

# Alice and the Connolly Castle Mystery



## REAL LIFE NUTTY PUTTY

She's *phenomenal!*"

Alice shrugged and pouted at Brandon's sudden declaration as they sat together in the front row of San Romani's Assurdo theatre watching the stage production's opening scene of *Alice and the Baptism of Fire*..” The charismatic Ailish Ryan was playing the part of Alice.

“You don't think so, sis?”

“She's pretty good...” Alice responded, staring down at her clothes. “I do suppose.”

It was the show's closing night and Queen Marina had requested all attendees to dress in costume pertaining to the play's period. As providence would have it (or more like fate in Alice's opinion), Alice was fortuitously wearing a royal blue silk Victorian pinafore dress, striped hose and patent leather shoes—the only costume available for her size and shape at a local outfitters.

*Perfect for what methinks is to be recorded as a Heaven's Library story, she reflected. Especially seeing as I am cogitating in “J.A. lingo,” as Brandon would call it. But this is real life I assume, Jes ... Joshua?*

*Yea, this is real life.*

*So, I call you Joshua?*

*Yea.*

*In front of people?*

*Yea.*

*But would that not appear most awfully odd to those whom I will meet? What about when I ask to pray with them? It is one thing to refer to you as Joshua in a dream or spirit experience, but in real life...?*

*Trust Me, Alice. Thy Jeshua ha'meshuah. Thou shalt meet many who will respond. But for now, I urge thee to keep a check on thy jealousy.*

HL: This story uses British spelling.

### *Jealousy?*

“She and Ron will make a *fantastic* team,” Brandon continued. “Totally talent compatible.”

“Really?”

“Well, like their individual talents complement each other. Especially Ailish’s.”

“‘Especially’ does not sound like ‘complementarily compatible,’” Alice sullenly muttered.

Brandon gave his sister a mystified glance, and Alice returned his expression with another shrug. Her brother was evidently smitten with Ailish Ryan, having had a deep and lengthy conversation with her on Lady Windermere’s yacht on their way from Greenwich to San Romani. Alice found his now seemingly indifferent attitude toward herself undesirable but understandable considering the circumstances.

Alice cast her mind back to the previous night’s voyage of her family’s long-anticipated journey to San Romani on Lady Windermere’s 213-foot, four-decked Super Yacht ...



“Tell me, Alice,” the eminent woman had inquired at the late-evening seafood buffet, “just where did you learn such elocution and deportment?”

Alice smiled, put down her spoon, and wiped her mouth on her serviette. “You would never guess, ma’am! Why, may I ask?”

“Well, my husband and I are looking into a suitable such course in which to enrol our daughter Natasha. Most of them, such as *Tiffany Etiquette* and *Decorum Forum*, list admittedly sound ‘do’s and don’ts’ and one ends up paying a fortune. The problem is, having met some of their ‘sample products,’ I cannot help but perceive a strained adherence to rule. Do you understand my point?”

“Most assuredly, ma’am,” Alice said and returned to sipping her soup.

“*Stiff*, they are, Miss Godley. Unnatural. But yours ... your training bears witness to something intrinsic. A certain *spontaneity*—as though you ‘go with the flow,’ as they say nowadays. It is especially noticeable when you interact with the cleaning staff and hired help at the salad bar.”

Alice sipped and chuckled. “You most certainly have been observing me, ma’am.”

“I confess I have, my dear!” Lady Windermere said with a laugh. “But—and forgive the seeming flattery—when a young girl such as yourself graces

an occasion with remarkably unfeigned decorum mixed with kindness, one cannot help but wonder... —”

“And I’ve been wonderin’ the same thing! Just *where* is this babe hailin’ from?”

At the vocal interruption, Lady Windermere gave a start. “I’m dreadfully sorry, young man—I didn’t notice you standing there. Do sit down. Oh, and let me introduce you to Alice ... Miss Alice Godley.”

