



*Reluctant Press* presents:

# ALEX IN WONDERLAND



**Briana Vermont**

---

**A 'HER TV' E-BOOK**

---

*Copyright © 2010, Reluctant Press - All Rights Reserved*

***Reluctant Press TG Publishers***

This story is a work of fiction. Any similarity to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. All situations and events herein presented are fictional, and intended only for the enjoyment of the reader. Neither the author nor the publisher advocate engaging in or attempting to imitate any of the activities or behaviors portrayed.

Persons seeking gender reassignment surgery, hormone therapy or any other medical and/or body-altering process should seek the counsel of a qualified therapist who follows the Benjamin Standards of Care for Gender Identity Disorder.

***Protect Professional Fiction on the Internet!***

We need *your* help! We want to keep providing our readers with low cost, professional quality fiction on the Internet. We spend thousands of dollars to edit, illustrate and typeset *each story*. It is important, therefore, that everyone works to help keep professional fiction alive on the Net.

This story is protected by US and International copyright law, and is owned exclusively by Reluctant Press, which retains exclusive rights to publish these materials. The civil penalties for copyright infringement can be severe, including substantial monetary damages, injunctive relief, and liability for attorneys' fees incurred in prosecuting a case. If a court determines that the infringement was committed willfully, statutory damages of up to \$100,000 for each copyright infringed can be awarded. Even if not found to be acting willfully, a defendant can still be held liable for statutory damages of \$500 to \$20,000 for each copyright infringed. **These penalties apply even if money was not charged.** In addition, criminal penalties may be imposed if someone willfully infringes a copyrighted work for commercial advantage or private financial gain. This crime is punishable by up to five years imprisonment, up to \$250,000 in fines, or both. State civil damages and criminal penalties vary from state to state and country to country, but are always severe.

The best way to keep professional illustrated fiction available on the Internet is to do **YOUR** part to protect the author's and publisher's copyright. *You can be part of the solution.* Encourage others to purchase our stories. Never share the access rights you've purchased. **You** make the continued availability of TG fiction on the Internet possible. Thank you for your cooperation!

# Alex in Wonderland

**By Briana Vermont**  
**Illustrations by David McKinley**

## **Chapter I: Down the Hutch**

Alex was annoyed at having to stand for such a very long time. It was a beautiful evening, and he could be anywhere in the city. Instead he found himself here, in line, waiting to get into a club. There was no guarantee he would even get in before the evening was over. The line was quite long, moving slowly when it did, and not at all when it didn't.

Alex looked over the shoulder of the fellow who stood in line ahead of him, to see what he found so endlessly fascinating. The fellow simply looked at his PDA, flipping through pages of information.

'Words, just words,' thought Alex to himself. 'No pictures, and no conversation! How can anything hold someone's attention without pictures, or at least a decent conversation?'

It was about this time that a white rabbit walked down the street, passing by the long line of bored and disinterested potential club-goers. This was no ordinary white rabbit, though. Not that there actually was such a thing as an ordinary white rabbit in the city, but if there had been, this one would not be it.

This white rabbit was unusual in that it wore long white gloves, white heels, a frilly white skirt, and a white corset. It was also unusual in that it really wasn't a rabbit at all. Rather, it gave an impression of overall rabbitish-ness, owing to the white cottontail attached to its bottom and the pink-and-white rabbit ears seated upon its head.

Alex, like the others in line, paid little attention to the young lady (for, I hope you had gathered by this point that the white rabbit was indeed a young lady). Her appearance

was not that remarkable, and even when she stopped directly beside Alex he barely looked up until he heard her remark, 'Oh, dear! I shall be so late!'

In fact, Alex was prepared to ignore the entire incident until he notice – the white rabbit was using a pocket watch to check the time! Alex watched as she dashed to the end of the street and then disappeared around the side of the club.

'Well, that was rather curious,' Alex said aloud. 'A pocket watch, of all things!' he continued. Then realizing his words had attracted the attention of others, he returned to thinking his private thoughts privately. 'I'm quite certain she would have no pockets in that outfit. Where could she possibly keep a pocket watch?'

Alex was not the sort of person who could allow such a thought to linger. It was a question, and what is a question without an answer? Why, nothing whatsoever, and that would not do. So Alex followed the white rabbit, past the line, past the very large bouncer who guarded the doors to the club, and around to the side of the building.

Alex rounded the corner to find an empty alley. Empty, except for a single door in the side of the building. He looked back at the bouncer, to see if he would be stopped from approaching the door. However the bouncer was only interested in the front doors. Apparently his job description was very specific.

Alex proceeded down the alley until he stood directly in front of the door where the White Rabbit had disappeared. Above the door was a sign that read 'The Rabbit Hutch', and on the door was a piece of paper, held in place by a piece of sticky tape and protected from the rain (when there was rain, presumably) by a plastic cover which read, 'Bunnys Only'.

'Well, if one wishes to find a bunny, then this would seem to be the right place,' said Alex. It did not occur to him that perhaps the 'Bunnys Only' sign might pertain to him. Alex opened the door and stepped inside. It half-occurred to him that there might be another bouncer inside this door, and he might be required to leave without a satisfying answer to his question. However this worry was unjustified, and no bouncers were stationed behind this particular door. As Alex thought to himself, 'It would appear that bouncers respect the 'Bunnys Only' restriction.'

Alex was just in time to see the White Bunny (for he now thought of her as such, 'bunny' being a more apt descriptive than 'rabbit') turning a bend in the corridor. He ran after her, turning the bend to find another long corridor, leading ever so slightly downward.

And this is how they proceeded, for quite a long time. Corridor after corridor, bend after bend, slight decline after slight decline. Sometimes he would catch sight of the bunny, but she was always too far ahead, and she certainly paid no attention to his calls. But just when he was about to give up and turn back, a thought came to his mind concerning his geometry lessons from school.

'Now why should I be thinking of geometry lessons at a time like this?' thought Alex. However the thought was persistent and so he ran with it. 'Let's see. A corridor is like a rectangle, and a decline can be thought of as a triangle subtracted from that rectangle. So logically, repeated declines are the same as repeated triangular subtractions.'

Alex was rather pleased with this logic, until he considered its immediate implications. 'So, what I am subtracting is in fact the floor on which I am standing,' he reasoned. In fact, looking down he realized the floor was at a very steep angle, such that stopping his forward momentum was not at all possible.

'Oh dear,' said Alex aloud, as he ran past the next bend to find the floor gone altogether.

## **Chapter II** **Where Alex finds Himself in a Tight Spot**

Alex fell. And fell. At this point, not knowing what else to do and feeling out of options, he continued to fall.

'A hole like this should definitely be roped off, with signs to protect the public,' said Alex aloud, as he felt less alone when he heard his own voice. It made no sense, yet some things just never do, and so he continued to express his thoughts aloud.

'I mean really,' he continued, 'who digs a hole this deep, then does nothing to prevent another from falling in? It's just so inconsiderate.' He continued to fall for a very long time, and continued to speak his thoughts, for this was an excellent way of distracting himself from considering what would happen when the falling stopped. Which it did, rather abruptly...

'Oh!' exclaimed Alex on his second bounce, since his first bounce found him to be quite unprepared. By his third bounce he was settled and reacquainted with gravity, and so took a moment to take in his surroundings.

'Why, it's a bed!' he told himself. 'What an absolutely splendid idea, to place a bed at the bottom of this hole. I imagine I'm not the first to come down this way, so placing a bed at the bottom makes perfect sense.'

Alex hoped that the White Bunny had also landed on the bed. 'Although I suppose she must have, as she's no longer here,' he said. He looked around to see which way she might have gone, but this time there was no sign of her.

Alex dropped to the floor from the big bed, then set off to explore his new surroundings. 'Another corridor,' he said. 'I am getting so tired of corridors. Still if this one should slope down, I will be prepared this time.' The corridor never did slope down, but neither did it lead anywhere. Alex looked up and down both sides, all the way to the ends, and found nothing but locked doors.

'The White Bunny found a way out,' he said. 'And so I should be able to get out the same way.' But by the time he had explored all the way around to the large bed a second time he was less certain. Then he was startled to see something new.

A table. Beside the large bed there now stood a table, where none had been before. And on the table was a bottle.

'Really, if you're going to sneak in and leave something while my back is turned, couldn't you make it something useful?' said Alex. 'Maybe you could leave a key to one of the locked doors, for example. What am I to do with a bottle?' Alex turned his back, then spun around to take the little table by surprise, but it still contained only the bottle. Except now the bottle had a note tied around its neck that read, 'Drink It'.

'Drink it?' scoffed Alex. 'That seems a foolish thing to do. This could be anything. No, I will not drink it.' But no matter what he tried, nothing else appeared on the little table. And so after a few moments of waiting Alex drank.

Alex felt the liquid gurgle down to the pit of his stomach. He was rather embarrassed by this (even though he was quite alone) and was about to say 'excuse me', when the gurgling continued down his legs and into his feet!

'I must say, that has never happened before,' Alex said. Then as he watched, his feet gurgled right out of his shoes! Alex's feet grew and grew, until his shoes would barely fit on his big toe. Then he watched as his legs grew, and his arms and chest and head grew. Alex continued growing until he barely fit in the room.

Alex looked down at the tattered remnants of his clothes. 'Well this is a difficult spot! I still have no way of getting out of this room. In fact it's worse than before, as I can no longer fit through any of the doors even if I could get one open. And even if I could find a way out, I'm now completely naked!'

Alex considered calling for help, but felt at a loss to explain any of this to anyone who might respond. Then he noticed; the ceiling of this tiny room was not bare. There was a tiny table on the ceiling, set for tea with tiny plates and cakes. Alex realized he had not eaten in some time.

'As empty as my stomach was before, at this size it is that much more empty,' said Alex. He puzzled over what held the table, plates, and cake on the ceiling. 'Perhaps I fell so far that I passed through the center of the earth,' he suggested. 'In that case, everything would point the other way around.'

This explanation seemed to have some flaws. However, Alex felt that it would take a scientist to arrive at a proper answer. In the end, he decided it really didn't matter. Lifting up (or rather, down) one of the plates, he greedily stuffed the cake in his mouth and swallowed it whole.

Before he had a chance to feel satisfied though, Alex shrank and fell onto the table with a crash! Rolling off the table, he continued falling all the way to the ceiling where he lay, stunned, looking up at the table high above. Judging by other tables with which he was familiar, Alex judged himself to be about six inches tall.

Alex lifted himself to a sitting position. And as he sat, he was amazed to discover there were still things that could amaze him.

'My hair!' he said in amazement, as previously discussed. The very amazing thing was, his hair now reached halfway down his back. Thinking logically he considered, 'If my hair was three inches long when I was six feet tall, and remains three inches long when I am only six inches, then it appears that it neither grew nor shrank with the rest of me!'

Alex was now in a room with no apparent exit, meant for people much larger than himself. However being very small does have some advantages, such as being able to leave rooms through unconventional means. With a small amount of exploration, Alex found a mouse hole leading out of the room. He didn't know where it might lead, but anything would be better than remaining tiny and naked in this strange room.

### **Chapter III Mouse House and a Convincing Story**

Alex entered the mouse hole, expecting to find a dingy and dirty passage. However he was pleasantly surprised to find it instead led to a small but neat apartment. There was a tiny bed and chest of drawers against one wall, and a clothes tree with a single blue dress hanging from it, with a pretty blouse, a freshly starched crinoline, and a pretty white apron. Alex puzzled over what to do.

'I can't continue on naked,' he considered. 'And I'm getting quite cold. On the other hand, I shouldn't take things that don't belong to me. And a blue dress, well, it isn't even appropriate.'

After due consideration, Alex decided that the lady who lived here would most likely be more upset to find him naked in her apartment than to find him wearing her dress. And so he took the clothes down from the clothes tree, and laid them out on the bed.

Alex put on the blouse and did up the tiny buttons. He stepped into the crinoline, pulling it up to his waist, then slipped the blue dress over his head and fastened it up the back.



He found a pair of white cotton panties in a drawer, and felt that if the dress was forgiven then these certainly would be as well.

'I suppose I should also wear the apron,' he said as he put it over his head and tied a bow at his back, 'To make sure the dress stays clean.' Then finding his feet were quite cold on the tile floor, he slipped on a pair of black, patent leather Mary Janes he found under the bed.

Alex searched through the chest of drawers, hoping to find a pair of scissors. There were none, but he did find some combs and brushes. 'If I can't be rid of this excess hair,' he said, 'then at least I can keep it under control.' Alex sat at a little table with a mirror, and worked out the knots from his long hair. Then he brushed it till it nearly shone like gold.

'Now that I'm clothed and no longer look like a stack of hay,' he said, 'I suppose I should go out and see if I can find some men's clothes to wear.' But no sooner had he uttered these words than he found himself lying in the little bed, sound asleep.

Alex had no idea how long he slept. He had been very tired, what with his long run, then even longer fall. Then there had been a lot of shrinking and growing, which can take a lot out of a person as you can well imagine, and still more falling. He must have had a very good sleep indeed, however, as he woke refreshed with the sunlight streaming in the window.

Alex considered getting up, and had just decided it was a bad idea and he would rather sleep a while longer, when the door opened. Alex sat up quickly, readying an explanation of sorts, when a huge mouse walked into the tiny apartment.

'What are you doing here?' exclaimed the Mouse in surprise. 'Get out! Get out at once!'

'If you please,' said Alex, 'I would like to speak to the lady who lives here first.'

'Then speak up, as I am the closest you will find to a lady who lives here,' replied the Mouse. 'Then you can remove my clothes and get out.'

'Oh! I'm very sorry. I had no idea this was your apartment. But believe me, there is a very good reason why I am here, in your clothes.'

'So, speak up girl!'

'One point of confusion at a time,' thought Alex to himself as he decided to deal with the 'girl' comment later.

'You see,' he began. 'I was following a white rabbit, then slid down a very steep corridor and fell to the centre of the earth where I grew quite large until I could eat a cake from the ceiling, then shrank and fell to the ceiling where I found myself naked as my clothes were hopelessly tattered and completely the wrong size anyway and so hid in a mouse hole, where I wore what clothes I could find and combed and brushed my hair since apparently it did not shrink with the rest of me.'

The Mouse waited a moment before responding. 'And this is your idea of a good reason?' she asked.

'Um, yes,' responded Alex, finding no easy way to expand on this explanation.

'Well then, you've been through quite a lot, for a young girl. Now, don't you worry about that old dress, it's yours to keep. The shoes as well. After all, what am I going to do with them? I'm a mouse! I don't wear dresses or shoes. Can't imagine why I kept them around the place all this time. Now the best thing is for you to be getting along, but please come back and visit soon.'

Throughout this speech the Mouse had escorted Alex to the door, led him outside, and closed the door behind him. 'I'm a boy,' was all Alex could think to say to the closed door.

'Girl,' Alex heard spoken behind him. Turning around, he found himself to have been addressed by a very large (or perhaps not, it was becoming so difficult to cope with questions of size) canary.

'Pardon?' asked Alex.

'You said boy, where you meant to say girl,' replied the Canary.

'She does seem quite confused on the subject,' said the Mouse, poking her head out of the window.

'I know, it does seem confusing,' said Alex.

'There, you see?' said the Mouse. 'She admits to being confused. I dare say, it has not even been suggested that anyone else is confused on the subject. Take my advice dear, and listen to those who know about these things.'

Alex was incensed. 'I am not confused! I merely meant to suggest...'

'Is there a problem here?' interjected a passing crab.

'It's just a young lady,' replied the Canary, 'who has become confused and thinks she's a boy.'



'Well, she's not like any boy I've ever seen,' said the Crab as he relit his pipe. 'It's the long hair and the dress which are the real clues. Typical for girls, you know. I suggest, young lady, that you stop this nonsense and admit that the evidence concludes you are in fact a girl.'

'It is rather frustrating to know a thing for certain, and yet be so unable to convince anyone,' said Alex.

'Convincing!' said the Crab. 'That's what she needs. Logic and convincing. Perhaps if we have her speak to the Dodo. He was able to convince me that one was two and black was white just last week.'

'Yes, he's a lawyer you know,' interjected the Mouse.

'Fine,' said Alex. 'If he is so very good with logic, perhaps he can explain to you all, and to me as well, how a boy can end up in a mad world with long shiny gold hair and wearing a blue dress.'

And so the group set off to the home of the Dodo, which turned out not to be far at all. And after a round of introductions, as the group had grown quite large and very few knew all of the others, the nature of the problem was set before the Dodo.

'The problem as I see it,' began the Dodo, 'is that you believe you can fall through the earth, change size and shape through the eating of cakes, turn up to down, then sleep in a mouse's bed, and not have it affect who you actually are. With everything about you constantly changing, you somehow continue to believe you have not changed at all.'

'Well, yes,' said Alex sheepishly (although only like a sheep; he was still a tiny girl). 'I mean, it sounds improbable when you say it that way.'

'People change all the time,' continued the Dodo. 'And for much less reason than you have suggested.' He then proceeded to tell a story:

A man once woke up in his bed,  
'For where else would I wake?' he said.  
'Enough of this,' he then replied,  
'We've things to do! Get up!' he cried.  
'But wait, let's rest here in our bed,'  
He told the thoughts within his head.  
'Those things will wait, why they will keep,  
So let us now go back to sleep.'

But he was cunning, and not deterred.

A plan to change his mind occurred.

'Tell me sir,' he softly spoke,

'Who was in your bed when you awoke?'

'Just you and I, you know that's true,'

He told himself without a clue.  
'And might you wake up with a man?'  
He asked, for this was in his plan.  
'Most certainly not!' he almost spat,  
'Not that there's anything wrong with that.'  
'So now you know that I'm a girl,'  
He told himself, his lips a-curl.

'The logic's right, it must be true.  
But you are me, and I am you.  
And so a woman you must be,'  
He told himself with evil glee.  
'And so it's time, get up!' he said.  
'Get out of bed you sleepy head.  
There's much to do, don't waste the sun!  
A woman's work is never done.'  
And so she rose to start her day,  
Determined in a woman's way,  
With frilly these, and lacy those,  
And shaven legs in pantyhose.

