of people, the beach was littered with rowing boats, donkey rides, Punch and Judy shows, chairs and benches, and even picnic tables. Buggies drawn by ponies laboured to ferry people over the flatter areas, where the stones were better packed and withstood heavy loads.

In and out of the water stood dozens of bathing machines - four-wheeled carriages with wooden or canvas walls. There was something forlorn about them, as if they were vehicles that had lost their way then broken down. Every so often, one of them would roll lazily in or out of the sea, pulled by horses or men. The bathing machines in the water were the ones attracting most attention. Once the contraption was far enough from the shore, men and women would appear from the far end and be helped, or pushed, into the icy sea by 'dippers', a profession in which a streak of sadism came in handy. The women bathers wore ankle-length woollen bathing suits, while the men wore striped tops and knee-length shorts. Some men sported straw hats and were still in their suits with their trouser legs rolled up. Many of the bathers left their demure Victorian values behind with their clothes and splashed around as if never having stood in water before.

Alice and her sisters used one the inland bathing machines to change into bathing costumes, which they had managed to smuggle past their parents. Alice made a point of placing her red shoes on top of her white dress, so



they didn't get dirty. She placed the black feather that Jack had given her inside one of the shoes. The three sisters ran across the stones to the sea, laughing at the disapproving glares and lurid stares of older folk around them. Alice had studied History and knew that her parents' generation had forgotten how things used to be. She wondered if society would ever return to the pre-Victorian freedom, when people bathed naked, long before Victorian prudishness had taken over.



Alice and her sisters splashed each other as they transformed into little girls again. The water was bitterly cold but Alice wouldn't have been anywhere else for all the tea in China. She felt ten years younger. Each splash was followed by a scream as the sisters' faces and hair became progressively colder and wetter. They screamed at the top of their voices – screams of fun. Among them sounded a scream of panic. And another. The nature of the screams had changed. Alice heard words of warning, which became garbled by the water in her ears. Suddenly her head was completely underwater. The bright sun high above was distorted by a foot of water over her head, now two feet. A deep and deafening noise of underwater shouts and air bubbles assaulted her ears.

Alice had learnt to swim but a sinister undertow now tugged at her ankles, preventing her from rising. Alice kicked hard and made contact with something – seaweed or hands? As her head bobbed above the surface of the water, she heard her sisters screaming but could see no sign of them. In fact, her sisters sounded more like seagulls. The only thing Alice saw was a huge green wave rising up above her.

Alice wasn't scared as she knew that waves rolled in towards the shore and that this one would carry her to the safety of dry land. As long as she was able to hold her breath, she would be safe. The wave towered above her for such a long time that she not only had ample time to fill her lungs with air, she also had time to see that in amongst the water and spume were objects and creatures; a bucket and spade, a deck chair, a small shoal of mackerel, two mermaids, a seahorse and a lamp shade, of all things. In fact, the more Alice looked, the more peculiar objects

she identified; a porpoise, a picnic basket, a turtle (she checked the head to see if it was genuine or just a mock turtle), a parasol and what looked like a whole nursery of baby clams. The wave was teeming with life and not all of it belonged in the sea.

Unlike hot air, most of what goes up, must come down. Eventually, the wave came crashing down on top of Alice. She had taken a huge gulp of air and had enough sense to grab hold of a small bedside cabinet that flew close by her head. Of all the things she could have and probably should have thought of while trying to stay afloat in the salt water, she ended up wondering if she was swimming in a sea of her own tears.



“Jack. Jack! JACK!” Alice woke herself up with her own shouting. She reached for her eiderdown and rolled over to get half an hour’s extra sleep before getting out of bed. But there was no eiderdown. Or bed. She was lying on wet sand.

She lifted her head and saw that a vast stretch of yellow sand lined the seashore. She stood up and examined herself for injuries, which she knew was the first thing one should do after a serious accident. The only odd and uncomfortable sensation was the fabric of her white dress sticking to her skin. Uncomfortable because it was wet and cold. Odd because until very recently, she had been wearing a bathing costume.