Alice sensed all decorum and perception of time and space indelicately departing from her gaping mouth as the dark-haired youth clad in a white tuxedo bowed, took her hand, and kissed it.

*Oh, Joshua, help me. I’m falling into those eyes...*

Lady Windermere continued addressing her, however.

“This is Ronald Trucker,” Alice heard her saying. “The young gentleman from the United States who is starring in the very Lance Williams’ masterpiece we’re off to see. ...”

*It’s actually him! ... Oh, Joshua, please. If this is real life, why now?*

“...a delightful fable about a young girl making destiny-impacting choices. Your namesake. No doubt named after the renowned Alice of Wonderland. Especially fitting, actually. Anyway, the eminent Hollywood powers that be have secured Ronald to star in a movie adaptation of the play. He and his costar just took a couple of days off rehearsals to negotiate such in New York. Quite the success story when taking into account that the young man sustained serious injuries in Iraq...”

“Rum ... Rummy...” was all Alice could say as Lady Windermere continued.

“*Rum?* You wanna glass of rum?” the young man said. “Seem a bit young...”

Alice shook her head. “N-no ... no. It’s just...”

“Have you seen it?”

“I’m sorry. Seen what, young sir?”

“He’s asking you about the play,” Lady Windermere said softly. “The one I’ve just been telling you about, *Alice and the Baptism of Fire.*”

“Oh y-yes, of c-course. I have r-read a sizeable portion of the book and me and my f-family ... I mean, m-my family and I will see the s-stage version in San Romani shortly.”

Ronald smirked. “Yeah. I star in that two-bit deal.”

“Yes, and I have ever so much w-wanted to see it for that very reason ... I m-mean...”

Alice put her hand to her mouth.

“Nice to know I have such a cute little fan,” said Ronald. “But don’t get your hopes up.”

*Little fan?*

“Hopes up? Wh-what about...?”

“Well, except for yours truly and the stunning Ailish Ryan in the lead role, the live play has quite an amateurish cast. It’s cute though, and it’s at least given me the break to go big-time Hollywood and all that. True talent eventually gets noticed.”

So saying, Ronald smirked again and jutted out his chin.

Alice winced and shut her eyes. “I do suppose. Even if occasionally somewhat unfortunate ... oh, *gosh!*”

“The night is getting a wee bit late, Ronald,” said Lady Windermere. “Poor Alice is obviously quite exhausted and ready to retire to her cabin, so I suppose you don’t mind if she...”

“Not at all, ma’am. It’s been a great pleasure. Goodnight, Alice.”

“G-goodnight,” Alice blurted, and quickly excused herself to run to the ladies’ lavatory where she locked herself in a stall and bawled her eyes out. Fifteen minutes passed before she, having scrubbed all traces of tears from her face, had the courage to step out and check if the coast was sufficiently clear for her to make a bolt for her cabin.

It was not.

“Hey, that’s *great!* A fantastic chance to find out a little more about each other before the night shuts us down.”

“*Rummy* ... er ... Ronald. I was just going to bed.”

“That’s cool. I figured it was *way* past your bedtime anyway.”

*Way past my bedtime?*

“What makes you say that?”

“Oh. Your eyes just seem a bit red and tired.”

“Well, it’s not my bedtime,” mumbled Alice as she blushed. “N-not usually.”

“In that case, angel, I’d hate for this to be the last time we connect.”

“M-me too. I do suppose.”

“Okay. So, wanna take a breather out on the deck?”

Alice nodded and pressed a hand to her chest. “S-some fresh air would be m-most in order, thank you.”

The yacht was gliding at a reasonable clip as Alice and Rummy stepped onto the main deck. The moon was full, stars sparkled, and a cool, gentle breeze swirled about the gleaming white craft.

“Awesome,” said Ronald. “It’s a kind of romantic dream vibe.”

“R-romantic?”

“Yeah. I just love those old Brit black and whites.”