Then, when day was done, with stars above her,  
Dressed in her nightgown beneath the covers,  
She thought, 'We worked, and did our best,  
And so I feel I can suggest,  
When morning breaks but we're still tired,  
We might be a little less inspired?'  
'Sleep in?' she said. 'Yes, I suppose,  
We've earned a rest, a brief repose.'  
And so sleep came, with all it brings,  
And she dreamed her dreams of girlish things.

'Bravo!' shouted the multitude of birds and other woodland creatures. Alex couldn't help but join in the applause, for it had been an excellent story, with rhymes which were hardly forced at all.

'It was a very convincing story, don't you think?' suggested the Mouse.

'So are you saying,' Alex asked the Dodo, 'that I should simply think that I am a girl, and then I shall actually be one?'

'Not at all,' replied the Dodo. 'What I am saying is, you will be a girl whether you think you are one or not. We are all agreed on that. However, you could make it much easier on everyone if you believe it as well.'

Well then, I shall give it a try,' said Alex.

'Hurray for Alex!' shouted the woodland creatures.

'Good lord, is that your name?' asked the Dodo.

'Yes, if it please you, sir,' said Alex with a curtsy. 'Alex, short for Alexander.'

'That's a bit of a boy's name, don't you think?'

'There are many girls named Alex,' said Alex crossly.

But Alex, short for Alexander? It won't do. From now on, we shall call you Alice, short for Alice.'

'Hurray for Alice!' shouted the woodland creatures.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Alex Doesn't Live Here Anymore**

So Alice finally came to terms with who she really was. She was about to take charge and suggest a fun morning activity, as little girls are wont to do in the mornings (and then again the rest of the time), when she once again spotted the White Bunny.

'Oh look,' she cried. 'Why, there she is!'

'There is whom?' replied the woodland creatures. For all woodland creatures, in spite of the prejudiced views of them, are in fact quite fanatical about proper grammar.

'Why, the White Bunny!' said Alice. 'Oh please look, she's almost gone again. I simply must catch her.'

'I don't see how,' said the Mouse dismissively. 'She's all the way on the other side of the pond. By the time we could get there she will be far away.'

'We shall take my boat,' declared the Dodo.

And so the Dodo led Alice and the woodland creatures to the water's edge, where his rowboat was to be found. Alice was first, and so climbed into the very center. The Dodo placed himself at the bow, this being a place of prominence where he could properly take charge of the expedition. The Mouse sat at the back, where she felt there was slightly more room for her to continue with her knitting, and the various other birds, rodents, arthropods, mollusks and such fit themselves in as they could.

'Man the oars!' called out the Dodo.

'Who shall row?' asked the Canary.

'Alice!' called out the others.

'Why Alice?' was asked by someone stuffed tight beneath the seat.

'Because she's the one with arms!' was the reply.

And so Alice grabbed the oars, and although rowing does not come easily to little girls, she did the best she could to row the overloaded boat through the water.

'Hard a-port!' the Dodo would call. And when Alice would stop with a questioning look on her face, the Mouse would interpret for her, 'He means left, dear.'

'Put your backs into it, men! Fasten that jib! Hard alee! Prepare to come about! Master Gunner, report!' called out the Dodo ('Swab the poop' might have been a useful command, considering the number of birds on board).

With so many orders, Alice was hard-pressed to keep up. Yet she was determined to catch that White Bunny and so continued rowing, until she noticed the sky had turned dark.

'That's odd,' she said. 'It can't be night, even though it does feel as if I have been rowing for a very long time. How far are we from the shoreline? Surely we must be close! Oh please, could some of you move so I might have a look?'

Alice put aside the oars, and the creatures rearranged themselves so that she could see out. And what she saw did not please her! They were in the middle of the ocean, with no land in sight.

'But we were on a pond,' she said. 'It was no more than a few hundred feet across! How could this happen?'

'So easy to criticize those in command after the fact,' replied the Dodo. 'Looking back over every decision, though, I would have to say they were right, and I would repeat them without hesitation.'

'Well that's the most foolish thing I've heard in a long time,' said Alice. 'And that's saying a lot, especially in this place!'

'Storm coming in from the south east, captain!' someone called from the crow's nest (probably a crow).

No sooner had the storm been announced than it was upon them. Huge waves tossed the tiny boat, tearing the oars from Alice's frightened grip. Water poured over the sides, and within moments it was clear to one and all that they were sinking.

'Oh please, everyone!' cried Alice. 'Please my friends, save yourselves!'

And so they did. The birds flew off, the Mouse and others swam quite easily in a direction Alice could only believe they knew was the shore, and even the Crab was safe as he slowly sank to the ocean floor (although Alice did hear him say, 'Damn, my pipe's gone out again').

'Well, if I had known it was that easy for them,' said Alice, 'I would instead have said 'Save me'!'

Alice had time for one more thought as the tiny boat capsized and she sank into the inky darkness. 'I always believed dodos to be flightless birds...'

\* \* \*

Alice fainted for a while. She didn't know how long, but when she awoke once again she found herself to be still under water.

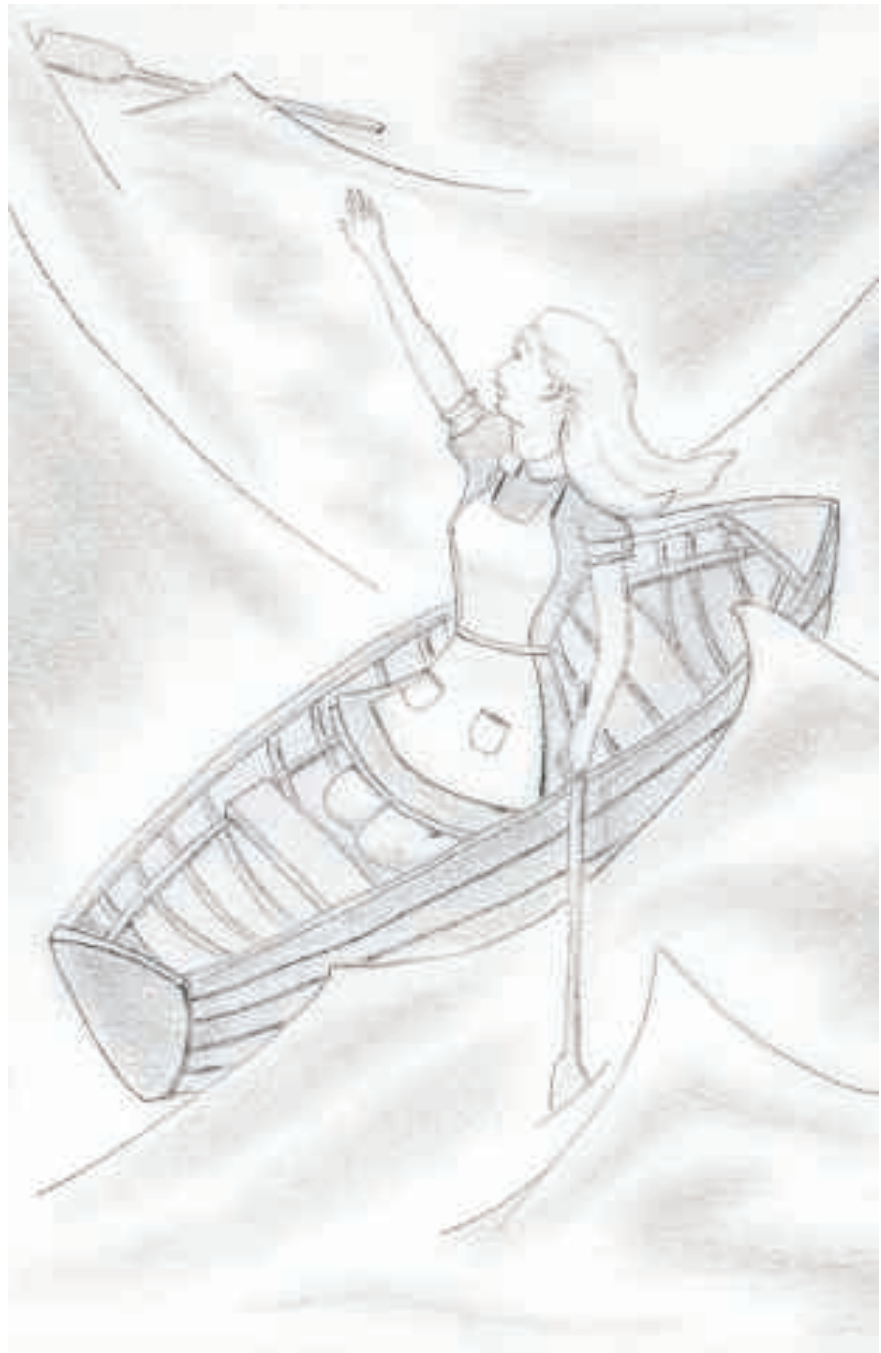
'Well, that's inconvenient,' she said. 'Usually in stories, a person goes over the side and then wakes up on a beach, usually near a stream and a lifetime supply of coconuts, not deep under water.'

Alice looked around, and noticed the gold, swirling patterns on her front and sides. 'Why, I believe I am now some sort of fish!' she thought. However she still wasn't willing to try breathing under water. Instead she swam as fast as she could toward the surface.

'Oh, my goodness,' Alice exclaimed on reaching the surface and having her first look about. 'I must be a fish, since I'm in a huge fishbowl.'

And indeed, it was true. Alice was in a large glass globe, half-filled with water, just deep enough that she couldn't quite touch the bottom.

'You there, what are you doing in there?' a voice boomed. Alice turned around, and spotted what she hoped was a distorted image of a person outside the bowl. It was mostly a face, huge and wide and slug-like.



'Good day to you, sir,' said Alice politely. 'Please tell me, am I your fish?'

'You are not my anything,' the face told her.

'It's just that, if I am to live in your fish bowl, I'm wondering if the air will always be so filled with smoke,' Alice said with a cough.

'That is what you can expect, if you go for a swim in someone's hookah!' shouted the face. Then Alice and the hookah were turned upside down, with Alice splashing at the many feet of an enormous caterpillar.

Alice flopped about for a moment, until she realized that she was not, in fact, a fish at all. She still had arms and legs, and what she had taken to be golden scales was the swirling, golden pattern of the bikini she wore.

'I don't remember changing into this,' she said.

'There will be no bargain!' said the Caterpillar in his deep, booming voice. 'Solo is mine.'

'Excuse me?' said Alice. 'What bargain? What are you talking about?'

'You're here to rescue your friend?' said the Caterpillar, no longer quite so sure of himself. Alice shook her head slowly. His voice no longer boomed as he continued, 'We were expecting you? You thought you were tricking me, but it was all a trap? Any of this familiar? No?'

'I'm sorry, but no,' replied Alice. 'I'm new around here.'

It was as if a light bulb had gone on in the Caterpillar's brain. 'Oh, no!' he laughed. 'Oh, is my face red? Oh no, this is so embarrassing! I completely mistook you for someone else. So you're not here for Solo?'

'No!' laughed Alice, but politely, to reassure the Caterpillar that it was okay and she did not consider his mistake a foolish one.

'Oh, gosh,' laughed the Caterpillar, wiping away a tear. His voice was no longer scary, since he was no longer trying to intimidate anyone. Indeed, it had a sort of high-pitched, singsong quality to it.

'You just wouldn't believe, we had this whole thing planned. But never mind, let's start over, shall we? I'm the Caterpillar. I'm also a caterpillar, as you probably noticed.'

'How do you do?' said Alice. 'I'm Alice, and I'm a little girl.'

'Little?' said the Caterpillar. 'You look to be at least twenty to me.'

'Oh, well, little in stature, I suppose, not little in age' Alice explained. 'I mean, here I am, standing on a mushroom with a caterpillar so how big could I possibly be?'

'Oh, please, don't stand on my mushroom in heels. Could you just take them off before you... you see, that's a puncture. I don't think that can be fixed.'

'Oh, I'm sorry!' said Alice. 'I'll just sit then, shall I?'

'Yes, that might be best,' said the Caterpillar.

'You see,' said Alice from where she sat at the many feet of the Caterpillar, 'It's just so very difficult to cope. Whether I'm big, or whether I'm little, there are always problems.'

And with the number of times I seem to change every day, I just get used to one thing and then it's another.'

'So you would be happy if you simply stayed as you are?' asked the Caterpillar.

'Well, I must admit I would like to be a bit bigger.'

'Bigger?' said the Caterpillar in surprise. 'An odd choice, but why not? It takes all sorts to make a world. Still, for you I would recommend smaller as you would be likely to cause less damage. Well, I hope you won't think me rude, but I must be off.'

He climbed down from the mushroom, and left through the tall grass. Then he returned for a moment.

'One side makes you a big girl, the other side makes you a little girl.' And before Alice could ask he added, 'Of the mushroom, of course.' Then he left for good.

'Thank you,' Alice called after him. 'Good luck with your plans for Solo!' The Caterpillar waved his three left arms without turning around.

Alice slid down from the mushroom, and stared at it from underneath.

'A mushroom is round, it doesn't have sides!' she suddenly realized. 'Why, he might even have meant top side and bottom side, or inside and outside!' Alice puzzled this one for a while, but finally realized there was nothing for it except to break off some pieces and try them, so that is what she did.

She broke off two large pieces of mushroom from two opposite sides, mostly at random but also trying to avoid parts that anyone had sat on, and held the pieces in her hands.



'I should very much like to be bigger,' she said, 'as I am still quite thoroughly soaked. If I were big, the water on me would barely be a drop. So I will try the pieces of mushroom until I find the one which makes me big.'

Alice took a bite from one piece. There was no effect at first, but after a few moments she felt herself growing smaller. 'Oops, wrong one,' she said, and tried the other. She began to grow immediately, but stopped when she reached the height she had been originally. No matter how much she ate, she would not grow any taller than that.

Then she looked closely at herself. Her hair was gray, her arms and legs were skin and bones. 'Liver spots!' she said, not as an expletive but rather because she had looked at the back of her hands. 'That stupid caterpillar! Big girl, little girl! This mushroom makes you young or old! What use is that?'

Alice ate enough mushroom to take her back to her original age. She was still wet, and completely out of magic possibilities. So now she had to go in search of a towel.

## Chapter V The Towel of Babel

It really made no difference which way Alice went. 'Every direction looks the same, and so one is as good as another,' she said, 'especially as I don't know where I'm going, or how to get there if I did.' Alice eventually decided to strike out in the exact opposite direction to which the Caterpillar had last been seen. 'Seeing him again after his trick might annoy me greatly, and I don't want to make a scene,' she said.

Alice had been walking for some time, enjoying the warm weather and pleasant surroundings, when she noticed a most peculiar thing.

'Why, I'm wearing my pretty blue dress once again!' she remarked. 'I don't know how that can be, except here it is. I might actually be pleased about it, if it weren't still soaking wet.'

However, Alice was pleased by one thing. She was able to make good use of the pockets in her apron, to hold the pieces of mushroom she had been carrying. With her hands free, Alice was able to make much better time as she skipped along the path through the woods. Soon she found that the path emerged into a pretty little meadow. And in the meadow was a party.

'Oh wonderful!' said Alice with excitement. 'I do so love a party.'

Alice crossed the meadow to where a long table had been arranged. And seated at the table, celebrating, were the March Hare, the Hatter, the Dormouse (who was fast asleep with his head on the table), and the Squirrel.

'Hello!' called Alice with a friendly wave. 'May I ask, what are you celebrating?'

'It's someone's birthday,' said the March Hare.

'Oh, that's so nice,' said Alice as she arrived at the table. 'Whose birthday is it?'

'Well how should I know?' asked the March Hare abruptly.

Alice was taken aback, and stuttered, 'I - I just thought you would know, you know, whose birthday you are celebrating. So is it none of yours?'

'No,' said the Hatter. 'But it's bound to be someone's. If you care so much, go look it up.'

'Yes, look it up!' the Squirrel squealed with laughter.

'Well I suppose it doesn't really matter,' conceded Alice. 'I was hoping I might be invited to sit. I've walked a very long way.'

'Invited to sit?' said the Hatter. 'That would be most unusual. One usually does not invite the maid to sit for tea.'

'The maid?' said Alice. 'Do I look like a maid?'

'A mermaid, perhaps,' said the March Hare, to more squeals from the Squirrel.

'Well, that's another thing,' said Alice, blowing a drip of water off the tip of her nose. 'I've had a bit of a kerfuffle, and am now quite wet. I was hoping that someone might offer me a towel.'

'I'm not in the habit of handing out towels to the maid,' said the Hatter. 'Indeed, one might expect quite the opposite.'

'I am not the maid!' shouted Alice crossly. She spoke so loudly, in fact, that the Dormouse stirred from his slumber momentarily.

'You must be the maid, or you wouldn't have come here,' said the Dormouse sleepily, then placed his head back on the table.

'Oh, that's a good one!' laughed the Squirrel.

'You're a nutter, you are,' Alice told him. 'And now I shall sit, whether I am invited or not!' she said, seating herself next to the March Hare.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' asked the March Hare.

'Why yes I would, thank you,' said Alice.

'Too bad, there is none,' he told her.

'How rude of you to offer,' said Alice politely. 'And besides, there is a full teapot right in front of you.'

The March Hare took the teapot in both hands and tossed it behind him and over a hedge, where it made a noisy production of its demise.

'Too bad, there is none!' he told her again, to the raucous laughter of the squirrel.

The Hatter collected the dirty cups and saucers onto a tea tray, and shoved it down the table to Alice. 'Now clear away the dirty dishes,' he ordered.

Alice stared angrily at the Hatter. Then, taking the tray in both hands, she threw it over her head and beyond the hedge behind her. The noise of a full tea service crashing dwarfed the earlier sound made by the March Hare's teapot.

There was silence from the table until the last tinkle of broken china was heard. Then everyone burst into spontaneous applause.

'You're a bunch of loonies, that's what you are!' Alice told them.

'Ah, but seriously,' said the Hatter. 'Now that you've broken our tea service, you really must go and get us another. Do that, and we would be delighted to have you join us.'

'Yes, I suppose I should,' agreed Alice. Looking around though, she didn't see a house, or any other possible source of tea services. 'Where shall I find it?'

'Well how in blazes should I know?' asked the Hatter loudly. 'You're the maid; that's your job!'