It was only then she noticed the silence (with the exception of the waves and one angry seagull) and the fact that there was no sign of her sisters, or indeed of any people at all. Alice’s stomach turned upside down, which caused her to be sick on the sand. She wanted to believe it was the sea water she had swallowed. Yet she knew the real reason - she had returned to Wonderland.





## Chapter Two

## A Tail of Two Fishes

Alice took many moments to gather her wits about her as well as a few pretty shells off the sand to take back home. Sand? Not pebbles? Alice promptly dropped the shells when she recognised the beach. It was the exact same place from which she had left Wonderland at the end of her last visit. Mary had been collecting shells here. Mary Peep was the girl that nobody else could see, who had turned out to be the darker side of Alice herself. Their coming together had allowed Alice to become whole again and return home. This was also the same beach where the people of Banbury had fought with the animals. Where the Eelers had risen out of the sand and where Alice had summoned the tidal wave to cleanse Wonderland.

Wonderland – a place of adventure and danger, a place of heartbreak and ... Jack! What would she feel if she saw him again? What would she feel if she didn't see him? Alice momentarily panicked when she remembered that she had left her precious black feather in one of her red shoes in the bathing machine. She instinctively reached into her dress pocket and breathed a huge sigh of relief when her fingers touched the soft barbs of the feather.

“Alice?”

Alice spun round and came face to face with someone who hadn't been there a moment earlier. It was a youth a few years younger than Alice - short red hair, slight of build, gentle facial features - wholly androgynous and dressed in what could have been boy's or girl's clothing of browns and greys. He, or she, was looking about in search of something and continuously taking sips from a water bottle.

“Have you seen a prince?” the youth asked, in between gulps. “Tall. Dark hair.”

It would have been an easy question to answer, had Alice not been disorientated. As it was, she could hardly catch her breath, which was

peculiar as, until recently, she had just finished holding it. *How does she or he know my name?* It wasn't the only question on her mind. *Why has Wonderland summoned me again? Where is Jack? How do I get home?* Alice knew that the only way she could stay sane and survive Wonderland was to play the game, if one could call it that. For unlike most games, Wonderland made up its own rules as it went along.

"Well, have you seen a prince?" the youth repeated impatiently.

"I'd have to say, no. I've never even heard of any princes in Wonderland, tall, short, dark or fair. Unless you count the Knave of Hearts, that is." Alice had met him in court the first time she visited Wonderland. "Though a knave is not quite the same as a prince, you know. Have you lost one?"

"What's a knave?"

"A knave is one of the court cards in a pack of cards. The jack." Alice's heart skipped a beat as she said the name. "Or it can mean a tricky, unscrupulous fellow."

"That sounds about right."

*There's nothing tricky or unscrupulous about my Jack,* thought Alice. It was her turn to repeat a question. "Why are you looking for a prince? Have you lost one?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. Prince Edward. I need to marry him. We are destined to marry but he hasn't really accepted his destiny yet. In fact, he's run off. It seems even fate hasn't realised that he and I belong together."

Alice suspected it was the youth in front of her who might be struggling with reality. "I'm sorry for asking but are you a boy or a girl?" Tact had never been Alice's strong point.

"Neither. I'm a mermaid."

*Ask a silly question*, thought Alice. She looked for a tail but saw only legs, which the youth scratched as if trying to locate the source of an itch.

“Well, I was a mermaid,” conceded the youth. “Currently, I’m human.” The mermaid took a few more sips of water.

“Right,” said Alice slowly. “Mermaids are female and mermen are male. Therefore, if you’re a mermaid, you must be female.”

“It doesn’t quite work like that. Mermaids and mermen are one and the same. We can switch between the two. Some days it’s nice to be a mermaid, sometimes a merman. It’s complicated.”

Alice had studied biology and thought the difference between genders was not complicated at all but decided to give the youth the benefit of the doubt. “And can you choose which to be on land too?” she asked, not sure what she was getting herself into.

“Oh no, quite different.”

Alice was curious to know what gender the mermaid was in human form but, as any product of the Victorian Age, she didn’t relish the thought of a conversation about genitalia. She was smart, though, and knew how things worked in Wonderland. Here was a mermaid, who talked about a prince and unrequited love. “Am I right in thinking that you’re the Little Mermaid?”