“M-movies?”

“Yeah. Niven, Olivier, Leigh ... Dietrich...”

“Marlene Dietrich was German, I b-believe,” said Alice.

“That’s right, German. But classic anyway. Hey, this isn’t a come-on or anything, but I have the weirdest feeling we’ve met before.”

“M-me too.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of awesome when that happens.” Ronald dropped his voice and reached into his jacket pocket. “Listen, er...?”

“Alice.”

“Right. Here’s my card—and I want you to know I don’t dish these out wholesale. That there is my very own personal handy number. Call me anytime.”

“A-anytime?”

Ronald nodded.

“Why thank you, kind sir,” said Alice as she took the card. Then, to her own chagrin but to Ronald’s impressed surprise, she instinctively curtsied.

“But what about umm ... how’s Deirdre?” she asked, having gathered her composure.

“Deirdre? Who’s Deirdre?”

“Er ... n-nothing ... no one,” Alice said with a smile of relief.

“Okay, well ... what’s your name again?”

Alice’s smile faded. “I told you—*Alice*.”

“Cool. Anyway, Alice, I am always like, *flipped out* to meet one of my loyal little fans. ...”

*Little fans?*

“Little fans?” Alice said aloud.

“Yeah. I have like a kids’ BlogSpot online, where I communicate with them and arrange info and chat times. Don’t have time for a lot of it, though. So, this hotline to my personal handy is a major privilege. ...”

“Ron, begorrah! I’ve been looking all over fer ye!”

Ronald and Alice turned heads at the interruption of an attractive blonde girl dressed in a formfitting, green velvet minidress and holding a glass of whisky.

Ronald slapped his forehead. “Of *course*. I just got to talking to this little fan who has been stealing the politesse award on this trip ... not that there was any official competition, mind you. Alice, this is Ailish...”

“The Gaelic form of Alice, actually,” the girl said.

“Wow, really?” said Ronald. “Awesome. Anyway, Alice, Ailish is my costar in the play we talked about. We were just in New York together to...”

“Y-yes, I know,” Alice muttered. “Lady Windermere said so.”

The girl kissed Alice’s reluctantly tendered cheek and staggeringly drew back, looking intently into Alice’s face.

“But haven’t we met before? You seem most remarkably familiar.”

“Funny, that’s what *I* thought,” said Ronald.

“We must have,” Alice said. “For you seem ever so familiar too. Possibly in Italy?”

“C-could have been.”

“At a circus perhaps?” Alice cautiously asked, assessing the girl’s reactions.

“Why, *yes!* Hmmph. Days I’d sooner forget. That bastard Baldo Striffolino contracted me into playin’ Goldilocks wit’ three real live bears. Dancin’ wit’ ’em and leadin’ ’em around by the noses.”

“That’s where she got her training handling me,” Ronald said, grinning.

“*Ronny.* Okay, and then Striffolino got me into lion tamin’, of all things, can you believe.”

“I most certainly can,” said Alice. “I mean no offence, by the way.”

“None taken. Ye know of him?”

“B-Baldo Striffolino? Umm ... yes, in a way...” Alice stopped at the approach of her brother.

“Still up, sis? I thought you had long gone to bed!”

“N-no, I’m...”

“That’s cool. I’m just winding up the night myself.”

“*Man,*” Ailish whispered to Alice. “Aren’t you going to, like, introduce me to this dreamboat?”

“Oh, sorry. Ailish Ryan, this is my brother, Brandon.”

“Cool,” said Brandon. “And this is...?”

“Rummy ... Ronald Trucker.”

“Of *course,*” said Brandon. “Nice to finally meet you, man. Read ... *heard* lots about you from Alice. Great performance, by the way...”

## ACTS OF PROVIDENCE

She's *awesome* isn't she, sis?"

"Er ... what? Who?"

"Ailish. Phenomenal."