Alice just stared at him, expressionless, for a full minute.

'Well, I guess we're not having tea,' she finally said.

'No. No, I guess that's the end of that,' agreed the Hatter. 'Would you like to dry off?'

'Well I would, if anyone would offer me a towel,' said Alice as she began to lose her temper.

'I don't have a towel,' replied the Hatter. 'However, I shall offer you the driest thing I know.'

The Hatter held out a small tray. On the tray was something, and that something was covered by a napkin. The Hatter then pulled away the napkin revealing...

'A martini?' said Alice. 'This is the driest thing you know?'

'Oh, it's a very dry martini, I assure you,' he told her. 'Do you want it?'

Alice looked at the martini. 'Yes, I'll take it,' she finally agreed, snatching the martini and sipping it. 'And give me that napkin,' she added.

Alice sat at her place, moodily sipping at her martini while blotting water from her face, neck, and arms with the napkin. No one spoke for a while, until the March Hare broke the tense silence.

'Are you getting dry?' he asked hesitantly.

'Yes, thank you,' Alice replied frostily.

'Is there anything else we can do for you?'

'No, I'm fine for now,' Alice replied.

'It's just, you've sort-of ruined the party atmosphere,' said the March Hare.

'Not my problem,' said Alice petulantly.

'Tell us a story!' yelled the Squirrel (a bit too loudly, under the circumstances. Or any circumstances for that matter).

'Yes, capital idea!' chimed in the Hatter. 'Do tell us a story, Alice.'

Alice finished her martini, and set the glass aside. 'Well, I'm not in the mood for telling a story just now. But, I would very much enjoy listening to one.'

'I have a riddle,' suggested the March Hare.

Alice was intrigued. 'I'm very good at riddles,' she said. 'All right, let's hear it.'

And so the March Hare posed his riddle; 'When, is a young lady, like a fire hose?'

Alice simply stared at him for a while and then said, 'I have no intention of answering that. So who has a story?'

'Wake the Dormouse,' suggested the Hatter. 'Oh, he has some wonderful stories!'

And so the Hatter and the March Hare pinched the Dormouse until he awoke and consented to tell a story.

'A wolf...' began the Dormouse.

'Oh, a story about a wolf!' enthused Alice. 'I do love stories about wolves. They can be very scary. Is he to be the villain of the piece?'

'Hmm?' replied the Dormouse. 'What? No, no, he is just a wolf.'

'Then he is to be the protagonist?' asked Alice, who was very proud of this last word as it was a very fancy way of saying 'the main character'.

'Hmm? Um, quite,' said the Dormouse, then waited to see if Alice had more to say.

'Oh, please go on,' said Alice. 'I promise not to interrupt again.'

'A wolf,' said the Dormouse, pausing only a moment to see if there would be further interruptions, 'who found he could not sleep...'

'Leave it to you,' said the March Hare, 'to tell a story about a wolf, who only wants to go to sleep!'

'Be fair!' said the Hatter. 'He's only just begun. Any number of things could occur at this point.'

'Yes, please, let's give him a chance,' suggested Alice.

Everyone looked at the Dormouse, who looked lost. With all the interruptions, he had completely lost his place.

'A, uh, a, uh,' he muttered.

'A wolf...' prompted Alice.

'A wolf, who,' said the Dormouse, then paused.

'Found he could not sleep,' said Alice, with the Dormouse joining in somewhere toward the middle...

'Did stoop so low as counting sheep!' said the Dormouse triumphantly.

'Oh, wonderful!' laughed Alice. 'What a wonderfully comical picture!'

'I couldn't sleep once,' said the Hatter. 'I tried counting sheep. It was awful. So boring. Drove me quite mad.'

'Oh, is that what did it?' asked Alice, simply to provoke the Hatter.

'Oh! Guh-huh, guh-hah,' the Hatter pretended to laugh. This was his way of saying, 'Look at the oh-so-educated lady from the big city, come to make fun of us simple country folk.' For her part, Alice replied by sticking her tongue out the side of her mouth and rolling her eyes up in her head.

'The wolf, was, he went to bed,' said the Dormouse, trying to restart his story.

'No, no,' said Alice, and taking pity on the befuddled Dormouse repeated the story so far:

A wolf who found he could not sleep,  
Did stoop so low as counting sheep.

'And then there was, he looked, the sheep were in the field,' the Dormouse tried to pick up the story, but it was no use. 'I've completely lost my train of thought.'

'It must have been derailed!' laughed the Squirrel.

'Oh, what a shame,' said Alice. 'Your story had such a promising beginning, and I should ever so much like to know how it was to end. If you can't remember the exact words, could you at least tell us how it was likely to go?'

'Well,' said the Dormouse. 'I suppose the wolf would scare all the sheep, and he would become a sheep so they wouldn't run away, and then for some reason the sheep would become wolves, and they would eat him.'

'Oh, like we didn't see that coming,' said the March Hare.

'Well that's horrible,' said a disillusioned Alice to the Dormouse, except he was already back to sleep. 'Still, I suppose with some clever rhymes one might salvage a good story from it.'

'Your turn, Alice!' said the Hatter. 'Tell us a story.'

'Oh,' said Alice. 'I'm unprepared to tell a story. But I could recite Kilmer for you.'

'Yes, yes! Please do.' The March Hare, the Hatter, and the Squirrel sat attentively, and the Dormouse twitched in his sleep in an encouraging sort of way.

'All right then,' said Alice, who stood and cleared her throat:

I think that I shall never see  
A bumble bird or humming bee.

A bumble bird does swim and joust,  
Reads Oscar Wilde and Marcel Proust;

A humming bee's the quiet sort  
With evenings out and days in court.

In summer they're both out of style,  
With pillbox hats in patterns vile;

In winter they'll do even worse,  
With culottes or a mohair purse.

A fool like me might write a poem,  
But only God makes Styrofoam.

Alice's audience sat in stunned silence, attempting to comprehend what they had just heard. The March Hare was the first to speak.

'So which Kilmer wrote that? Val?'

'Oh, I'm so sorry!' apologized Alice. 'I really don't know what happened. The words just came out all wrong. Should I try again?'

'Why don't you try another poem?' suggested the Hatter. 'Something simpler. Do you know 'The Grand Old Duke of York'?''

'Oh yes! Of course.' Alice straightened her dress, cleared her throat and proceeded:

A grand old Dame from York,  
She had a man named Ken;  
She chased him into the bedroom where  
She poked him with a pen.

Again her audience sat in stunned silence, while Alice just looked mortified. This time the Hatter was the first to recover himself and speak.

'Well I've never heard that verse before.'

'I'm so sorry,' said Alice, almost in tears from embarrassment. 'The words just seem to be coming out all wrong today.'

'What will she do with 'When he was up he was up'?' asked the March Hare. 'It should be quite filthy from her mouth!'

The Squirrel laughed and laughed, in his high, squeaky way. 'Keep going! Keep going!' he egged her on.

Alice held her anger in check, with her arms straight at her sides and her tiny hands balled into fists. 'I shan't give you the satisfaction!' she yelled, then spun on her heel and stormed off.

'Come back! We'll do the actions this time!' the March Hare called after her. Alice kept walking, until the laughter of the mad tea party faded into the distance.

## **Chapter VI A Cat of Nine Tales**

Alice was furious, and so paid no attention whatsoever to where she was going. By the time she considered that it might be a good idea to know where she was, she was deep in the woods. The trees were quite thick, and the path she was following no longer looked like a path at all. She was tired, the branches tugged at her hair and dress to slow her down, and Alice just wanted to sit somewhere to rest.

The canopy of the trees above kept out most of the light, and so it was very dark. But after what seemed like ages, Alice noticed a bright area ahead. Following the light she soon broke into a small clearing, and at the center of the clearing was a signpost.

'Oh, thank goodness,' said Alice. 'I think if I should have spent one more moment lost in those woods I might have gone quite as mad as a hatter. But look, here is a signpost to guide me!'

Alice approached the signpost and read:

'Tiger Woods? All this time I've been in Tiger Woods! I do hope that's just a fanciful name. I certainly don't want to actually meet a tiger. That would be just too terrifying! Let's see what the sign has to say about getting out of here.

'To the left is, 'Nowhere Good'. To the right we have 'Hopelessly Lost'. Straight ahead reads, 'Turn Back Now', and behind me reads 'Wrong Choice!'

Alice fell to the ground, crying. 'Oh no! What is a girl to do? This place is so strange, and I'm so lost! And now, my best prospect is that I am eaten quickly by a tiger!' Alice sobbed loudly, and cried a small river of tears.

When one is feeling sorry for one's self, what one generally needs is a distraction from one's problems. In this case the one was Alice, and the distraction came not a moment too soon. Alice looked up from where she sobbed in the dirt, and sniffed.

'Oh, phew, what a smell! Where is that coming from? Oh, it's just awful,' said Alice as she scanned the area for any possible source while attempting to fan the fumes away from her face. Yet as strong as the odour was, Alice momentarily forgot all about it when she spotted a tiger on a high branch.

'Tiger!' cried Alice with a scream. She fell to the ground and covered her eyes, hoping to at least avoid seeing her certain death, as experiencing it was, of course, certain. Except nothing happened.

Alice lay on the ground for some time, until eventually she heard a voice.

'I am not a tiger, on a high branch,' the voice informed her calmly.

'No?' questioned Alice, daring to uncover one eye.

'No,' said the voice. 'I am a cat, on a low branch.'

Alice uncovered both eyes, to allow for depth perception. After focusing she determined that, in fact, it was a cat and not a tiger, sitting on a branch just a foot or two above her standing height.

Alice stood, and brushed the dirt from her dress. 'Oh, you are a cat!' she said. 'And you speak!'

'Just the occasional Rotary Club dinner,' replied the Cat. 'Nothing professional.'

Alice took a moment to recover from her fright, but was soon her old, curious self. 'I hope it's not terribly forward of me,' she said, 'but is it possible that you have been rolling in something foul?'

'Rolling?' replied the Cat. 'In something foul? I would say not.'

'It's just,' Alice attempted to explain. She pinched her nose and continued, 'Please don't take offense, but there is a terrible odour emanating from you.'

'I shall not take offense,' said the Cat. 'For you are but an ignorant child, not yet accustomed to the finer things in life. You see, I am a Stilton Cat.'

'A Stilton Cat?' said Alice, not letting on that she was, in fact, an ignorant girl in her early twenties. 'I had some idea that I might meet a Cheshire Cat, but I had no idea there even was such a thing as a Stilton Cat.'

'Oh, be glad you met me and not him,' warned the Stilton Cat. 'A Cheshire Cat is never seen without his grin. Believe me, you can't trust a cat who smiles too much, and too much for a cat is any smile at all.'

'So I should trust a cat who smells too much instead?' asked Alice, unable to resist a chance at wordplay even if it meant being awfully rude.

'Stilton is known for its strong aroma,' agreed the Cat. He went on to explain, 'And so you see, Stilton Cats are bred especially as champion mousers.'

'I would have thought that the smell would have warned the mice away,' said Alice, chancing to take her hand away from her nose.

'Not at all. In fact, the smell is what positively draws them to me!' explained the Cat. 'No mouse can resist the scent of a fine Stilton.'



'If you say so,' agreed Alice. She took a few breaths, and found the Cat's blue cheese odour becoming almost tolerable. 'I was hoping you could tell me the best way out of these woods.'

'Ah yes,' replied the Cat. 'Hope springs eternal. There is always hope.'

Alice waited to see if he had more to say. When it became obvious he did not, she asked again, 'So, can you?'

'Can I what?' replied the Cat.

'Can you please tell me the best way out of these woods,' asked Alice for a third time, as she became just a bit impatient.

'Of course,' said the Cat. 'The very best way is to fly.'

'Fly?' said Alice, now very puzzled.

'Oh, yes,' said the Cat. 'Absolutely, the best way out of these woods is to fly. It's very dark in the woods you know, but above the trees it's quite bright and sunny. You can see for miles, I understand, and head directly to any place you choose. Why, there's none of this walking around trees or climbing over rocks and hills, you just sail right over it all. And simple! No need for checking maps, or compass directions, or looking for moss on trees. Definitely, the best way out of the woods is to fly.'

'But I don't know how to fly,' said Alice.

'Of course not,' replied the Cat. 'I would be surprised if you did. Flying is primarily the domain of birds, and some insects. Now among the mammals, which would include both you and I, I believe only bats are capable of true flight. So don't be concerned that you are incapable of flight. You're not alone.'

'Well,' said Alice, becoming slightly discouraged, 'is there any other way out of these woods?'

'I know a mole who insists on digging everywhere he goes,' said the Cat. 'It's actually a reasonably effective way of getting around, although the advantages aren't at all obvious initially. You see, deep underground he's quite safe from all predators. I don't know for certain, but I suspect he would be able to tunnel all the way out of the woods.'

'But I can't dig all the way out of these woods!' said Alice in despair. 'I don't even have a shovel.'

'No one would ever suggest that you should dig your way out of the woods,' said the Cat. 'Moles are specially adapted for such endeavours. They don't use shovels; their four feet have been adapted for digging.'

'None of this helps me at all,' said Alice, as she began to cry once more. 'How will I ever find my way out of these woods?'

The Cat watched her cry for a little while, then spoke. 'Excuse me miss, but all this talk about ways to exit the woods. Is it possible, and I'm going out on a limb here (ba-dum-bum), but is it possible that you are lost?'

'Yes, and I don't know what to do,' said Alice between sobs.

'Well then, I would suggest to you that the very best way for a little girl who is lost in the woods to get out of those woods, would be to find someone who knows the way and have him show it to you.'

'Oh, would you? Could you?' said Alice with a smile. The Cat acquiesced, and so Alice lifted him down from his branch and the two of them proceeded through the woods together.

'You must forgive me,' said the Cat after they had been walking in silence for some time. 'But I'm as curious as a slithy tove. How did you manage to become so very lost, so very deep in the woods?'

'Oh, that is such a long story,' said Alice.

'It's a long way out of the woods,' said the Cat. 'There's plenty of time for a long story.'

'My goodness, where to begin?' said Alice. 'I suppose it all started when I wanted to catch the White Bunny. Ever since then I've been so many different things, to so many different people. I've been as big as a house, and as small as a mouse. Yet the Caterpillar thought I should be smaller still. And I've been very old, and very young, and the Dodo and all the woodland creatures insisted that I was a girl even though I was certain at the time that I wasn't. And they expected me to row their boat for them, except it was ever so difficult. Then I tried to recite poetry for the Hatter and the others, except they just laughed at me.'

'It sounds to me as if you're trying to live your life to please others,' said the Cat. 'You know that you can't please everyone, don't you? It's no wonder you're lost.'

'But what else am I to do?' asked Alice.

'Why, please yourself!' said the Stilton Cat. 'Don't let others tell you you're too big or too small. Don't let them tell you that your poetry is nonsense. You need to decide what's right for you, then live the life you want to live.'

'You make it sound so easy,' said Alice.

'That's because it is easy,' insisted the Cat. 'Outward appearances are just that – outward appearances. You can look like whatever you wish, or whatever someone else wishes for that matter, but inside you will always be the you you choose to be. That's where real change begins; it comes from within.'

'Then how is one to choose?' wondered Alice. 'What is the very best thing to be?'

'That's an easy one,' said the Cat. 'The very best thing to be is a Stilton Cat.'

'I don't think that would be the best thing for me,' said Alice.

'Of course not,' agreed the Cat. 'You don't want to go setting your sights so high. However, if you want a suggestion to get you started, think about something you're good at. For example, I could see you doing very well as, oh, perhaps, a maid.'

'A maid?' said Alice, tapping the palm of her hand with the handle of her feather duster. 'Why does everyone think I should be...? Wait a minute, where did this feather duster come from?'



'Outward appearances,' said the Cat. 'If you are to be a maid, you really ought to look like a maid. I suppose you could be a maid that looks like a television repairman, but it would be confusing and you would likely find less work.'

Alice examined her maid's uniform. The black satin dress had an off-the-shoulder top with white lace ruffles at the sleeves and bodice. The skirt was only inches long, and was held up by layers of lacy white petticoat. She wore black thigh-high stockings and high-heeled shoes, a white lace apron, and a starched white lace cap on top of her head.

'I don't want to be a maid,' said Alice as she tried to keep up with the Cat. Her heels kept sinking into the soft ground, and keeping up was becoming rather difficult.

'Why not?' asked the Cat. 'It's honest work.'

'Well yes, I suppose it is,' agreed Alice. 'Although

if I were to be a maid, I would not be the type who dressed like this! It's just that, I always thought I would be something more.'

'Of course! I understand,' said the Cat. 'Young girls always have dreams, don't they? What is it you dream, Alice? I'll bet in your mind, you are a ballerina!'

'No, I've never...' Alice started to say, but stopped as she realized she had changed once again. Instead of her black satin maid's uniform, she was all in pink! She wore a pink top with a sweetheart bodice, a full pink tutu, pink tights and pink ballet slippers, with pink glitter on everything like a sweet, sugar coating.

'I am not a ballerina!' said Alice. 'I can't even dance.'

'Well you need to understand that some dreams require a lot of hard work,' explained the Cat. 'You will have to study, and practice every day. But if you work hard, one day you will see your childhood dream come true and you will be a ballerina.'

'But that's not my dream!' Alice tried to explain, as she attempted to follow the Cat along a path that was far too narrow for her tutu.

The Cat stopped, and eyed Alice coldly. 'So you are too good to be a maid. And you're too good to be a ballerina. Why, Alice is too good for anything that might require her to actually perform a little work. I know what you are, you're a princess!'

'No, that's not it at all!' Alice tried to explain. 'It's just that... what on earth am I wearing now?'

Whatever it was, it was very heavy, and very hot. Her long gown was made from thick burgundy velvet. Antique brocade decorated the front of the dress, and detailed puff sleeves extended to her wrists. The conical hat she wore increased her height by a good two feet, with a veil draped from the very top and catching on every branch in the forest.

'This is your idea of a princess?' said Alice. 'I think you're about a thousand years out of style. Try reading a fashion magazine – Beatrice never wore anything like this!'

'Try to keep up, Princess!' called the cat, mocking Alice as he leapt over a log blocking their path. Alice tried to climb over, but caught her hat on a low branch. She eventually managed to crawl over the log, then ran to catch up.