“Why ‘little’?”

“I don’t know. I thought that’s your name in the story.”

“It is but no-one ever told me why. I was hoping you would know. I mean, I’m no smaller than you are, am I?”

*A stroppy mermaid at that*, thought Alice. The two of them seemed to have got off on the wrong foot. Alice suspected that the youth had an inferiority complex, because that was how her father explained business

partners that were overly defensive. Taking a leaf out of her father's book, she decided to start again.

"My name's Alice. Pleased to meet you."

"How do you do. My name's Ari."

Alice smiled - her diplomacy was working. Yet she couldn't work out what a character from a fairy tale was doing in Wonderland. Especially a mermaid. The story of *The Little Mermaid* had upset Alice as a child. She had disliked the injustice of someone saving a prince's life, sacrificing everything for him and then being rejected. Evidently Ari shared her opinion.

"If my memory serves me right," said Alice, assuming for argument's sake that Ari really was a mermaid, "you saved the prince after his ship sank, didn't you?"

"I did. Prince Edvard's ship sank after a trident-shaped hole appeared in its hull. I just happened to be in the area, observing humans from afar, and so I rescued the prince. Mission accomplished or so I thought. A fat lot of good it did me. The prince still doesn't believe that it was me who saved him. He still thinks it was the princess from the local temple. All she did was to have her servants carry him from the beach to her dwelling place, where she clothed and fed him. And brainwashed him."

"So, if mermaids and humans don't mix, why did you decide to save him?"

"I was a princess among mermaids - I was female most of the time - and there was only one unmarried prince in our sea. And he was uglier than an angler fish."

Alice empathised. She had a drawing of an angler fish in her encyclopaedia of animals and it was so ugly that she always turned the page over quickly. It did seem quite a coincidence that Ari should be

near the prince's ship just when a trident-shaped hole had appeared in the vessel's hull.

"I guess the other reason I saved him was that I wanted to have an adventure on land. See how the other half lives. You see, humans have souls and go to heaven. Mermaids don't. Mermaids dissolve into sea foam when they die. In order to become human and change my tail into human legs, I sold my beautiful voice to the sea witch."

Alice was about to point out that the girl's vocal chords seemed to be in perfect working order but thought it better not to upset her further (Alice had started to think of Ari as female).

"If I can't find Prince Edvard and convince him to marry me, then I won't gain a soul and I'll change into sea foam."

"But you can't make him marry you. No-one can make another person love them."

"I don't need to. He loves me already, I can tell. He just doesn't know it enough to marry me. He fell in love with me when he was out walking the princess's dogs and found me naked on the beach."

"I don't think that was love."

"And I saw the look in his eyes when he saw me dancing. He loved watching my body move."

"Again, I'm not sure that that would qualify as a declaration of pure and undying love."

The youth was scratching her legs in frustration. "Well, I saved his life, gave up my voice to get a body like this and danced my butt off, even though it hurt every step. He owes me. I'm sure he'll come around when he realises that I'll vaporise if we don't get married. I'm not going to give up hope."



“If I’m not mistaken,” said Alice, “and I do hate to be the bearer of bad tidings, I seem to remember that your prince indeed marries the princess from the neighbouring kingdom.”

The Little Mermaid swigged aggressively from her water bottle and glared at Alice. “Are you trying to turn me into sea foam too?”

“No. I’m trying to help you see that there might be an alternative to chasing after a prince who doesn’t love you. Is there any way you could return to the sea as a mermaid?”

“Funny you should say that,” said Ari after she had calmed down. “The sea witch has given me one more chance to return to being a mermaid. But the price is high - kill Prince Edvard. My sisters obtained a magic dagger from the sea witch in exchange for their long hair. I have to use that dagger to cut the prince’s throat but there’s no way I could bring myself to kill the man I love. So, I’ve decided to stay human, forgive the prince for being unfaithful and win his heart before he marries that other woman.”

“And how is that working out for you?”

“Not so well. The prince is avoiding me. If that wasn’t enough, I don’t really fit in here. I feel like a fish on dry land.”