"So you said. Ronald is excellent too—so out of character with his real self," Alice said offhandedly. Due to her recollections, she had been paying little attention to the play, which was now in its second act. She sighed and surreptitiously glanced up at the royalty box, hoping to glimpse Queen Marian or "Marina" as she was called in the "real" world. Nevertheless, since it was considered inappropriate for members of the audience and especially the stars of the show to be directing their attentions to the reactions of the "gallery" (as the royalty box had come to be known), Alice decided to lay aside personal concerns and concentrate on the play.

Notwithstanding, as much as Alice disliked admitting it even to herself, she found Ailish Ryan's performance indisputably phenomenal. As the play progressed, almost every word the actress uttered pierced Alice's heart, insomuch that at each poignant moment of the protagonist's soul-searching, especially when voiced in song, Alice was moved to tears.

"The crown is never so heavy," declared Ronald Trucker (who was playing the role of Joshua) as he stepped down from a throne, "as upon the head of the one who wears it."

"But thou art the King," said Ailish.

"Yes, milady. The King of kings ... and queens. Yet, I crowned thee 'Queen Alice.' Dost thou not remember?"

Ailish nodded. "I do, but ..."

"Then let no man or *woman* take thy crown. How often must I tell thee?"

"Alas, many times it seems, milord."

Noticing his little sister's futile suppression of her emotions, Brandon would intermittently take Alice's hand and nod understandingly, — temporarily assuaging her anguish.

Up on the stage, Ronald took Ailish's hand and lifted her to her feet. He kissed her brow, smiled, and delivered what had been adapted from the novel to be the final speech.

"Presently, dear Alice, thy crown is but the flimsy tiara of a princess, and thou dost wear it blithely and unburdened. But I must tell thee



that the more glorious crown that awaits thee is of greater weight. Many times thou shalt wish to doff it and be about your amusement, but it is not to be.”

“Meanest thou that I will take pleasure in neither frivolity nor amusement?”

“Ah, there shall be moments when once thou hast passed from teenhood to queenhood and art off the stage that thou shalt lay thy crown at thy bedside and wilt enjoy frolic with those entrusted to enter thine inner chamber. These will be but for short seasons, however, and thou must shortly return to the stage, where the crown will again weigh heavy upon thy neck.

“Yea, Alice, it shall be as a leaden *crown of fire!*” said Ronald as the orchestra burst into the finale song sung by Ailish Ryan.

*Must I shed these rags of renegade royalty?  
To repossess a kingdom of vanishing loyalty?*

*That tossed-aside crown; must I take it up?  
Do I have to down, or can I merely sup  
From that bittersweet cup  
And go down in flame  
With the fame and the blame  
The acclaim and the shame,  
Shed upon my name?  
Shed upon my name?*

*Thou hast laid this cross upon my shoulder,  
Would I mourn its loss as I get older?  
If I should choose these rags of renegade royalty,  
And abandon a kingdom of vanishing loyalty?  
Should I choose these rags of renegade royalty,  
And abandon a kingdom of vanishing loyalty,  
And remain a princess in rags,  
A princess in rags?*

“It’s just as it was in *Cutting the Strings*, right, sis?” Brandon whispered as they and the audience stood to applaud, and the cast were taking their final bow.

Alice nodded and smiled as she wiped her eyes.

“Ever so,” she said. “Oh, do pray for me, Brandon. I am in ever such straits right now.”

Just then, a man dressed as a liveried page approached Alice and presented her with a folded note upon a silver platter.

*Her Majesty, Queen Marina, has requested your presence tomorrow afternoon in the palace reception room at 2 PM. Should you accept, a chauffeur will be at your hotel at 1:15 PM. to escort you, unaccompanied, to the palace.*

Alice nodded and bowed at the page.

“I accept,” she whispered.

Discreetly glancing up, Alice caught Queen Marina’s eye as the monarch was preparing to leave the royal box and detected an equally discreet smile and a nod of acknowledgment.