'Would you please, slow, down?' panted Alice as she tried to set her hat back to rights and keep her dress off the muddy ground. 'I can hardly breathe in this thing. And I'm not being a princess! I don't want to be a maid, and I don't want to be a ballerina, but that doesn't mean I'm a spoiled little girl. Those were your choices, and weren't you the one who told me to stop trying to please everyone else?'

The Stilton Cat stopped on the path and waited for Alice to catch up. 'You're right,' he said. 'Perhaps I should give you the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps you aren't a princess. So tell me, what is it you truly want to be?'

'Well, I don't know...' said Alice meekly.

'Oh, here we go again,' said the Cat angrily. 'You want others to do all the hard work, thinking up another idea for you, which you can just shoot down under any flimsy pretext.'

'That's not it! I don't know exactly,' Alice tried to explain. 'But, I have some ideas. You see, I'm wondering if I could have a male appearance. Deep down, I still think that I may be a man.'

'Oh, if only a cat could laugh,' said the Cat quite seriously. 'A man? You? I'm sorry, but are you in the wrong story.'

Alice and the Cat continued on through the forest. Neither spoke. Alice continued to disentangle her hat and veil from the branches as necessary, and the Cat tried to ignore the forlorn expression on her face.

'Oh, all right,' the Cat said after this had gone on for some time. 'We'll try something masculine.'



What would you say to being, oh I don't know, a construction worker?'

'Oh, that would be wonderful!' enthused Alice, her face positively radiant in her delight.

Alice immediately felt that the heavy velvet gown was gone. She looked down, and saw steel-toed construction boots where her tiny slippers had been just a moment earlier. Reaching up, she realized her conical hat and veil had been replaced by a construction hard hat. Instead of a sash woven from silk threads with tassels, she now wore a leather belt holding heavy tools. And instead of a medieval gown with antique brocade, she wore a red halter top and denim miniskirt.

'There, that's a bit more masculine, don't you think?' suggested the Cat.

Alice looked at herself in astonishment. 'Exactly what do you see in this outfit that is the least bit masculine?'

The Cat looked surprised. He answered, 'Why, the leather! And denim, denim is a very manly fabric. The steel-toed boots!'

Alice looked frustrated. 'Denim is not a manly fabric, when it's used in a miniskirt! And there is absolutely nothing masculine about a halter top.'

'Well, you've got the whole construction-machismo thing going on,' suggested the Cat.

'You are unbelievable!' said Alice. 'Hey, these boots have high heels. Who would ever even make these?'

'These are just outward appearances,' the Stilton Cat explained again. 'True change comes from within. You are who you are on the inside, and only you can change that.'

'Okay, okay, I get it,' said Alice. 'Could we just drop this whole conversation, please?'

'Fine,' said the Cat, as they continued on through the woods. After a while he suggested, 'Would you like to be the maid again? You really were a very pretty maid.'

'Thank you, no,' replied Alice. 'This outfit will do for hiking through the woods. I'll keep it for now. And you knew all along that these steel-toed boots had high heels, didn't you?'

Alice and the Stilton Cat continued on, once more in silence. It wasn't long before Alice saw a bright patch through the trees. Alice ran toward it, knowing it had to be the way out.

When Alice finally emerged from the trees, she looked around in astonishment. The Stilton Cat leapt into the clearing, landing beside her. He rubbed against her legs affectionately, then climbed a familiar tree where he settled down on a branch.

'But, but,' said Alice, finding herself speechless. Finally she managed to say, 'But, this is the same clearing where we started!'

'Of course it is,' said the Cat. 'The difference being, of course, that this time you are not lost. This time you know exactly where you are!'

'You've been leading us around in circles!' Alice accused the Cat. 'You were going to show me the best way out of the woods!'

'The best way,' said the Cat, 'The very best way, is like this.' And then the Cat simply disappeared.

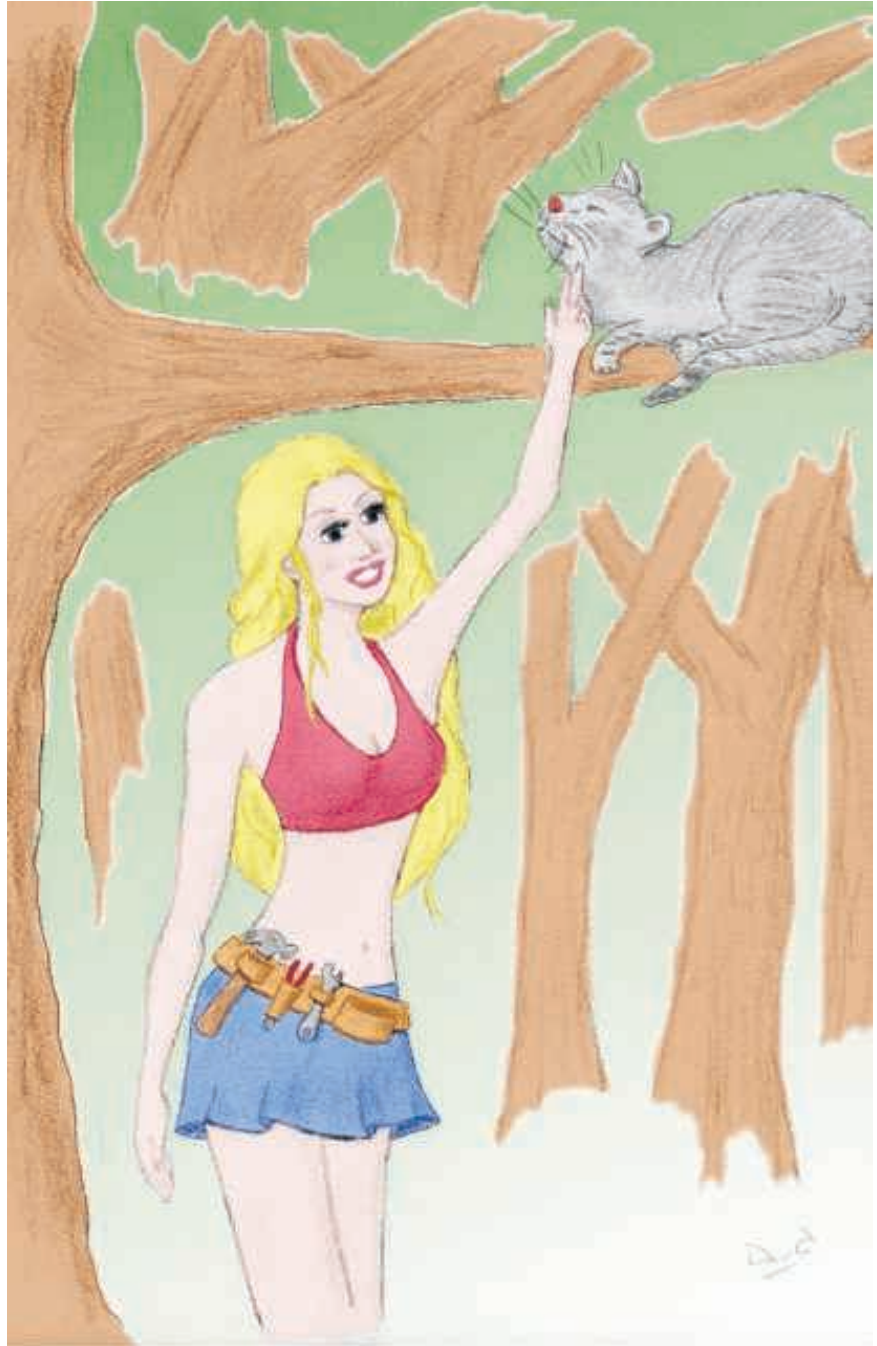
'Wait!' cried Alice. 'You said you would show me the way out.'

The Cat then reappeared in a puff of Stilton fumes. 'I thought I just did that,' he said. 'But I'll tell you again. Choose a direction, Alice, the direction that's right for you, and follow it.' And then he disappeared, slowly this time, starting from the tip of his tail and proceeding to the tips of his whiskers, until all that remained was his smell.

'The direction that's right for me!' pouted Alice, as she crossed the clearing to look once again at the signpost. 'What is that supposed to mean? Every direction leads to disaster. Oh wait, look!'

Alice looked at the signpost. In addition to the four signs pointing in four directions that she had seen before, there was a sign she hadn't noticed the first time. This one said, 'Best Direction for Alice', and pointed in an entirely new direction she hadn't even known existed.

Alice walked in the direction indicated, looking forward to leaving Tiger Woods well behind her.



## Chapter VII The Folly of Youth

Alice emerged from the woods quite easily, following her new direction. The direction led to a stream, and the stream led to a path, and the path led her out of the woods and into the bright sunshine. With the sun bright and warm on her smiling face, Alice was not at all surprised to find that she was once again wearing her familiar blue dress.

'How many times have I said to myself that I would never get used to anything in this strange place?' Alice asked herself. 'And yet, I am used to this blue dress. It's comfortable, and familiar, and pretty. And I'm always glad to see it again!'

Once again Alice found herself on a long walk, and even though this was a pleasant walk through sweet-smelling countryside in the lovely warm sunshine, Alice soon found herself once more overcome by exhaustion.

'I do hope I shall find some place where I might stop and rest,' Alice said. And no sooner had she said this to herself than she came up over a hill to find a beautiful country estate.

'Goodness, how very grand,' said Alice. She passed through the outer gate, and approached the front door with some trepidation. 'I wonder who lives here? It is certainly much more grand than I'm used to!'

However, exhaustion won out over propriety, and Alice knocked at the imposing front door. Barely a moment passed before the door swung open, revealing a footman in livery with a face so odd, if it had been green Alice would assume him to be a frog.

'Are you the babysitter?' croaked the Frog-Faced Footman.

'Oh!' said Alice, taken aback at the lack of introductions and the unexpected question. However she recovered quickly and explained herself.

'No sir, I'm not. I was just passing by your beautiful estate and...'

Alice was not given a chance to finish her sentence, however, before the Footman closed the door.

'How very rude!' said Alice. Undeterred, she knocked again, ready to give that footman a piece of her mind. And once again, the door swung open immediately.

'Are you the babysitter?' asked the Frog-Faced Footman again, exactly as he had the previous time.

This was not what Alice expected, but she thought to herself, 'Why not? If he is going to play silly games, then I shall show him how we play under my rules.'

'Yes!' she told the Footman. 'Yes, I am the babysitter.'

The Footman eyed her suspiciously, making Alice feel rather uncomfortable about her lie. After a few very awkward moments he told her, 'You are too old to be a babysitter.'

The Footman made to close the door once again, but Alice caught it and asked, 'Just how old is a babysitter supposed to be?' The Footman opened the door and Alice stepped back, awaiting his reply.

'A babysitter,' he told her quite pretentiously, 'is twelve.' And then he slammed the door once again.

'Well, let's just see what we can do about that!' said Alice. Reaching into the left pocket of her apron, Alice pulled out a piece of mushroom.

'It looks like this will come in handy after all,' she said. Alice nibbled at the mushroom and soon felt herself shrinking, growing younger. When she judged herself to be about twelve she put the remaining mushroom back in her apron, and knocked on the door.

The door swung open immediately. 'Are you the babysitter?' asked the Frog-Faced Footman again, in precisely the same way.

'Yes!' said Alice in the high-pitched voice of a child. 'I'm the babysitter, and I'm twelve years old.'

'How delightfully precocious,' said the Footman as he ushered her into the front hall. 'What is your name?'

'My name is Alice,' 12-year old Alice introduced herself. 'What's your name?'

The Frog-Faced Footman ignored her question, and led her down the main hallway. They turned into the library, which appeared to serve double duty as a playroom. In the room was a thin, fine-featured young man. He was good looking in an almost girlish way, and not much older than Alice. Alice's real age, that is, not twelve. To avoid confusion let's say he was twenty-five. He paced the floor nervously, but looked up when Alice and the Footman arrived.

'Announcing Alice, the babysitter,' said the Footman. 'His Grace, the Duke of Middenhale.' The Frog-Faced Footman then turned and left, closing the door behind him and leaving Alice alone with the Duke.

'Your Grace!' said Alice, taken aback by the title, but still remembering her manners and curtsying as low as she could.

'Your name is Alice?' said the Duke. 'That's not right. Babysitters are named Margaret. Or possibly Jenny. Yes, Jenny I think.'

Alice did not want to be thrown out again, and so went along with the Duke's suggestion. 'Oh yes, I forgot. My name is Jenny.'

'Then why did you say your name was Alice?' asked the Duke.

'Well,' said Alice, thinking quickly. 'Sometimes people who don't know me, they think my name is Alice. And, um, since you didn't know me, I thought you would call me that. But now you know me so please feel free to call me Jenny. Sir.' She ended this speech with a slight curtsy.

The Duke stared at her a moment, but obviously reached the conclusion that this answer was satisfactory.

'Very good,' he said at last. 'The Duchess and I will be out until quite late. May I introduce to you your charge for the evening, Princess Baby Doll Pretty Kittums Snuggle Bunny Whosa Big Girl Now Jelly Bean Botty Boo Windsock-Sweet.' And then he added (rather wistfully, Alice thought), 'I wanted to name her Chloe.'

Alice turned and found the baby in a playpen, in the corner of the room. The baby reached out to her, so Alice lifted her up. Holding the baby, she turned to the Duke and asked, 'So that's all her name?'

'Yes,' said the Duke. 'Named after her grandmother, on her mother's side.'

'So she's a Princess then?' asked Alice.

'Don't be ridiculous,' replied the Duke disapprovingly. 'You do understand the whole concept of a name, don't you?'

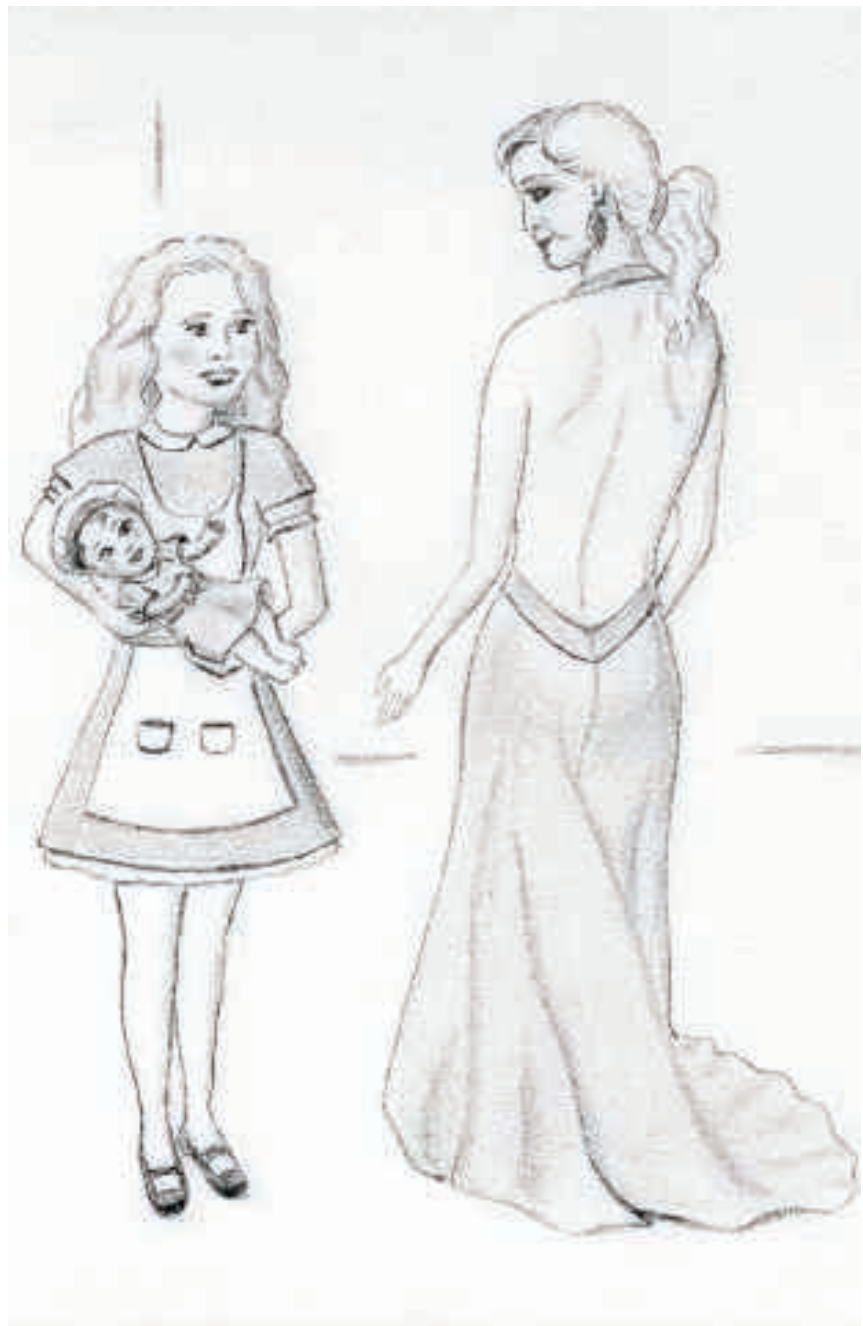
This entire time, the Duke had been pacing nervously. Satisfied with the babysitting situation, he returned to dealing with his major concern. The Duke rang a bell, and a fish-faced footman appeared.

'Did you find her?' asked the Duke.

'No Sir,' replied the Fish-Faced Footman. 'She hasn't returned from her outing. We searched the house and grounds just to be certain, but she is not here.'

'This is very bad,' said the Duke, wringing his hands. 'The Queen is expecting the Duchess! And if the Queen is disappointed, she'll have both our heads.'

'It's getting late, Sir,' said the Fish-Faced Footman. Then, as if speaking in a secret code he said, 'We can't wait any longer. You're go-



ing to have to... 'find' the Duchess, yourself? There is one of her Ladies in Waiting, in her bedroom to assist you.'

'Yes, yes, very well,' said the Duke as he left the library, closing the door behind.