Alice often felt the same yet she was sure she was not a fish.

“Having said that, I’m very good at fishing,” continued Ari. “That’s one thing I’m better at than humans. I think it’s because I can talk to the fish. To be honest, I get on better with fish. They’ve kept me informed of the prince’s whereabouts and helped me to stay on his tail. They told me he landed his boat on this beach.”

*How great the pain of unrequited love,* thought Alice, not giving a second thought to the numerous admirers that she herself had rebuffed. *Love has driven her insane. Talking to fish indeed!*

“He loves me, Alice, he just doesn’t know it. Deep down, he must love me because he hasn’t married that other woman yet, has he?”

There was some twisted logic to Ari's conclusion. Nevertheless, Alice was of the opinion that Ari was deluding herself. Didn't they talk about emancipation or women's suffrage under the sea? Everyone was talking about that back home. "I just remembered something from your story. Even if the prince does marry someone else, you won't become sea foam and cease to exist because at the last moment, the angels turn you into an ethereal spirit, you gain a soul and rise to heaven after doing good deeds for 300 years."

Ari looked as though she'd swam into an oil slick. "Are you making fun of me? I know the concept of mermaids is far-fetched for humans but the idea of doing good deeds for 300 years is ... beyond ridiculous. I'd rather plunge the dagger into my own heart right now."

"Far be it for me to say," said Alice, determined to say it anyway, "but you don't need the prince. You're strong, smart, independent and very attractive. You really don't need him. Think of what you have seen and accomplished on your own." Alice didn't mean sinking a ship. "I suspect that deep down, you didn't leave the sea because of the prince but because you wanted to explore the world and learn new things. And you have done. You learnt to dance. You learnt to stand on your own two feet. Scholars of fairy tales say that you even transgressed gender boundaries when you put on men's clothing to go horse-riding ..."

Ari gave Alice a strange look.

"...though I think that might be something to do with their own fantasies." Alice was older and wanted to share the benefits of her own life experiences with Ari. "We all rebel when we're young, Ari. It's natural. But rash decisions come at a cost. There's nothing wrong in striving for adventure but at some point, we have to stop dreaming and face reality." Alice knew that she was beginning to sound like her mother.

Was Ari ready to face reality, at least, the one Alice considered to be real? Was there any other? It all went back to the question of whether Alice had been a part of the Red King's dream or whether he had been

a part of hers. How funny that you could choose to decide for yourself what was real and what wasn't. *Just because Ari is living in a fantasy world, does that make it any less real?* pondered Alice, who knew that she, of all people, had no right to judge. *Perhaps she is just an ordinary girl with an over-active imagination and an obsession for princes. One look at today's world and it's no wonder some people want to flee it.* "Times are changing," continued Alice, playing with her hair. "More and more women are daring to cross over into the men's world. You and I, we're not so different – we're just too curious for our own good."

Alice had to admit, she was quite taken with Ari – an intelligent, confused youth. And very attractive to boot. She reminded Alice of Jack Door in some ways, the androgynous boy she'd met in the Winter Forest. Both of them were very different from anyone in her own world. As if struck by a bolt of lightning, Alice was once again able to conjure up the image of Jack's face in her mind, something she hadn't been able to do for years. Alice gasped and put her hands over her eyes to keep his image there a moment longer.

When Alice uncovered her eyes, Ari had gone. Gone fishing perhaps, scared off by Alice's sudden reaction. Or her preaching. Had Ari just been a figment of Alice's imagination? Probably not, for there was a half-eaten fish and an empty water bottle lying in the sand a few feet away. *Typical*, pouted Alice, *just when I decided that Ari was female, she disappears.* Had Alice given this more thought, she would have struggled to explain exactly what this was 'typical' of. She did, however, feel a little sorry for Ari. Love had blinded the girl, as well as taken away her beautiful singing voice and tail. She had sacrificed a lot for Prince Edvard yet he clearly preferred terrestrial princesses to marine ones. It was unfair. Deciding that the Knave of Hearts was the closest thing Wonderland had to a prince, Alice planned to keep an eye out for him and give him a piece of her mind. He had certainly lived up to his name. Not only had he stole jam tarts, he had also stolen a mermaid's heart.