The Godley family was wandering euphorically into San Romani’s exclusive Julio hotel and chattering about the evening’s events, principally Alice’s upcoming audience with Queen Marina, when a member of the hotel staff soberly confronted them. There had been a fire on the second floor.

“Our very floor!” said Eileen.

“Exactly, Madam, but only Miss’s room was affected.”

“Miss’s?”

“Miss Alice Godley, madam. It seems it started there. Fortunately, we were able to alert the fire brigade and they extinguished the blaze. Unfortunately, much of the young lady’s possessions suffered the gravest of harm.”

“Such as?”

“Suitcases mainly, Madam, apparently containing many varieties of vesture.”

“Sounds like my little sis. A walking fashion magazine if she could have her way.”

“Okay, but does the gentleman mean to say that all my clothes are spoiled?”

“Not just *spoiled*, sis—charcoal and ashes.”

Alice burst into tears. “You can be *ever* so insensitive sometimes, you know.”

Brandon blushed and put his arm around her. “Sorry, sis. I was just trying to lighten up the situation.”

“Thank the Lord, no further harm was done, Alice,” said Eileen. “Good thing I had the presence of mind to keep all our passports, credit cards,

and whatnot with me. We can go out first thing in the morning before your audience and provision or even purchase some replacement clothing.”

“I-I am not so sure...”

“Why, darling? We have time before your audience.”

“I don’t know, Mummy—it’s just that I am feeling rather apprehensive about this turn of events.”

“How did it start?” Malcolm asked the hotel staff member, who then drew him aside.

“I’m so sorry, sir,” he said in low tones, “but a police investigation and forensic tests indicated foul play.”

“Foul play, Daddy?” Alice asked, having overheard.

“Apparently, Alice. But who on earth would wish you such harm?”

“On *earth*, for the life of me I cannot imagine. But *elsewhere* ... I do have a vague idea...”

“Alice!”

Alice spun around at the exclamation of her name. “Rum ... *Ronald* ... Are you staying at this hotel?”

“Yeah ... *wow*. It was meant to be!”

“Er ... what was ‘meant to be’?”

“That our tête-à-tête on Lady Windermere’s yacht didn’t terminate our little connection.”

“Alice,” said Malcolm, “who is this young gentleman?”

“Oh ... umm, someone I bumped into on the yacht...”

“More than ‘bumped into,’ mister.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, whatever. I’m Ronald Trucker, star of the play at the Assurdo.”

Malcolm’s eyes widened. “Of *course*. I recognise you now. Stage lights and makeup can project a very different perception of a person. Anyway, pleased to meet you, Ronald. Outstanding performance, by the way.”

“Thanks,” said Ronald, shaking Malcolm’s hand.

“So ... speaking of your ‘more than bumped into, little connection’ with Alice...?”

“She’s *phenomenal*, Mr. ...”

“Godley, Malcolm Godley. I’m Alice’s father. Er ... in what sense is she *phenomenal*?”

“Brains, insight, consideration ... all that good stuff.”

“I see.”

“Yeah. In fact, Ailish—my girlfriend, wants to keep up the connection. She’ll be *flipped* to know you all are staying at this same hotel.”

“Well,” said Malcolm, looking relieved, “it’s nice to know you have a fiancée and that she feels the same way.”

“Absolutely, Mr. Godley. And to prove it, she ... well, maybe I should let Ailish say it for herself, but she’s *crashed*.”

“Understandable,” said Alice. “Such performance can take a h-heaven of a lot out of one.”

“Don’t I know it!”

“And I believe it’s *our* time to turn in for the night,” said Malcolm. “Specifically Alice, considering her appointment tomorrow morning. Thank you, Ronald.”

“My pleasure, sir. And thank you, angel.”

Alice —at a loss for words, curtseyed, blushed and accompanied her father to the elevator.

“‘Angel,’ dear?” Malcolm said as the elevator door closed on them.