'Well that was odd,' said Alice to the baby. 'If the Duchess isn't here, what good will it do for the Duke to search for her? Surely they've already looked in her bedroom. Still, that's his problem and for once I'm glad to leave something to someone else for a change.'

Alice played with the baby for the next half hour or so. Princess had many dolls and stuffed animals, which Alice helped her to arrange into a tea party on the carpet. All the dollies were having a lovely time, with the teddy bear about to offer round a tray of biscuits, when the library door opened.

A pretty woman whom Alice did not know entered and addressed her. 'All right, I'm late and must be leaving now,' said the woman. She was quite tall, approximately the same height as the Duke, plus a couple inches for heels. She was good looking, in an almost boyish way. She had on a long, formal gown, her hair was done up, and she wore far too much makeup for Alice's taste.

Alice stood quickly and curtsied to the woman. 'Your Grace! My name is Al... My name is Jenny. I'm your babysitter.'

'Yes, I know,' replied the woman. 'We met earlier.'

'I don't think so,' said Alice. 'I've only met the Duke since I arrived.'

'Oh yes!' said the woman, laughing a bit too loud. 'You met the Duke, and I am the Duchess. Not the Duke.'

The Duchess walked quickly out of the library, down the main hallway to the front entrance with Alice hurrying to catch up, carrying the baby.

'And now I have to run. The Queen is expecting me, you know. Goodnight, Jelly Bean.' This last comment was directed to Princess, with a kiss on her forehead.

Alice carried the baby out the front door, where she watched the Duchess leave with her lady in waiting and the two footmen in a carriage.

'Well, I guess it's just you and me,' Alice said to Princess. She carried her back into the home, and had no sooner shut the front door than Princess began to cry.

'Oh, don't cry,' said Alice sweetly. 'Mommy and Daddy will be home soon. We'll have some fun, won't we? Do you want to go to the tea party?'

But Princess did not want to go to the tea party. She continued to cry as Alice served the imaginary tea to the dolls and animals. She continued to cry as Alice tried to feed her mushy peas. She continued to cry as Alice tried to give her a bath, and she continued to cry as Alice tried to get her to lie down in her crib with a warm bottle.

Alice sat in a rocking chair in the nursery, holding Princess, rocking her as she continued to cry into her third hour. 'Honestly, Princess Baby Doll!' said Alice in frustration. 'I've tried everything. I just don't know what you want. If only you were just a little older you could tell me, but you're not.'

Then Alice got an idea. It was a very bad idea, but after two hours with a screaming baby it can be difficult to tell the difference. She reached into her right apron pocket and pulled out a piece of mushroom.

'Here, Princess Baby Doll,' said Alice, tempting the baby with the bit of mushroom. 'Mmm, num num. So good! Princess loves mushroom.'

Princess never stopped crying, but Alice was able to get her to eat the mushroom. Her plan was to age Princess until she was around two, and able to speak just a little. Unfortunately Alice was unaware of the required mushroom dosage for children, and it was difficult to get Princess to even look at small pieces. Once Princess had eaten a piece, however, she started to grow. And grow. She grew until she was too big for Alice's lap and she slid to the floor.

When she finally stopped growing, Princess and Alice stared at each other. It was difficult to tell who appeared more shocked: 12-year-old Alice looking down, or 12-year-old Princess looking up.

Princess looked at her hands. 'Begir,' she said with a smile. 'Big girr!'

Alice knew this was very bad, but she was just so relieved that Princess had stopped crying. 'Yes, big girl! Look at you, such a big girl!'

'No da baby,' laughed Princess as she stood on her wobbly long legs. 'Big girl!'

'Such a pretty big girl! Does she want to wear a pretty, big girl dress?' Alice led Princess to the closet, and found a few suitable clothes near the back.

'Look, a pretty blue dress. So nice, Princess is such a big girl!' Alice helped Princess into the dress, slipping it over her head and doing up the buttons. 'There now. Princess is a big girl, just like Alice.'

'Big girl,' said Princess again. Then she spotted a doll. Picking it up and cuddling it she said, 'Baby!'

'Oh, is Princess the babysitter now?' asked Alice playfully. 'What does baby want to do?'

'S'leep,' said Princess with a yawn. She sat on a little cot at the side of the nursery, and then lay down with the baby doll in her arms. Her eyes closed, and she was soon fast asleep, her thumb firmly in her mouth.

'Well that was easy!' said Alice. 'Self-sitting babies, what will they think of next? They're so cute, once they're asleep.' Alice tried to remove the thumb from Princess' mouth, but it was stuck fast.

'How am I going to get her to eat this mushroom and become a baby again if I can't dislodge her thumb?' said Alice. But all attempts failed, and she was seriously worried about the possibility of Princess waking. Finally Alice gave up, and left 12-year-old Princess asleep in the nursery.

'She'll be just fine for now,' Alice decided. 'I'll deal with her later.'

Alice wandered through the house, eventually finding the kitchen. She boiled some water and made herself a cup of tea and an egg, finally able to sit for the first time in ages. She was hardly halfway finished though, when she heard the front door open. Alice raced

down the main hallway to see who it could be. In the front entryway she found the Duchess.

'Your Grace,' said Alice with a curtsy.

'Who are you?' asked the Duchess.

'Why, I'm Al... I'm Jenny,' said Alice. 'The babysitter. We met earlier.'

'Earlier?' said the Duchess. 'I don't think so, I've been out all evening, but I suppose it doesn't matter. I'm supposed to see the Queen this evening and I'm late. I just came home to check on the baby.'

'Oh, she's fine,' said Alice nervously. 'She's asleep. So tired, poor little thing. So you can be on your way.'

'Bring her to me,' commanded the Duchess.

'Oh, no I couldn't, you see...' said Alice, trying to invent an excuse.

'Bring her to me!' shouted the Duchess.

'Yes ma'am, right away ma'am,' said Alice as she raced up the stairs. She had a piece of mushroom ready in her hand by the time she reached the nursery. Alice found Princess exactly where she had left her, sleeping on the little cot with her baby doll.

'Princess, you have to get up!' said Alice, trying to lift her to a sitting position. 'Mommy's home, wake up and see Mommy. Here, try this mushroom, mmm, so yummy.'

Unfortunately, Princess was not the type who wakes gracefully. And being a 12-year-old girl, she was an equal match for Alice.

'No!' she declared, holding Alice's hands and the mushroom away from her. 'Bad! Dirty!' she declared.

'What is going on up here?' Alice heard the Duchess say from the hallway just outside the nursery. Alice tried again to force the mushroom into Princess' mouth, but it was no good. Princess was just as strong as she was, and equally determined.

'Please Princess,' said Alice. 'The Duchess will be furious if she finds two girls and no baby!'

'Are you in here?' said the Duchess. Alice looked over her shoulder, just in time to see the door handle turn and the door open. Thinking quickly, she ceased her struggle with Princess, and popped the mushroom in her own mouth.

\* \* \*

Alice looked up, way up from the floor at the legs approaching her. She struggled to crawl through the neck of her blue dress, which lay as if dropped on top of her.

'Baby doll!' said Princess, looking down at Alice. 'Dirty!' she yelled, plucking the remaining mushroom from Alice's chubby fist with ease.

'Yes, here she is,' said the Duchess, bending down to pick Alice up in her arms. 'Here's my Snuggle Bunny! Look at you, did baby girl crawl out of her clothes again? Mommy will find you a pretty dress, yes she will!'

The Duchess carried Alice to the change table, where she found a pretty pink night-dress with sweet little ruffles and lace and bows. Alice was quickly powdered and diapered, then changed into the baby dress with matching bloomers.

'There's my Pretty Kittums,' said the Duchess, admiring Alice at arm's length. 'Mommy's sweet angel. Does she want her cribby-byes now? I think she does. Yes, so tired, in the crib she goes. Nighty-night, Princess Baby Doll.'

Princess (the real Princess) and the Duchess backed out of the room, turning out the light to let the baby sleep. When they were gone Alice stood and tried to climb out of the crib, but she was too small. Listening carefully she was able to hear the Duchess leave by the front door.

'Oh poor Princess!' she said, although it sounded more like 'O, p p b' in her tiny baby voice. 'She's all alone, with no one to take care of her.'

Then the door to the nursery opened. The light came on, and Princess crossed over to the crib, lifting Alice out.

'Baby doll!' she said ominously.

\* \* \*

So now Alice, who was also the babysitter named Jenny, was now the baby while Princess who was the baby was now the babysitter who was also Jenny, who, depending how complicated you wished things, could also be thought of as Alice. However to be as clear as possible, we shall refer to them as Baby Alice and Princess. If that is not clear then please don't expect it to get any better.

Baby Alice was beginning to realize just how bad an idea it had been, to turn Princess into a 12-year old. The fact that this was not her intent was of little consolation. And if turning Princess into a 12-year old was a bad idea, turning herself into a baby was the absolute height of poor thinking.

'I think that I should much rather look after a crying baby than be looked after by one,' said Baby Alice.

This was not to say that Princess had been crying. Princess had been having a wonderful time these past few hours, running through the house, throwing toys, and taking her favourite dolly, Baby Alice, with her everywhere.

Of course, no one had ever taught Princess how to carry a baby. And so she carried Baby Alice variously by a piece of her clothing, or a leg, or simply as one might carry a small sack under an arm. She ran joyfully from room to room, dropping Baby Alice momentarily while she explored mysterious cupboards and closets and shelves, or worse, not dropping her during these explorations. Then she would grab up her dolly Baby Alice and race to the next adventure.

At some point in the evening, events seemed to become less random. It was nothing Baby Alice could really put her chubby finger on, but it seemed to her that Princess had developed a sense of purpose.

It was around the time that Princess had made her way back to the library, Baby Alice would later think to herself. Princess had carried Baby Alice into the library and had then simply stood there, holding Baby Alice by the leg, staring into the room.

Princess entered the room and set Baby Alice on the floor. Alice struggled to turn herself right-side up, and found herself seated at the tea party she had arranged earlier. Princess was seated opposite her, busily pouring imaginary tea into toy teacups, then throwing the cups at the guests.

'This is better,' said Baby Alice as a teacup bounced off her forehead. 'Why, plastic toy teacups hardly hurt at all! Perhaps I can keep her playing here until she grows tired and goes to sleep.'

And so Baby Alice picked up a teacup in her plump little fists, and made yummy noises encouragingly. Princess would refill the cups regularly and toss them again. Then she would pass around a bin of imaginary biscuits, ensuring each guest was suitably struck somewhere about their person. None of the other participants appeared to mind, but of course they were all dolls and stuffed animals.

As enjoyably non-life threatening as this activity was, it couldn't hold Princess' attention forever. She had a sense of purpose, and eventually picked up Baby Alice, carrying her away from the library. Alice soon found herself in the kitchen, seated precariously in a very high highchair. Princess was searching through the fridge and soon found what she was looking for – a huge bowl of mushy peas.

'I know what she's doing!' said Baby Alice. 'She's playing babysitter. She's doing all the things we did earlier. Let's see, I fed her some mushy peas, and what came next?'

Baby Alice was not given a chance to think about it. However, to have done so would, at the very least, be getting far ahead of herself. For being fed mushy peas by a 12-year old baby should have been her immediate concern.

Princess was, after all, a baby. To her, every spoon looked huge, and every bowl enormous. She therefore didn't know any better than to try to feed an entire mixing bowl full of cold mushy peas to Baby Alice, using the mixing spoon.

'Princess, please! Wait till I've finished one spoon before giving me the next, for pity's sake!' said Baby Alice through a mouthful of mushy peas. Of course, this sentence would have sounded like gibberish without the peas, and so sounded like nothing at all with them.

Baby Alice couldn't have eaten the entire bowl under any circumstances. Fortunately for her, Princess didn't seem to feel that eating them was the main objective. She was just as happy to see the peas on Baby Alice as in. Baby Alice fended off the spoon as well as she could, but Princess was determined and continued until every last spoonful dripped from Baby Alice somewhere.

'Ah gone!' shouted Princess when the bowl was empty. She knocked the bowl and spoon to the floor, and lifted the slippery, green Baby Alice from the highchair. 'Bad baby, dirty!'

Baby Alice was relieved that her feeding was done, but couldn't help dreading what was next. 'What was it we did after feeding Princess?' she wondered, as she was sure now that Princess was playing babysitter and recreating their earlier evening. Unfortunately she was being carried backward, and couldn't see where they were going. It was therefore something of a surprise (of the unpleasant sort) when she found herself dumped, clothes and all, into the bathtub.

Baby Alice looked up, way up over the tall walls of the tub, to the giant 12-year old Princess grinning down at her.

Fortunately for Baby Alice, most of the buttons, clips, ties, bows, and snaps that held her clothing together had come undone during her rough treatment through the evening. So even with Princess constantly pushing her into the cold, running water, she was able to slip, paw, and crawl her way out of her baby clothes before they dragged her down and drowned her.

Princess' concept of a bath was to fill the tub, then push poor Baby Alice repeatedly under the water. To her credit, this was highly effective at cleaning green goop from a baby's face, hair, underarms, and everywhere else it had dribbled. Most babies, however, would find it a rather difficult treatment to survive. Alice timed her breathing for those rare moments when she found herself right-side up and above water.

And then it all stopped. Baby Alice found herself seated, precariously, in the deep end of the tub, and watched as Princess became distracted and dashed out the door.

'Never leave the baby alone in the tub!' Baby Alice called out after her, admonishing the absent Princess. Although she had to admit, having Princess leave you alone in the tub actually improved your chance of survival.

Baby Alice sat very still for a while, as she had to be extremely careful not to slip under the deep water. Then she noticed the chain holding the plug in place was within reach. Carefully hooking her arm around the chain, she pulled the plug, and within a few minutes the water was gone.

'Now, to get out of this tub!' said the soggy Baby Alice. Crawling carefully over the slippery surface she made her way to the other end, where the tub wall was not quite so high. Then using every ounce of baby-strength she could find, Baby Alice managed to pull herself up and over the side, landing on the bathroom floor.

Which was when Princess returned.

Princess looked in the tub. 'No baff,' she said with disappointment. Grabbing a fresh towel from the towel stand, she scooped Baby Alice from the floor, wrapped her face, and carried her to the nursery.

Baby Alice was dumped unceremoniously on the change table, where Princess found a fresh, pink dress for her to wear. Between the two of them, they managed to get Baby Alice into it with minimal injury. Then Baby Alice was lifted, and dropped into the crib.

Princess searched around the crib until she found what she wanted, the bottle of warm milk Alice had tried to give to her earlier.

'D'ink a bodda!' said Princess, forcing the bottle at Baby Alice.

'I've put up with a lot, tonight,' said Baby Alice as she struggled. 'But I am not going to drink from a baby bottle!' she said with determination.

'D'ink it!' said Princess. And suddenly, Baby Alice remembered something important.

'Of course!' she said. 'When I first arrived, the bottle which made me large had a note tied around the neck that read, 'Drink it'! Now here is a bottle, and once again I'm being told to drink it. It makes so much sense. If I want to grow I should drink it!'

Baby Alice stopped struggling, and allowed Princess to place the baby bottle in her mouth. Baby Alice sucked at the rubber nipple, and drank the warm milk. She took the bottle, holding it as best she could, continuing to drink as Princess went back to the tiny cot to lie down.

It only took a short while before Alice felt herself being pulled away, into a safe, warm place.

\* \* \*

Alice opened her eyes. Bright sunlight was shining in through the window, and she needed to blink several times before she could see properly.

'Goodness, I'm so glad that's over!' she said. 'I don't know where I am now, but it must be an improvement over... oh.'

Baby Alice sat up in her crib. She grabbed the bars in front of her like a prisoner on death row, staring out at the pink nightmare that was Princess' room.

'Curse you, warm milk,' said Baby Alice. Which was not a nice thing to say, but given all she had been through must really be forgiven. For it seemed the only magical thing that the warm milk achieved was to put Baby Alice into a sound sleep.

Within moments of Baby Alice waking, the Nanny arrived to take care of her. Without a word she lifted Baby Alice from her prison cell, then quickly and efficiently removed her old dress, wiped and powdered her, and put her in a new diaper and a bright red dress with matching bonnet and knit booties. Then Baby Alice heard the words that sent a chill up her spine...

'Baby doll, baby doll!'

'Just a moment,' cautioned the Nanny as she put the finishing touches on Baby Alice's bows. 'You're very lucky, Baby Doll. Your babysitter stayed all night, and she has waited patiently all morning for you to wake up and play with her.' The Nanny lifted Baby Alice and held her so she could see Princess.

'Hey!' said Baby Alice with as much outrage as a baby possibly can. 'That's my blue dress you're wearing! Who said you could wear my blue dress?'

The Nanny handed Baby Alice to Princess, who grabbed her and started to run.

'Take her to her mother,' the Nanny called after her. 'And take care. She's a baby, not a football!'

\* \* \*

The Duke spread a bit of jam on a piece of toast, and set it on the kitchen table in front of the Duchess. The Duchess took a small bite, and continued speaking.

'I mean honestly, I was humiliated! To arrive at the Queen's Ball last night, and find...'

'I did say I was sorry, darling,' said the Duke while buttering a piece of toast for himself.

'But that gown!' said the Duchess. 'I wore that same gown just last week, surely you remember? If you don't I guarantee to you that every woman at the ball last night does. Really, what must people think?'

'I'll try to be more careful in the future,' said the Duke meekly.

'How could you? You really need to think like a woman if you're going to...'

'Oh look,' said the Duke, happy for a chance to change the subject. 'Here's the babysitter. Jenny, isn't it?'

'And she's brought us our Botty Boo!' replied the Duchess. 'Place her in her highchair, Jenny. And could you please get her pabulum from the counter? Thank you dear.'

For once, Princess seemed to be behaving herself, doing as she was told, and sitting quietly at the table while the Duchess spoon fed Baby Alice her nasty pabulum.

'Jenny is working out so well, don't you agree darling?' the Duchess asked her husband.

'Hmm?' replied the Duke, who was not really listening. 'Um, quite.'

'I mean, when I first met her last night,' said the Duchess, and then continued in a whisper as if 'Jenny' would not hear, 'I thought she might be a bit simple! But since then she's been a godsend!'

'Baby, baby!' said Princess.

'Yes, entirely focused on the job,' said the Duke.