Alice was in unexpectedly high spirits. She had made a new friend and now had at least three goals to set her on her way – find Jack, find the Knave of Hearts, and discover the way back home. It sounded like a lot of searching but Alice was used to that. In fact, it was the story of her life. And it was rather wonderful to be on her own again, away from the noise and smells of city life, doing something out of the ordinary. No nagging, no schedule and no unwanted suitors. Above all, there was the certainty that anything could and probably would happen. The spring sun was surprisingly hot on her back and there was the fresh smell of the sea in the air. It created a sense of hope, yet a feeling of trepidation, that her life was about to change.



Alice took two steps forward but was stopped in her tracks by a dry, rasping voice from the sand around her feet.

“Mind where you’re going!”

She looked down and saw two peculiar fish, gasping for breath. *No, not breath*, she thought. *They must be gasping for water.* “Shall I go and get you some water? Or carry you to the sea?” She was rather hoping they would choose water for she didn’t fancy picking up a slimy fish at all.

“No Time!” said one of the fish. “And don’t interrupt again. Julian is about to recite the Poem of Life.”

*How strange to recite a poem about life when the time it takes to tell it may kill you.* On the other hand, Alice was curious. “On your head be it.”

Both fish stared at her with their googly eyes until one of them gasped loudly and began.

“I left my land for I had no home.”

*“You were running from something,”* whispered the other fish loudly.  
*“Or rather swimming.”*

“Far and wide was I forced to roam.”

*“Because you were afraid to linger in one place. You never did like treading water.”*

I entered a world strange and new.

*“Where you thought you could hide. Perhaps behind a rock.”*

“Where the sky was green and the grass was blue.”

*“No, it wasn’t.”*

Without another word, the fish that had begun its poem gave a huge sigh and deflated. The other fish did the same, leaving two perfect fish skins in the sand.

“How very odd,” said Alice. “And tragic. Now I’ll never know how the story ends.”

Alice looked behind her. Just to the side of the water bottle and half-eaten fish, which inexplicably had more flesh on it now than it had had a moment earlier, Alice noticed a set of footprints in the sand. *They must belong to Ari,* thought Alice, *hot on the trail of her prince.* No sooner had Alice arrived at that conclusion, than the footprints changed shape – into those of an animal – a rabbit, if she were not mistaken. And because of the close spacing of the footprints, it seemed to be a rabbit in a hurry. *A white rabbit, I’ll wager. Well, at least I now know which direction to set off on.*

Alice had just enough time to take three steps, when the ground shook and a fountain of sand sprayed fifty feet into the air. A similar explosion happened a little farther down the beach. Before the sand had time to settle, Alice could make out two tall, dark monstrosities, which stood like black pylons against the blue sky. Eelers! She had seen them from a distance during her last visit to Wonderland. But not this close up.



*“Fee-fi-fo-fum!” boomed the ogre.*

*“Why do you keep quoting Shakespeare’s King Lear?” asked Alice. “And while we’re on the subject, why can you only smell the blood of Englishmen? Why not other nationalities? Or English women come to that?”*

A poltergeist in tattered leotards, a queen suffering from hypersomnia and a psychotic arsonist. These are not the Rumpelstiltskin, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella that Alice knows and loves. Nevertheless, she needs to get them and other fairy tale characters out of Wonderland if she’s to mend Time and return home. And rescue Jack, the feathered boy she’s in love with.

Alice’s quest is not helped by accusations of treason from the local inhabitants, the advances of an arrogant Pied Piper and the fact that she is growing younger by the hour. And then there is the Queen of Hearts and her cohorts to contend with.

Peppered with surreal events, gritty wordplay and the sinister backstories to popular fairy tales, this sequel to *Alice Falls Again* is a must for younger and older adults alike.

*Reviews for Alice Falls Again:*

*“A brilliant and amusing reinvention.” - KIRKUS REVIEWS*

*“An ideal fantasy for Carroll fans.”  
- blueink*

*“Fantastical wonders and head-over-heels adventures abound.”  
- Foreword Clarion*