## REGENCY VOGUE

**D**eadly weevil flu hits San Romani! GWC reports hundreds feared dead!”

The following morning, the Godley family had just gathered in Eileen and Malcolm’s hotel room to pray for Alice’s audience with Queen Marina, when this announcement boomed from the TV.

“Here in the BSN studio today,” croaked a steely blonde newscaster, “we have renowned pandemic expert and longstanding official of the Global Wellness Concern, Dr. Furcht. Good morning, Doctor, nice to have you on the show ... I mean, the programme!”

“Heh, heh. Thank you, Miss Grausam. It is my pleasure.”

“Dr. Furcht, is there any substance to this report from a trusted source that the virus has in fact invaded San Romani on weevils infesting genetically modified cereals and grains imported from the Mideast?”

“Absolutely. For many years, despite Global Wellness Concern’s urgent counsel and repeated warnings not to do so, San Romani has maintained strong relations and commercial ties with certain Middle Eastern countries. This foolish, and dare I say, traitorous, treacherous, and treasonous liaison with the enemies of the Western world has resulted in an act of bioterrorism in its lowest form through the chain of our planet’s weakest link. “By that I assume you are referring to San Romani itself.”

“I am. The gross negligence of this insignificant, uninformed country has the potential to destroy the entire civilised world.”

“I see. For the benefit of those interested, what are the initial symptoms of weevil flu?”

“Usually the victim experiences a mild headache, a runny nose, and a dry cough, followed by a sore throat, chills, and fever.”

“But these are somewhat normal flu symptoms, am I right?”

“True, Miss Grausam—at the onset. Then vomiting and diarrhoea ensues, and once the rash appears, what follows is traumatic—tumours in the groin similar to those of bubonic plague, holes in the brain, pain in the joints and muscle spasms. Finally an inability to breathe due to the slow perforation of the lungs takes the victim’s life.”

“Oh, my goodness! Do you really think you should be seeing the Queen, Alice?”

“Absolutely, Mummy. Why, pray tell?”

“Well, the whole palace could be infected with it. Didn’t they say that the virus came from weevils in their imported cereals? I mean, we could have been eating it in our porridge this morning.”

“This sounds like Truco at work, Mum,” said Brandon.

“Who?”

“Listen, darling,” Malcolm whispered as the broadcast continued.

*“Do you see any hope, Dr. Furcht?”*

*“Only if we, as a responsible global community militantly take the necessary steps.”*

*“Such as?”*

*“Such as benefitting from an unassailable mass vaccination programme, through which we could stem the devastating potential of this pandemic. You see, it has recently been discovered that once the mutating superbugs realise the threat of extinction, they do not wish to bring their offspring into a hostile environment and so they practise a form of intelligent birth control, thus decreasing their population.”*

*“Amazing. It makes one wonder if the microcosmic world has something to teach us humans!”*

*“Indeed.”*

Alice burst into laughter.

“What on earth is so funny, Alice?”

“I-it’s okay, Mummy.”

*“So Doctor, what measures, such as mandatory vaccination programs, has San Romani’s government taken regarding this potential devastation?”*

*“Unfortunately little, if any, Miss Grausam. The embattled regime of Queen Marina and her cronies have demonstrated blatant irresponsibility towards the threat and flagrant disregard for the warnings of the GWC, and have been grossly negligent in making sure their people are informed...”*

“See?” said Brandon. “Definitely Truco.”

“Nevertheless, Alice,” said Malcolm. “You should pray about it. It’s just like the old boy to throw a spanner into the works right when you are about to meet the Queen of San Romani.”

“Exactly,” said Brandon. “Besides, there’s not a lot about it on the local news. That says something.”

“Well, as the news said, they could be withholding the truth from their own people,” said Eileen.

“I meant that we’re not seeing any specific footage on the international news either. So, are you going, sis?”

“But of course.”

“Have you prayed about it?”