'Would you like to try it, Jenny?' asked the Duchess, handing her the baby spoon. Jenny took over the feeding, and Baby Alice watched her nervously.

'Wouldn't it be more proper for her to be using a soup spoon, lovey?' asked the Duke, indicating the Baby Alice with his chin.

'No dear,' the Duchess corrected him. 'It's entirely acceptable etiquette for her to use a baby spoon, so long as she is a baby.'

'Hmph, don't know about that,' said the Duke.

Breakfast proceeded without incident, although Baby Alice was extremely nervous of the spoon Princess repeatedly shoved at her. Baby Alice finished her pabulum, watching

Princess closely but also watching the Duke, and wondered why he was wearing one false eyelash.

Following her breakfast, Baby Alice was lifted from her highchair by the Duchess, who wiped her face thoroughly using a damp cloth. Princess followed the Duchess about, impatiently reaching and gesturing to have her baby returned.

‘Would you like to take Princess Baby Doll for a walk, Jenny?’ asked the Duchess.

‘Baby doll baby doll!’ said Princess.

‘That certainly sounds like a yes to me,’ said the Duke.

‘Are you two out of your minds?’ said Baby Alice. ‘You can’t possibly leave me alone with her! You have no idea what she’s capable of. This is reckless child endangerment!’

‘Oh, such a big speech from our widdle Snuggle Bunny,’ said the Duchess in baby talk, nose to nose with Baby Alice. ‘I think she wants to go for a nice walk with Jenny, yes she does!’

‘Unbelievable,’ groaned Baby Alice, slapping her forehead with a tiny hand. ‘I suppose I really must work on my diction and enunciation.’

‘The pram is at the rear entrance,’ the Duke informed Jenny as he led everyone out of the kitchen. When they reached the rear entrance he took Baby Alice from the Duchess and placed her in the pram, while the Duchess made sure the pram was stocked with plenty of spare clothes and other essentials for the walk.

‘Oh dear,’ said the Duke with a sniff. ‘We may need to postpone temporarily. I think Jelly Bean may need a change.’

Baby Alice looked affronted. ‘I most certainly do not!’ she told him in no uncertain terms.

‘No dear, that’s just the cat,’ the Duchess informed him, pointing out that the cat had just entered the hallway.

Baby Alice sniffed, recognizing a familiar smell, then sat up in her pram. ‘The Stilton Cat!’ she exclaimed. ‘Please, it’s me, Alice!’ she said with a frantic wave. The Stilton Cat looked up at Baby Alice, as she peered over the side of the pram at him.

‘Alice, is that you?’ said the Cat in disbelief. He managed to convey a sense of utter disappointment as he continued, ‘After all my good advice, this is what you’ve decided to do with your life?’

‘Please, you have to help me!’ Baby Alice pleaded. ‘No one understands me! You have to tell them who I am!’

‘Of course no one understands you,’ said the Stilton Cat. ‘The decisions you make are completely inexplicable. Whatever happened to your lifelong dream of becoming a ballerina?’

‘That wasn’t my dream!’ said Baby Alice, as Princess wheeled her out the back door. ‘Please help me!’

‘Unbelievable,’ said the Stilton Cat once Princess and Baby Alice were gone. ‘Now she’s a baby. What an incredibly lazy girl.’

Princess pushed Baby Alice in her pram and out the rear gate. She then ran, pushing the pram at (literal) breakneck speeds all the way to the park. The fact that no baby pram has ever won the Tour de France is a strong hint that they were never meant for such speeds. Baby Alice braced herself, wrapping herself as well as she could in her blankets to reduce the impact each time she was thrown from the overturned buggy. This never phased Princess one bit, as she would simply turn it right side up, dump baby and contents back inside, and race off to the park once more.

By the time they reached the park, Princess was quite winded and so was pushing the pram at a more relaxed pace. Baby Alice felt confident enough in the pram's stability to risk a peek over the side in order to get her bearings. This was when she first noticed that they had wandered into the middle of a large flock of schoolgirls.

'Oh, you have a baby! Isn't she just darling!'

'Look, Emily! A baby. Oh, she's simply adorable!'

'Look at her bonnet, and her tiny booties! You're such a cutie!'

'Do let us have a look! Oh, isn't she just so precious!'

'May I hold her?'

But Princess was no longer there to answer, having been distracted by something shiny and run off. So Baby Alice spent the rest of the morning in the company of the flock. They held her, and cuddled her, and passed her about, every one of them pretending for just a moment that Baby Alice was her very own baby.

And Baby Alice was never so happy in her life. For, although not every girl knew how to hold a baby, at least they were all trying their best, and certainly none of the schoolgirls held her upside-down or spilled her out on the ground.

Baby Alice was a little concerned about Princess. After all, Princess was only a baby and Baby Alice felt responsible for her. But realistically she knew there was nothing she could do for Princess, and a great deal Princess could do to her. No, Baby Alice was much better off where she was, safe in the arms of these girls who only wanted to snuggle and kiss her.

'One day I shall have a baby of my own, and I'll hold her like this forever and never let her go.'

'Mmm, she still has that new-baby smell.'

'Look, Caroline! Her pram is filled with the most smashing little dresses! Look at the little ribbons and lace. Let's change her!'

The schoolgirls selected a darling, sunny yellow tea-length dress with puff sleeves, accented with a white sash around the waist, and baby tights and a hair band to go with. They set out a cloth on the grass, and laid Baby Alice upon it to undress her.

'Oh my goodness,' remarked one of the girls, as Baby Alice lay naked on the grass. 'What is that?'

'What is what?'

'This,' said the girl, pointing. 'Do you know what it is?'

'I'm not sure. Hetty, do you know what this is?'

The girl who was apparently named Hetty took a brief a look. She replied, 'It's nothing. My little brother has one.'

'But what's it for?'

'Well he plays with it.'

Another girl joined the conversation, looking dubious. 'It doesn't look like much fun.'

'Look, if she's a girl but she has one of those, then how can you even tell she's really a girl?'

'It's obvious, because she's wearing a dress.'

'I don't believe she can actually play with it, do you?'

So Baby Alice tried to play with the little thing, but it was so small and slippery her chubby fingers simply couldn't get a grip. Eventually they all gave up.

'You see? Girls just are not meant to play with tin soldiers. She wants a dolly, doesn't she?'

'Let's put her in her pretty dress; I want to give her a bottle.'

After a couple of hours the schoolgirls tired of their mothering, just about the same time Princess returned. The girls all helped her to repack the buggy, and after saying their good-byes princess and Baby Alice were racing home.

\* \* \*

'I can't understand why she's not tired yet,' said the



Duchess as she carried Baby Alice upstairs to the nursery. 'She should be ready for a good long nap by now.'

Baby Alice knew she couldn't sleep, ever again. As long as Princess was her babysitter, she couldn't let her guard down for a moment. If she went to sleep, there was no telling whether she would wake up again. Except her tiny baby body really was very tired, and wanted a nap so very much.

'Here Jenny,' said the Duchess, passing Baby Alice to her tormenter. 'Take Snuggle Bunny into the nursery and play with her for a while. If she gets sleepy, see if you can get her to lie down in the crib.'

The Duchess closed the door on her way out. And just like that, Baby Alice was once again at the mercy (just a figure of speech, believe me) of Princess.

'Baby doll!' said Princess, hugging Baby Alice with all her might.

'So, this is my life,' said Baby Alice as Princess dropped her and then lifted her by the legs, smiling and laughing into her upside-down face. 'A helpless infant, to be forever tormented by a 12-year old baby. To never again wear my lovely blue dress, with its clean, white apron. My apron, with its handy little pockets.'

Baby Alice looked down from where she was held, suspended above the floor, likely to be dropped head first any time now. She expected it, really. Any time now. Except there, just within reach...

'Handy little pockets!' said Baby Alice, shooting out her chubby little fists into the right apron pocket in front of her. 'Please let there be some left!'

Baby Alice pulled out a piece of mushroom, and stuffed it into her mouth before anything else could happen. Then she fell to the floor, head first as anticipated, but it wasn't nearly as far as she had been expecting.

Alice straightened herself around on the nursery floor, then stood. Looking down at 12-year old Princess she said, 'Hello Baby Doll! So, who's a big girl now?'

'Uh oh,' was all that Princess could say.

Alice discarded the tattered remnants of baby clothing that still clung to her, then reached into her left apron pocket (still worn by Princess) and pulled out a piece of mushroom. Princess fought her, but this time Alice wasn't taking 'No' for an answer. Pinning Princess' arms and holding her nose, Alice popped the mushroom into her mouth as she tried to breath, then held Princess' nose and mouth till she swallowed.

Alice felt a little sorry for Baby Princess. But only a little.

\* \* \*

'Perhaps we should buy you your own, so you won't always be borrowing mine,' said the Duchess.

Alice entered the study, once again wearing her familiar blue dress. The Duke and Duchess looked up.

'Sir, Madam,' she said with a slight curtsy. 'I shall be leaving now. I just wanted to let you know that Princess is asleep in her crib. I expect she'll sleep quite well after her active morning.'

'Ah, well done, Jenny,' said the Duke, standing to show her the way out.

'Are you sure you can't stay for this afternoon?' asked the Duchess. 'Also, we will be able to use you again on Saturday.'

'I'm sorry, but no,' replied Alice. 'I've somehow gone off babysitting.'

As Alice left by the servants' entry the Duchess reminded her husband, 'I don't believe Jenny has been paid for her services, dear.'

'Quite right,' said the Duke, patting his pockets. Alice turned, hoping for a satisfying conclusion to this chapter.

The Duke found his wallet and pulled out a five pound note. 'Here you are, my girl. And you've earned every penny.'

Alice considered a number of replies, but finally said, 'Your Grace is too kind.' Then she curtsied and left through the back gate.

The Duke watched her leave. Then he turned to his wife and asked, 'Does it seem to you that she has grown since we met her?'

'Yes,' replied the Duchess. 'They do that, at her age.'

## **Chapter VIII**

### **A Big Head for the Little Lady**

Alice walked away from the Duke and Duchess' estate, and never looked back.

'Of all my adventures so far, that one was certainly the most vexing!' said Alice. 'It will certainly be a very long time before I am able to even look at talcum powder without blushing in shame.'

Alice could go a long way on a full head of steam. She marched away from the estate, along the cobblestone streets and past the park (softening only slightly as she waved at a couple of girls she recognized). Alice continued her marching pace until the cobblestones ran out, and gave way to English countryside once again.

After a while, Alice found herself following a narrow stream. She was looking for a way to cross when a picturesque little bridge came into view. And there, standing on the bridge (against all odds), was the White Bunny.

Alice approached the bridge cautiously, not wanting to startle the White Bunny away. However, whether or not caution was required she could not tell as the White Bunny did not move until Alice set foot on the bridge.

'Ah, Mary Anne, you've finally arrived,' said the White Bunny without looking up.

'I'm sorry, I think you may have mistaken me...' said Alice, trying to explain who she was. Except the White Bunny was not listening, and continued unabated.

'I'm afraid I may be late again, and I've soiled my white gloves. Please run up to the house and fetch me a new pair.'

'Yes miss,' replied Alice, realizing what an opportunity this was. The White Bunny was the key to this very strange land! Alice had only ever seen the White Bunny come and go from it. Perhaps as Mary Anne, Alice could follow the White Bunny and see where she went!

Alice crossed the bridge, but turned around when the White Bunny called out to her again. 'Please be quick. Change into your maid's uniform and bring me my gloves as fast as you can.'

'The maid!' said Alice angrily as she continued toward the White Bunny's cottage. 'So I'm to be the maid once again! Honestly, why does everyone think that I am their maid?'

Alice entered the cottage through the servants' entrance, and a quick inspection soon revealed that there was a small closet in the rear hallway. In the closet were various cleaning supplies, and a uniform with 'Mary Anne' written on the inside of the collar. Except...

'This is the maid's uniform?' said Alice. 'Why, it looks like something you would wear to clean the house! If I were to be a maid (and I will not), I would not be the type who dressed like this!'

This was too much for Alice. 'Everyone tells me not to let others tell me what to do, so perhaps I should listen to them!' said Alice, not noticing the incongruity. 'I most certainly do not want to be the maid again. Instead, I think that I shall be the lady of this fine home.'

Alice tossed Mary Anne's uniform carelessly into the closet, and proceeded to explore the cottage. She locked all the doors and windows to ensure she would not be disturbed, and soon found her way to the master bedroom.

'Now this is what I had in mind!' said Alice as she explored the large, comfortable room. The centerpiece of the space was a beautiful four-poster bed. There was a couch for relaxing by a sunny bay window, a makeup table with lighted mirrors, and a fireplace. The walk-in closet was enormous, and held so many beautiful clothes that Alice didn't know where to begin. But when Alice saw the enormous ensuite bath, she knew exactly what she wanted.

Alice ran the water for her bath, testing it to ensure the temperature would be perfect. She added a bit of perfume and bubble soap, then left the water running while she returned to the bedroom to change.

In the bedroom, Alice found a lovely white satin robe. She changed into the robe, tossing her blue dress over the back of a chair, and then returned to the steamy ensuite. The tub was full and so she turned off the tap, hung her robe on the wall, and slid into the warm water.

'Now this is luxury,' Alice sighed. She turned the faucet with her toes, topping up the hot water in the tub.

Alice relaxed in the bubbles and soothing warmth of the bath, then slid under the surface to wash her hair. A fluffy white washcloth was just the thing to get the last of the mushy peas from behind her ears. She was all set to explore new depths of relaxation, when she was interrupted by a knock at the front door.

Now the front door was a long way from the bath, and so the knocking was not particularly loud. However it was incessant, and Alice found herself unable to ignore it. If she listened carefully, she was able to hear someone calling, 'Mary Anne? Are you in there? Please unlock this door.'

'Always when you're in the bath,' Alice said with annoyance. And then as loud as she could she yelled, 'Go away!'

But the White Bunny (for it was the White Bunny at her own front door) did not go away. As Alice found her state of relaxation completely disturbed, she got up from her bath and toweled herself dry.

Alice then proceeded to the bedroom, looking for something to wear. In her dresser drawer Alice found a lovely lace-trimmed bra and panty set.

'Oh, these are lovely,' said Alice as she changed into the pair. The bra was a touch too big, but she fixed that with just a nibble of mushroom from her right apron pocket. But as comfortable and relaxing as Alice was finding her new home, she was still disturbed by annoying voices from outside.

'Is there some problem, miss?' a voice said, wafting into the room from outdoors.

'Well, I'm not sure,' another voice replied. 'I seem to be locked out of my own home.'

Alice went to the window and called out, 'Would you please just go away!'

'Are you sure this is your cottage?' one of the voices said.

'Quite sure,' was the reply. 'I don't understand this at all.'

Alice closed the window, but the voices still penetrated. She returned to the ensuite, and put her white satin robe on over top of her bra and panties. She then proceeded to blow dry her hair, which thankfully completely drowned out the voices from outside.

When she was finished, Alice used the dryer to clear the steam from the mirror, and admired herself in the bare patch created. Satisfied, she returned to the bedroom and sat at the desk with makeup mirror. Alice brushed her long hair till it was quite beautiful. Then she put on her makeup, finding a wonderful selection of eye shadow, eyeliners, mascara and lipstick in the desk drawers. Alice's natural, youthful complexion needed very little in the way of cosmetics, but she added the touches that every girl needs in order to feel she has attained perfection. Alice was quite enjoying herself, and so was able to easily tune out the growing number of voices coming from the front of the cottage.

'But it is my house!'

'Here comes old Bill. Let's see what he thinks. Bill! Come on over here.'

'Afternoon, all. What are we doin' today?'

'This young lady has been locked out of her home.'

'Oh, an' that's a shame. Maybe I can jimmy a win-der.'

'Yes, but you see, there's another woman inside.'

'Easier still. Tell her to open the door.'

'Well, that's the problem you see. There isn't supposed to be another woman inside. And we've asked her to open the door, but she refuses.'

'I think it may be my maid, Mary Anne. I sent her for a pair of gloves, and I can't understand why she is behaving this way.'

Alice searched the drawers, and found a clean pair of white gloves. Opening the window she threw them out, saying, 'I'm not Mary Anne, and I'm not your maid! Now here are you wretched gloves. Please take them, and go away!' Then she shut the window with a loud bang.

'Well, I'm beginnin' ta see yer problem,' said Bill.

'Perhaps one of us should look in the window, to see what is actually happening in there.'

'I've got a ladder in the shed.'

The discussion moved off to the shed, and returned with a ladder.

'Bill, perhaps you could climb up and look.'

'All rightee,' replied Bill. He climbed to the top of the ladder, and was able to look straight into the bedroom window, cupping his hands over his eyes to reduce the glare.

And standing directly in front of the window was Alice, wearing only her bra and panty set (her white satin robe having fallen open), with her hands on her hips and as angry as a Bandersnatch!

'How rude!' she yelled. 'Get away from my window!' Then she snatched



closed the curtains. Bill was so startled he tipped the ladder backward, falling in a great arc to the ground.

'Bill, old man, are you all right?'

'I must admit, I've bin better,' said Bill. But, he stood and dusted himself off.

'What did you see? Who was in there?'

'Well, at first I thought it must be a lady. But then, I figgered maybe it might be some kind of monster. Now I'm thinkin' it might be a bit o' both. Certainly, it had a lady's body. The way ladies used ta look when we was younger, remeber? But that huge head, I never saw nothin' like that before.'

'Huge head!' said Alice. 'What on earth is he going on about?'

Alice dropped her satin robe off her arms, and threw it on the bed as she went into the closet.

'Oh!' said Alice in surprise as her ears brushed the door frame. 'Goodness, who would ever make a closet door so narrow? I must get the Carpenter and the Walrus in to fix it.'

Alice looked through the many lovely outfits not knowing how to choose, given such opulence. She finally decided on a simple short-sleeved, wine-coloured silk shell top, with a pleated, lime-coloured tulip skirt that ended just above the knee. A pair of Louboutin high-heeled Mary Janes would complete the outfit beautifully. Alice took her selections into the bedroom (now having to turn sideways to get her head through the door frame). She placed the items on the bed, and set about changing into them.

'There must be some way into the house.'

'But we've tried every door and window, and they're all locked tight.'