“I most assuredly have, Mummy, and Joshua told me ever so clearly this morning to accept Queen Marina’s invitation and to give her a printed copy of *Alice Cuts the Strings* that I had bound at Kinki’s.”

“It survived the fire?” Brandon asked.

“It was in my backpack which I took to the show.”

“But isn’t she depicted in the story as some kind of a puppet?”

“Yes. Mummy. But Joshua said that I should still give her a copy.”

“Really, Alice. Is this ‘Joshua’ you refer to Jesus?”

“Well ... of course.”

“Anyway,” said Malcolm, “we need to get you out of that fancy dress and into something a little more relatable. Let’s go.”



“Oops, it looks as though you are relegated to your period costume, sis.”

Alice sighed and shrugged. She was tired; the Godley family had traipsed all over San Romani scouring its boutiques. “I do suppose.”

“It’s most awfully odd that not one carried your size, dear,” said Eileen. “Most unusual.”

“Knowing Alice, I’m not surprised,” said Brandon. “But *that* one looks way cool,” he added, pointing to a trendy shop front as they wandered through a bustling mall. “‘Duds.’ Isn’t that...?”

“Yes,” said Alice. “The same name as the one in...”

“Right. *Apparently*, Alice, the Lord wants you to try one last time.”

“Yes, but I fear that—”

“No fear, let’s just go with the flow,” Brandon said, taking his sister’s arm and steering her into the boutique. Their parents followed.

“Hi! Can I help you guys with something?” asked a pretty, young blonde shop assistant who was bopping to Eurotrance.

“I want ever so much to get out of *these*,” Alice said.

“These what? *Clothes*?”

“Yes.”

“Why on earth for? They’re cool.”

“It’s a most awfully long story.”

“Okay, well, what are you looking for?”

“Basically, the usual sequined bells and tees,” Brandon said grinning at Alice.

“Size?”

“Er ...*ten* European, I do believe,” Alice replied.

“Well hey, this is so *bizarre*. Until just today we had all sizes, but now we have all sizes except ten ... in *everything!* Weird.”

“Not so weird,” Alice mumbled, and wondered if she was indeed involved in a spirit dream story that was taking place in her everyday life.

The shop assistant stroked her chin and stared at the floor. “Hmm ... okay then, we could take larger sizes and have them altered, but that would look...”

“Tacky,” said Alice.

“Precisely,” the girl said and looked Alice in the eye. “Hey, have we met before? What’s your name?”

“Alice.”

“I don’t know why, but I knew it. I just *knew* it!”

Alice smiled. “It happens. By the way, does your name happen to be Tracy ... Tracy Sherman?”

“Why, *yeah*. See? I told you we’d met.”

“We have,” Alice said in a slightly jaded manner, knowing that nothing could surprise her these days. “But—”

“Hey, you have a cool accent. British?”

“Umm ... yes. But if I may ask, Tracy, do you have a most awfully difficult family life?”

“Talk about it. My dad’s an ex-pat, U. S. Desert Storm vet – drinks like a fish and then beats up on Mom and any of us within arm’s reach. That’s why I do this to make enough to move into my own apartment.”

“That is so sad. I will most surely pray for you.”

“Thanks. But how did you know? It shows?”

Alice shrugged. “Not at all. More like connections, I do suppose.”

“Yah, I see. But why would you want to change your clothes to this here run of the cotton mill?”

“Because I feel most awfully out of place in them.”

“*Out of place?* Listen, dude, what you are wearing is very much ‘in the place’. Regency Vogue is all the rage, you know.”

“Really?” said Alice. “I’m usually well informed on such matters.”

“We had no idea,” said Eileen. “Right, dear?”



Malcolm shook his head.

“Actually, I meant to tell you, sis.” said Brandon “But I saw something about it on last week’s *Cutting Edge*. As a result of the *Mallory Park* blockbuster movie, all these balls and banquets with fancy dress and classical music are becoming the in thing with young people. So, hey, be encouraged!”