'What about the chimney?'

'If'n you think I'm goin' down that chimney, you got another thing comin', ' said Bill.

'Oh please Bill, you must if I'm ever to get back into my own home!'

So they set the ladder up against the side of the cottage once more, and Bill climbed to the roof.

Inside, Alice stepped into her Louboutins, completing her outfit. 'Look at me,' she said to herself. 'Why, I am quite the stylish young lady. Finally, I'm getting everything I deserve!'

Which was when Bill climbed out of the fireplace. Alice looked down at Bill from where she stood, and Bill looked up at Alice from where he crouched. Then Alice's shock turned to anger, and Bill's shock turned to terror.

'Don't you know better than to enter a lady's boudoir unannounced?' Alice screamed at Bill. And as her anger grew so did her head, until it half-filled the room. Bill crept slowly back into the fireplace, but it was a case of far too little, far too late. Alice took a deep breath, then blew with all the force her enormous head had to offer, sending Bill up the chimney and popping out the top like a cork from a bottle.

'Bill's off like a rocket!'

'You, by the shrubbery! Please catch him!'

Alice opened the window. 'And don't come back!' she yelled. 'Now, I think I should like to admire myself in the mirror.' So Alice turned to the mirror, and received a shock. For the figure in the mirror did not look like a fashionable young society girl, but instead appeared to be an old turtle.

Alice lifted her right arm and waved. The turtle lifted its left arm and waved back. Alice lifted her left arm and waved.

Are we just going to wave at each other all day, then?' asked the turtle.

'Oh!' exclaimed Alice. 'I'm sorry, but I thought for a moment that you might be my reflection.'

'A reflection of you?' said the turtle. 'Oh joy, wouldn't that be the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me, or anyone else, ever?' he said sarcastically.

Then he seemed to reconsider. 'Wait, maybe I am a reflection of you.' The turtle began mincing toward the mirror, saying, 'Ooh, look at me! Aren't I just the most beautiful lady! I wear lovely dresses, and do wonderful lady things!'

Alice watched, dumbfounded. Finally she said, 'Who are you?'

'I am the Mocking Turtle,' replied the Turtle.

'And precisely why are you in my mirror?' asked Alice.

'What did you expect to see in a mirror?' replied the Mocking Turtle. 'Check out the size of your head! It's far too big for you to be able to see yourself, and yet you must see something. I'm as likely an alternative as anything. Now excuse me, I have some further derision to be getting on with.'

The Mocking Turtle began mincing again, saying, 'I'm an important lady. Why, it doesn't matter who I hurt. They're all so far beneath me.'

'I'm not like that!' said Alice. 'I've never hurt anyone!'

The Mocking Turtle took time from his parody to reply, 'You just blew poor Bill out of the chimney!'

'But he wasn't hurt,' said Alice, suddenly remembering that was exactly what she had done.

'How would you know?' said the Turtle. 'The last time you looked he still hadn't landed.'

Alice raced to the window to look for Bill. A group had formed around him, and was helping him to his feet.

'Thank goodness,' said Alice, turning back to the mirror. 'I think he's going to be all right.'

Except the Mocking Turtle wasn't listening. 'No one is as important as me. Whatever I want, I deserve. And what I deserve I will have. It doesn't matter if it belongs to another, because it all belongs to me!'

Alice looked at the Mocking Turtle, and could see herself. She turned away and said, 'Oh no, I have been acting like that – I really have developed a big head! That's not who I really am! Please stop.'

But when she turned back to the mirror, the Mocking Turtle was gone. Instead she saw only herself, dressed in someone else's silk shell top, pleated tulip skirt, and Louboutin shoes.

Alice's head had deflated to normal. She took off the skirt, and blouse, and shoes, and returned them to where she had found them in the closet. Then she found her old blue dress where she had left it on a chair and put it on. With her old patent leather Mary Janes on her feet, she was ready to leave.

This is the real me,' said Alice, looking at her comfortable blue dress as she left the White Bunny's bedroom, and bath, and closet full of beautiful clothes. She kept the White Bunny's bra and panty set though, as returning used underwear can be such an awkward business. Then she snuck out the back door, and ran away as fast as she could.

## **Chapter IX**

### **Alice Plays the Palace**

Alice ran for a long time, not just because she was afraid of being chased and caught, but also because it was just such a very nice day for it.

'It does seem that the weather in this strange land is always perfect,' said Alice fatuously. She slowed to an easy walking pace, and soon found herself at the gates of an enormous palace.

At the gate was a short line of people. Alice joined the line, hoping to find out what was happening inside.

'Excuse me,' said Alice to the man queued in front of her. 'I was wondering if you could tell me what is happening here today.'

'Who, me?' replied the exceedingly nervous man. 'Why, the Queen is hosting the Tiger Woods Invitational Badminton Challenge.'

'Oh, wonderful!' said Alice with genuine enthusiasm. 'I should ever so much enjoy attending a sporting event this afternoon.'

'It's by invitation only,' the man informed her. 'Do you have an invitation?'

'No, I don't,' said Alice with heavy disappointment.

The man brightened up considerably at this. 'Here, take mine!' he said as he forced his invitation into Alice's hands, and then ran away as fast as Alice had ever seen anyone run.

'Such odd behaviour,' said Alice as she watched the man disappear over a hill. But she thought nothing more of it as she stood in line, invitation in hand, waiting her turn to enter the palace gates.

Alice looked at the invitation. It was printed on a gold card with white overlay, with a black and gold wrap. 'Classy,' said Alice admiringly.

'Next!' called out the guard at the gate. He caught Alice daydreaming, and had to repeat his command before she realized it was her turn.

'Sorry,' apologized Alice as she approached the guard. He was in full armour, holding a long pike in one hand, and he made Alice very nervous.

'Invitation,' instructed the guard.

'Yes, here it is,' said Alice as she handed the invitation over to the guard. He looked at it for some time, mostly because he had some difficulty seeing through his visor.

'You are – Gary Seven?' he asked.

'No,' said Alice curiously. Then, realizing for the first time that these were personalized invitations she added, 'Mr. Seven was unable to attend, and asked that I represent him.'

The guard looked at Alice, and then looked at the invitation, and then looked at Alice again. 'You don't look like a Seven,' he finally said.

Thinking quickly, Alice told him 'My mother was Scottish.' (Or, perhaps not thinking quickly enough.)

However, the guard seemed to accept this explanation. 'Oh,' he said, by which he meant, 'That explanation means nothing to me, but I don't intend to say so because I don't want to appear ill-informed.'

'Name?' asked the guard.

'Alice,' replied Alice. The guard wrote this on a little card, not an easy feat while wearing metal gloves.

'Province?' asked the guard.

'Um, give me a hint. What are the options?' said Alice.

'Well, there's the Province of Diamonds, and the Pr...' said the guard.

'That's the one!' said Alice, and the guard wrote this on the card as well. Then he ripped a piece off the card, and stuck it on Alice's dress. Alice looked down and read, 'Hello, my name is... Alice of Diamonds.'

Alice was the final guest to arrive. She passed through the outer gates, and entered a large courtyard in front of the palace where a receiving line had been arranged. The Queen of Clubs (for this was the Club District) was still greeting the person in front of Alice, and so Alice stood back patiently waiting her turn.

'Ten of Hearts!' said the Queen pleasantly. 'It has been too long my good friend. I'm so glad you were able to attend. I do hope you enjoy playing badminton.'

'Why, I must admit I've never actually played,' said the Ten. Then, seeing the Queen's expression turn from pleasant to hostile he tried to add, 'But I'm looking forward to it...'

'OFF WITH HIS HEAD!' screamed the Queen, her face red with rage. Two guards grabbed the man, and dragged him away as he shouted protestations, apologies, and explanations. Then the Queen turned to Alice.

'Alice, so good of you to come. I've been looking forward to meeting you for some time,' the Queen said pleasantly, her normal colouring having returned almost instantly.

'Your Majesty,' said Alice with a curtsey, feeling it might be important not to offend.

'You realize, my dear, that we will be playing badminton this afternoon,' explained the Queen. 'Are you familiar with the game?'

Alice quickly decided that her answer should be, 'Yes! Oh, I love it. We play all the time.'

'All the time?' said the Queen tetchily. 'Then you must be very good?'

'Oh yes!' lied Alice in her ongoing attempt to keep her head. 'Why, I'm something of an expert player.'

'An EXPERT!?' shouted the Queen, her neck turning red and quickly spreading to her face.

'Well, when I say expert,' said Alice, realizing her mistake and attempting to calm the Queen, 'I mean an expert at the rules. I know them all. I just don't play very well.'

'What, not well AT ALL?' said the Queen, the red hovering at jaw level.

'Not well by your standards, I'm sure,' said Alice, trying to read the Queen's neck like a thermometer. 'Well enough to provide a challenge, but not well enough to actually win. Well enough to make someone else feel very pleased at beating me!'

Alice watched anxiously to see which direction the red would go. The Queen seemed to be having difficulty making up her mind (or rather her neck), when all of a sudden the red quickly settled down and into her gown.

'Wonderful!' said the Queen pleasantly. 'You will certainly be one to watch, my dear.'

Alice quickly moved down the line, not wishing to give the Queen further offence. She was introduced to the King of Clubs, a Knave by the name of Jack, and some of the Queen's high-ranking officials (a ten and a nine). Finally, a three escorted her to the far side of the palace where the lawn had been set up for badminton.

'There certainly are a lot of badminton courts set up,' remarked Alice. 'But very few of them are occupied.'

'Very few of the invited guests actually made it this far,' the Three informed her. 'Don't be concerned, though. The King will pardon them all, and they will be arriving to play very soon.'

'So the King will pardon them?' asked Alice. 'Even after the Queen has ordered their heads off?'

'Of course,' replied the Three. 'There would be no one left in the country if he didn't pardon everyone regularly.'

Alice and the Three arrived at Alice's assigned court, where a woman appeared to be having an animated conversation all by herself. 'Here we are,' said the Three. 'Alice, you have been assigned to play against the Duchess. Have you met before?'

'Oh yes, of course!' said Alice. Realizing there would be no introductions to perform, the Three bowed and left.

'Your Grace,' said Alice. 'How lovely to see you again, so soon!' But the Duchess had her back turned, and paid no attention to Alice as she continued speaking.

'... absolutely the most embarrassing thing you have ever done to me!' said the Duchess. Alice moved closer to see if she could understand what it was that the Duchess was on about. But then the Duchess moved aside, revealing...

'Two Duchesses?' said Alice. For standing in front of her was the Duchess, and directly behind the Duchess stood another Duchess. They were as identical as any set of twins you might ever have seen. They were the same height, with the same long, blond hair, and similar body shape and facial features as to make them indistinguishable. And just to add to the confusion they were dressed in identical badminton outfits. They both wore short, sky blue flounce skirts, and sleeveless polo shirts in white with matching blue accents.

'Except it was your suggestion,' said the Other Duchess to the Duchess. 'You were the one who said I should buy my own, so I wouldn't always be borrowing yours.'

'Buy your own, yes!' said the Duchess to the Other Duchess. 'But not the exact – same – identical outfit! It was bad enough being seen in the same gown twice within a week, but to be seen in the same outfit twice at the same time is just so humiliating!'

'Excuse me?' interrupted Alice, who had somehow remained unnoticed all this time.

'Oh look, dear!' said the Other Duchess, happy for any interruption. 'What a surprise! It's Jenny, our babysitter.'

'No dear, you're mistaken. This girl's name is Alice,' replied the Duchess, reading Alice's nametag. She then explained to Alice, 'You must forgive the Du... the, uh, Duchess, except you do look remarkably similar to a young girl we recently hired as a babysitter.'

'Ah, no!' said the Other Duchess. 'She explained that to me when we first met. Her name is Jenny, but people call her Alice by mistake. Isn't that right?'

'Yes, but...' was all Alice said for a moment, still confused by the presence of two Duchesses. 'No, but... yes but I had that conversation with the Duke.'

No one said anything for a very long, awkward moment. Then the Other Duchess broke the silence with the following odd speech, 'Yes! Of course, and I am the Duchess! Silly me. I know nothing of the Duke's private conversations. Except, of course, for pillow talk! But we are all ladies here, let us speak of lady things!'

The amplified awkwardness was relieved with the arrival of a two, bringing the badminton equipment.

'Here you are ladies,' said the Two. 'Three rackets, and a bag of birds to get you started.'

Alice was about to say, 'A whole bag of birds? Why, one should be enough!' However, upon turning around and being handed her racket she changed her mind and instead opted to say, 'What on earth?'

But the Two didn't remain to answer questions, exclamatory or otherwise. He simply left Alice, holding a live beaver. The bag of birds had also fallen open at her feet, and the ground was now covered with small sparrows.

'These birds are actually birds,' said Alice to the Duchesses. 'And my racket is a beaver tail, still attached to the beaver!'

'Yes,' agreed the Duchess. 'The Queen's very own idea. It does make the game something more of a challenge.'

'Why has no one begun play?' the Queen yelled from a few courts distance. 'OFF WITH THEIR HEADS!'

And so the tournament began, with some players returning from recently being pardoned, and others being taken away, hopefully to be pardoned and return later, and some actually attempting to play the game.

Alice watched a nearby court for a few moments, hoping to discover the form accepted in playing badminton with beavers and sparrows. However it seemed no one else had much more concept than she, and so she began play as best she could.

'So I shall serve, shall I?' said Alice to the Duchesses, who had taken their place on the opposite side of the net. Alice adjusted her beaver so it faced backwards under her arm, its tail flat on her palm. Then she picked up a nearby sparrow, and dropped it a short distance onto the beaver tail, flipping the tail as hard as she could (which, please be assured, was not very hard) at the same time.

The sparrow, for its part being unaccustomed to being dropped and struck, flew across the net looking for a more congenial spot to land. Here, it was surprised to find that it was not to be left unmolested but instead found itself the object of pursuit by two Duchesses waving the back sides of live beavers.

Neither Duchess actually got close to the sparrow, but then they didn't have to. The sparrow knew when to leave and so turned around, heading for the other side of the net. However, it soon realized its miscalculation as once again it was Alice chasing the startled bird with the flat side of a beaver tail. Alice swung and missed, but the frightened bird changed direction again, heading for the net.

Now the sparrow was not stupid, and certainly did not intend to keep this up all day. This time, it landed on the net in order to catch its breath and assess the situation. The assessment process was brief though, as the tiny bird soon found two Duchesses converging on it from one side and Alice from the other, all brandishing beavers. At this sight his tiny bird brain gave out and he fainted, falling to the ground. (For those who need to know such things, he fell on the side of the Duchesses, point to Alice.)

'Wonderful rally!' the Queen congratulated them, as she had stopped to admire the play. 'Alice, I was right about you! You are indeed one to be watched.'

'Thank you, your Majesty,' replied Alice with a curtsy, while her beaver scrambled to her shoulder in order to bow.

And so play continued, with the occasional rally but more often the sparrows simply flying away before they could even be picked up. Any bird flying away after it had been served was declared a fault, and most points were aggregated in this way.

Finally the Queen, who had not actually participated in the tournament, was named as overall winner. This was justified since no one else had been able to complete even a single game, and obviously the Queen, having invented the game, was better than that. She was

presented with her trophy, which was promptly put on display with the Crown Jewels and miniature replicas made available for sale in the gift shop.

Alice expected some sort of banquet at this point, or at least a reception, and had begun to question the Other Duchess on what she might expect, when without warning they were interrupted. A herald ran through the grounds announcing loudly, 'The trial! Everyone, the trial is beginning!'

Alice followed the Duchesses, who followed everyone else, who followed Herald, to see what this latest disruption was all about.

\* \* \*

Alice entered the general confusion of the court, but as she was with the Duchesses, and the Duchesses were of high rank, all three were escorted to seats at the very front.

'I never quite know how to sit in this skirt,' said Alice to the Other Duchess. 'There are so many frills underneath it tends to flip up if I'm not careful.'

'I know exactly what you mean,' replied the Other Duchess. 'You need to stay on the edge of the seat. Then keep your hands in your lap, and be extra careful while standing or sitting.'

'Oh, thank you!' said Alice gratefully. 'That is exactly the kind of advice I've needed so much recently. Tell me, when you wear a bra does it tend to ride up under your...'

'Oh please, enough already!' said the Duchess. 'You two are such a pair of girls. Honestly, I can't be-



lieve you're sitting here talking about underwear, when the trial of the century is about to start.'

'Goodness, I didn't know it was as important as all that,' said Alice. 'What is it about?'

The Duchess simply stared at Alice blankly for a while before she said, 'I don't know. But that doesn't mean that it's not true.'

'Look!' said Alice, pointing to the front of the court. 'The Dodo is Counsel for the Accused. I know him, and he's very good. The defendant is in very capable hands.'

'But look,' said the Other Duchess. 'The Prosecutor is Ace Diamond! He's never lost a case. He's the one that got Goldilocks tried as an adult and sent away for home invasion.'

Alice was about to comment on this when the Bailiff entered and said, 'All rise, this court is in session. His Majesty the King of Clubs presiding.'

The Bailiff spoke so quickly, Alice barely had time to stand (being careful about her skirt) before he finished and the King said, 'Be seated.' Then she had to sit again.

'Your Majesty,' said the Bailiff, turning to speak to the King. 'This is case number 375, the Crown vs. the Knave, Jack of Clubs.'

'Read the charges,' instructed the King.

'Objection!' shouted the Dodo.

'The King paused, slightly confused, then looked out at the Dodo and said, 'You can't object to the reading of the charges.' And then to the Bailiff he asked, 'Can he?' The Bailiff simply shrugged.

'Whether I can or not, I do,' said the Dodo. 'I object to these whole proceedings.'

'He's off to a very strong start,' Alice whispered to the Other Duchess.

'Hush!' said the Duchess to keep the two quiet, however the Other Duchess nodded her agreement.

'I think,' said the King slowly, as if thinking did not come easily to him, 'that I shall say that word, what is it? The one that means 'No'.'

No one spoke for a while, until some brave voice from the gallery said very quietly, 'Overruled?'

'That's it!' said the King. 'Overruled. Please continue with the reading of the charges.'

The Bailiff opened a scroll, and proceeded to read:

Jack and Jill went up the hill,

For Jack knew no girl finer.

Jack came down, and faced the Crown,

For Jill was still a minor.

'I will now hear opening statements,' said the King. 'Mr. Diamond, why don't you go first?'

Ace Diamond stood. He was very tall, and very good looking. His jaw looked like something you could tie a cruise ship to, and his teeth gleamed like a retouched picture postcard of St. Paul's Cathedral.

'I think he's guilty,' Ace said in a rolling baritone, turning so everyone present had to shield their eyes from his smile. 'Don't you?'

'Very convincing,' said the King. 'Very convincing! I want to find him guilty right now. Just as a formality though, let's hear from the defence.'

'Thank you, your Majesty,' said the Dodo as he stood. 'Very generous of you.'

The Dodo strutted as he spoke. 'I am sure, everyone present wants my client to be found guilty. The Prosecution is so tall, and his jaw so massive, even I now find myself wanting my client to be found guilty. But the simple fact of the matter is – he is innocent.'

'Think about this. My client is charged with crimes against a minor. But, the poem of Jack and Jill is well over two hundred years old! How old must Jill be? Surely she has reached an age where she might decide for herself who she wants to climb a hill with.'

'This alone should be enough to declare my client's innocence. But, your Majesty, I submit to you that this is a case of malicious persecution and character assassination. I ask you, how is it possible that every child over the age of three for the past 200 years knows the poem of Jack and Jill, even though it does not even rhyme?'

There was an audible gasp from the entire courtroom at this revelation.

'Certainly it rhymes,' said the King. 'Doesn't it?' The Bailiff shrugged.

'Examine the evidence,' said the Dodo. 'The defendant and his alleged victim went up the hill for water, and later we learn that Jill came tumbling after. 'Water' and 'after' do not rhyme!'

'Do you know, I never noticed that before,' said the King, to a general murmur of agreement from the audience.

'Your Majesty,' said the Dodo, summarizing his arguments. 'The defendant's political enemies are so clumsy, they can't even be bothered to cover their tracks with a simple rhyme. I submit to you, if the rhyme don't fit, you must acquit!'

There was spontaneous applause from the audience. The Dodo took a bow, until the King of Clubs called for order.

'Well, this is a pickle,' said the King once the courtroom quieted and the Dodo had returned to his seat. 'Two very strong opening statements. I feel equally justified in declaring the Knave either guilty or innocent. I'd like to decide so we could all get some lunch, but why don't we call at least one witness.'

'Very wise, your Majesty,' said the Dodo. 'The defence calls Alice to the stand!'

Alice was not at all surprised to hear her name called. This was not because she was expecting to be called to the stand all along. Rather, it was because she was paying no attention whatsoever, actually chewing on a hangnail when her name was called. A bit of prodding from the two Duchesses did surprise her, however. Then surprise turned to shock as Alice found herself in the witness box, being questioned by the Dodo.

'Please state your name for the record,' the Dodo requested.

'Alice,' said Alice.

Then turning hostile, the Dodo pressed her, 'Don't you mean, Alex? Did you not, in fact, recently change your name? Just what is it you are trying to hide?'

'I - I'm not trying to hide anything,' stammered Alice. Then remembering she added, 'Why, it was you yourself who suggested that I should change my name!'

The Dodo continued to press, 'Do you not, in fact, change your identity regularly? Alice, aka Alex, aka Jenny, aka Baby Doll, aka Mary Anne, aka Alice of Diamonds!'

'Well, those just sort of happened,' explained Alice.

At this point the Dodo changed his tack. 'Do you know the accused?' he asked.

'Not really,' said Alice.

'Not really?' mocked the Dodo. 'Perhaps you could explain what 'not really' means.'

'Well,' began Alice, 'I met him in the receiving line at the palace earlier. So I would have to say that yes, I do know him, just not very well.'

'Your Highness, members of the jury,' said the Dodo, addressing the court in general. 'We now see that the defendant, Jack of Clubs, consorts with known criminals!'

'I am not a criminal!' said Alice.

'This girl arrived just a few days ago and has ever since been the mastermind of a crime spree such as this land has never known before!' said the Dodo. 'Breaking and entering, theft of personal property...'

'I never did any such thing!' Alice declared.

'You entered the home of the Mouse without permission,' accused the Dodo. 'And are you not still wearing the same blue dress which you stole?'

'Um,' said Alice, thinking. 'Well, I couldn't say for sure. It's disappeared and reappeared so many times. I'm beginning to think there may be more than just one.'

'You also stole a wine-coloured blouse, green skirt, and Louboutin shoes...'

'I put those back!'

'And a lace-trimmed bra and panty set.'

Alice opened her mouth to deny the charge, but quickly thought better this time, turning quite red as she realized she still wore the evidence.

'Destruction of personal property, including a row boat...'

'That was your fault!' Alice said, pointing at the Dodo. 'You took me out into the ocean, and abandoned me there!'

'A mushroom, and a tea service,' continued the Dodo.

'Well, I'm not used to dealing with mushrooms,' said Alice. And then added lamely, 'Or, tea services.'

'Public nudity,' continued the Dodo in his list of charges.

'I never!' said Alice, in shock at the suggestion.

'You appeared before the Caterpillar wearing only the skimpiest of outfits.'

'That was a bikini!' explained Alice. 'I wasn't naked!'

'This is Victorian England!' the Dodo said righteously. 'And, last but not least in this list of most serious offenses, child endangerment.'

'Well, that one may be true,' said Alice. 'But only if you understand, I was also the child that was endangered!'

The King turned to Alice. 'These are most serious charges. How do you plead?'

'Wait a minute!' said Alice. 'I'm not the one on trial here.'

'Is she?' asked the King. The Bailiff shrugged.

'Do you deny the charges?' asked the Dodo.

'I'm denying that I was ever charged,' said Alice.

'True,' agreed the King. 'But, this case is much more interesting than the previous one. Very saucy! It is unusual, but I am of a mind to allow it to continue.'

'The defence has no more questions,' said the Dodo.

'Mr. Diamond,' said the King. 'You may question the accused.'

'Wait!' said Alice, not believing what was happening to her. 'Are you telling me that was my defence?'

Ace Diamond approached Alice in the witness box. 'I have only one question for this most charming young lady,' he said to her with a smile that could melt a heart at ten paces.

Alice swooned under his magnificent gaze. 'Yes?' she said dreamily.

'When,' he said, approaching Alice, 'is a young lady,' staring into her eyes while Alice's lips reached out, trying to fill the gap separating hers from his, 'like - a fire hose?!'

Alice stared into his eyes, not really hearing the words. Then they registered on her brain, and her mouth dropped open.

'Objection!' said Alice, pushing the prosecutor away in disgust.

'I believe,' said the King, 'that is your counsel's job.'

'I have no objection,' said the Dodo.

'Well I object!' said Alice. 'That question is totally inappropriate, in so many ways!'

'You must answer the question,' insisted the King.

Alice thought. And thought some more. Then really thought hard, as hard as she could. It was almost impossible to think of a response that wasn't completely rude. But finally she had it!

'A young lady,' said Alice, 'is like a fire hose when she becomes attached to her pumps!'

The courthouse erupted in applause, and Alice smiled and nodded in response. Ace Diamond did not look pleased, though.

'All right,' he said. 'In that case, I have one more question.'

'Objection!' said Alice. 'You said you had only one question!'

'Counsel, do you object?' asked the King.

'No objection,' said the Dodo.

'Your Majesty,' said Alice in exasperation. 'I have lost faith in the ability of my counsel to properly represent me. I ask your permission to represent myself for the remainder of the trial.'

'Well, it is unusual,' said the King with a tilt of his head. 'However, I am of a mind to allow it.'

Then Alice had a wonderful idea. 'Your Majesty,' she said. 'I have also lost faith in the ability of the prosecution to properly prosecute me. I ask your permission to prosecute myself for the remainder of the trial.'

'Well, it is unusual,' said the King, again with a tilt of his head. 'However, I am of a mind to allow it.'

Alice stood, and began her cross-examination of herself. She walked about thoughtfully, then turned to the empty witness stand.

'Alice,' said Alice to the empty stand. 'May I call you Alice? All these things that have been said about you. Tell us truthfully, did they actually happen?'

Alice sat on the stand and looked up. 'Well, yes they did. Maybe not just the way it sounded, though...'

Alice stood, looked down at the stand, and interrupted herself. 'Please, just answer the questions. So Alice, while these things were happening, did you consider them to be your fault?'

Sitting, Alice replied, 'No! Never. I was only trying to make things better. I did my best, but everything just got out of hand.'

Alice stood. 'Did you hear that!' she said. 'She only wanted to make things better. And, she did her best. What a travesty of justice it would be if we punished people who only ever did their best to make things better? Your Highness, the Prosecution would like to withdraw all charges in the case of the Crown vs. Alice.'

'Is there any objection from the defence?' asked the King.

'Um,' thought Alice. 'N-no.'

Caught up in the moment, the King loudly proclaimed, 'Alice, I find you Not Guilty, on all charges!'

'What about me?'

Alice looked up to see who had spoken. 'The Jack of Clubs!' she said. Everyone looked to see the Jack, still chained to the prisoner's bench.

'Alice,' said the King, 'would you like to prosecute him? You're doing so well.'

'Well, I would,' said Alice reluctantly. 'Except I think we already heard all the evidence, and it's pretty obvious he's innocent.'

Is it?' said the King. 'It was all a while ago. Perhaps you could introduce some new evidence that would sway the court.'

'Where would I find new evidence?' asked Alice.

'Oh, just make it up,' suggested the King. 'Some of the most convincing evidence is made up on the spot.'

'Well, all right,' agreed Alice reluctantly. She thought a moment then said, 'We have heard that Jack's political enemies altered the poem. The original poem can now be revealed.' Then she recited:

Jack and Jill went up the hill,  
To fetch a pail of water.  
Jack fell down, and broke his crown,  
But when Jill fell down, Jack caught her.

'That does rhyme better, doesn't it?' said the King.

'I must be a hero,' said the Jack in wonderment.

Alice was on a roll. 'Yes, in spite of severe personal injury, Jack saved Jill's life! And yet, he is plagued by lies and political scandal. Your Majesty, I say to you, if they can't do the rhyme, he don't do the time!'

'Jack, I find you not guilty!' said the King.

The courtroom abruptly erupted in cheers and applause. Alice curtsied to the many people, animals, and unidentified others seated in the room. The Jack raised his shackled hands in victory.

'Well, that ended well,' declared the King. 'And not a moment too soon. It's one o'clock, and I have a wedding to perform.'

'All rise,' said the Bailiff as the judge stood, and stepped down from his bench. He stood beside Alice, and looked toward the back of the court. Not knowing what else to do, Alice stood with him, until the organ music began.

Alice watched as the doors opened and a little girl entered. She was no more than three or four, wearing a white dress and carrying a basket. She walked down the aisle, scattering flower petals from the basket.

'Why, I think that's Princess Baby Doll!' said Alice. 'My, but she has grown.'

As Princess reached the front row of seats the Other Duchess fell in behind her, following her up to the front. The Other Duchess stepped to the right when she reached the front, joining Alice.

Then the bride entered.

Alice was stunned; she had never seen a woman so beautiful. The bride wore a floor length white gown, the tips of her delicate, open-toed white shoes just visible with each step. The skirt was full, but fitted from the waist up to emphasize the bride's youthful fig-

ure. Full length sleeves emphasized her long, graceful arms. A bridal veil obscured her face, so that the only clues to her identity were the long, pink and white bunny ears she wore.

'The White Bunny!' said Alice. 'She's so beautiful. I wonder who is the groom? Maybe it's Ace Diamond!'

The Other Duchess laughed. 'You're not getting cold feet now, are you old man?'

'Old man?' replied Alice. 'What are you talking about?'

But then Alice noticed the weight of her shoes. Looking down she saw that she was wearing heavy men's Oxfords, and her normally bare legs were covered in grey trousers. She wore a grey jacket with tails, and reaching up she found a top hat on her head.

'As your best man, I'm duty bound to make sure you go through with it!' said the Other Duchess.

'I'm the groom?' said Alice. Then she looked up, and saw the White Bunny slowly approaching down the aisle. As she passed the front row the Duchess fell in behind, the White Bunny's bridesmaid.

'Of course I'm the groom!' said Alex. 'That's why I've wanted so badly to find the White Bunny. She is the one, the only one, and today we are to be married.'

The White Bunny reached the front of the room, and she and Alex joined hands. Then they both turned to face the King.

'It is not often,' said the King, 'that I am privileged to perform a wedding. There are a lot of words that I am supposed to say, but frankly I don't know what they are, and I don't think the exact words matter that much anyway. Instead, I would like to tell you something of the true meaning of marriage.'

The King stopped for a moment, reflecting before proceeding. 'Marriage,' he said, 'is more than just a word. Marriage is a sentence.'

The King seemed to realize that this was not just right, but he struggled on valiantly. 'What I mean to say is, Marriage is an institution. And these two young people are here today because they should be institutionalized.'

The King continued on for some time, but Alex didn't truly hear a word. He was too happy, wrapped up in the warmth of his own thoughts.

'I am a man!' he thought. 'I knew I was, all along. And now I shall be married to the woman of my dreams, the woman I have somehow always loved.'

'Do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?' Alex heard the King say.

'I do,' he replied without hesitation.

'And do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?'

'I do,' said the White Bunny in her tiny, shy voice.

'Then by the power vested in me, which is quite a bit actually and only really exceeded by the Queen, I pronounce you guilty as charged. You may kiss the bride.'

Alex turned, and regarded his beautiful bride. He reached down and lifted her veil, leaning forward for his kiss. His first clue that something was amiss (or possibly not a miss!) was the face full of fur and whiskers he received. Alex opened his eyes wide to discover his bride was not the White Bunny after all.

'The March Hare!' he called out in shock.

'What a man!' giggled the March Hare coyly. Then the wedding gown dropped away, revealing Alex's bride to in fact be the March Hare standing on the shoulders of the Hatter.

'Hey!' called out the Hatter from where he stood beneath the March Hare. He scrambled up, climbing until he was on the shoulders of the March Hare, looking Alice in the eye.

'That's my hat!' the Hatter declared, grabbing the top hat from Alex. And as the hat was lifted from Alex's head, Alice's long, blonde hair fell out of the hat, followed by the wedding gown which fell over Alex's head, shoulders, and all the way to the ground.

The Hatter returned his top hat to his own head. 'May I kiss the bride?' he said, and then grabbed Alice for an enormous kiss. For with her long hair and gown, she was very definitely Alice, no longer Alex.

The Hatter looked at Alice with feigned adoration. 'How will I ever explain to Mother that I've married the maid?' he said in mock shame. And then he dropped to the floor, where he and the March Hare were roundly congratulated by one and all.

'No, this isn't right!' shouted Alice, although no one seemed to notice. Women swirled around her, complimenting her on her gown and her hair and makeup and what a beautiful bride she was, but not hearing a word she said. 'I didn't marry him! I didn't marry either of them! Please, what about me? What about me!'

## **Chapter X**

### **Best Direction for Alice**

'What about me?' shouted Alex, into the quiet stillness.

Alex looked about in surprise. 'Where am I now?' he asked, not recognizing anything in the darkness as the first rays of morning light found their way into the room. Then suddenly he recognized his surroundings.

'This is my bedroom!' he said. 'This is my bed! It must all have been a dream.' Then he had an irresistible urge to check and make sure...

'And I'm a man,' he said, feeling reassured under the covers.

'Some man!' laughed the girl who entered the room. 'For a man, you sure do wear skimpy nighties.' Then the girl got into bed beside Alex, snuggling up to him under the covers.

'The White Bunny!' said Alex, recognizing her even without her ears or cottontail.

Then he realized what she had said. Alex pulled back the covers and sat up. Alice's long, blond hair fell softly over his shoulders and down to his waist, as he noticed that he was indeed dressed in only a sunny yellow baby doll nighty and panties, not unlike the outfit Baby Alice had worn in the park.

'What does this mean?' asked a very confused Alex.

'It means,' said the White Bunny affectionately, 'that you have been a very naughty boy. When a sign says 'Bunnys Only', it means anyone who is not a Bunny had better stay out. But, I've decided that rather than punish you I will allow you to be a Bunny too. With all the rights and privileges that go along with the position!'

'Rights and privileges?' asked Alex, still looking confusedly at his long golden hair.

'Like going through the Bunnys Only door. But there are duties and responsibilities as well, don't ever forget them!'

'Duties and responsibilities?' asked Alex, hopelessly lost.

'Oh, I can see you're confused. Don't worry about anything, it will all become clear to you soon enough. The important thing is, today is my first day off in a long time, and I plan to enjoy it!'



Alex looked at the beautiful girl in bed beside him. 'What are we going to do first?' he asked.

'I don't think you fully understand everything I've said,' said the White Bunny. 'I'm going back to bed, to sleep in. The reason I have the day off is because I finally found a replacement. You!'

'Me?' said Alex in surprise. 'I can't be the White Bunny!'

'Then be the Blue Bunny, or the Pink Bunny. Whatever you like,' she told him.

'I have no idea what to do!' Alex complained.

'You don't need to worry about that,' the White Bunny said. 'Just fix your hair and makeup, and put on something pretty. What you have on right now is fine, actually. Then put on your ears and cottontail and go downtown, then through the Bunnys Only door. The rest will be obvious.'

'Well all right, if you say so,' said Alex, standing and stretching. He sat at his dressing table, which seemed to be covered with combs and brushes and bits of makeup that he didn't recognize, and began brushing out his long hair. The White Bunny curled up in his bed and closed her eyes.

Alex thought about the day to come. 'Do you know,' he said to the White Bunny, 'this reminds me of a poem I heard once:

'A man once woke up in his bed...'

'Oh I know that one!' said the White Bunny from where she lay, her eyes still closed softly. 'We used to sing it as children. I remember, my favourite part was always,

'With frilly these, and lacy those,'

Then Alice joined in for the next line,

'And shaven legs in pantyhose!'

The two girls laughed. Then the White Bunny fell asleep, and Alice prepared for her big day.

'Oh dear,' said Alice when she was ready to leave. 'After all that, I forgot to ask where she keeps her pocket watch!'

But there would be time for that another day.

###