“Yeah,” said Tracy. “What you’re wearing is super cool. I know, ’cos I keep up with it and *put* up with it, twenty-four-seven...

*She seeks them here, she seeks them there,  
In Regent Street and Leicester Square.  
Clothes will make or break her, so she has to buy the best,  
‘Cause she’s a dedicated follower of fashion.*

Apropos,” said Tracy, cocking her ear to the sound system.

*Everyday she does her little rounds,  
Of the boutiques of London Town,  
Pursuing all the latest fads and trends,  
‘Cause she’s a dedicated follower of fashion.*

*Oh yes she is (oh yes she is), oh yes she is (oh yes she is).  
One week she’s in polka dots, the next week she’s in stripes.  
‘Cause she’s a dedicated follower of fashion.*

*She flits from shop to shop like a butterfly.  
But in matters of the cloth, she is as hungry as a moth,  
‘Cause she’s a dedicated follower of fashion.  
She’s a dedicated follower of fashion.  
She’s a dedicated follower of fashion.*

The girl exhaled and rolled her eyes. Just like that old song says ... but it gets to you after awhile.”

“I can imagine,” said Eileen. “All this...”

“Anyway,” Tracy said to Alice. “We’re expecting a huge shipment from *Austen Regency* and *Alice Line* fashions once this stupid quarantine thingy is over. Thing is, yours is obviously the genuine article ... Victorian silk taffeta, right?”

Alice sighed. “Yah.”

“So I don’t see why you’d *want* to change.”

“Actually, Alice,” Malcolm whispered, tapping his watch. “Even if you could or did, you wouldn’t have time. Your royal command audience is in three quarters of an hour—we need to get back to the hotel.”

“Oh sorry, Tracy, I must fly,” said Alice, handing the girl a business card. “But do stay in touch. Here are my contact details. May I have yours?”

“By all means, dude.”

## NO SMALL AUDIENCE

After passing through a simple security check at the palace gate, where Alice had to turn in her passport and cell phone, a spry, sparkling-eyed elderly dignitary who introduced himself as Christopher, led her across the grounds to the visitor's reception room on the left wing. Alice mentioned that she thought the edifice resembled a scaled down version of Buckingham Palace. Her escort chuckled, and he began singing as they traversed the courtyard, tramping the gravel in time to the song's metre.

*Oh, they're changing guard at Buckingham Palace –*

*(Tromp, tromp, tromp, tromp)*

*Christopher Robin went down with Alice.*

*(Tromp, tromp, tromp, tromp)*

*Alice is marrying one of the guard.*

*'A soldier's life is terrible hard,'*

*Says Alice.*

*They're changing guard at Buckingham Palace –*

*Christopher Robin went down with Alice.*

*We saw a guard in a sentry box.*

*'One of the chambermaids darns his socks,'*

*Says Alice.*

*Oh, they're changing guard at Buckingham Palace –*

*Christopher Robin went down with Alice.*

*We looked for the Queen, but she never came.*

*'Well, God save her Majesty all the same,'*

*Says Alice.*

*They're changing guard at Buckingham Palace –*

*Christopher Robin went down with Alice.*

*A face looked out, but it wasn't the King's.*

*'He's much too busy a-signing things,'*

*Says Alice.*

*Oh, they're changing guard at Buckingham Palace –  
Christopher Robin inquired of Alice:  
'Do you think the Queen knows a bit about me?'  
'She's sure to, dear, but it's time for tea,'  
Says Alice.*

Alice giggled. "I have never heard that one before, sir, but it's most awfully cute. Sounds like something Lewis ... Mr. Charles would have written. And there is but little chance that I shall be marrying a soldier anytime in the near future.

"Although I once thought...," she added wistfully.

"So did we *all*," her escort said as they entered the reception hall.

"Did what, sir?"

"Well, not necessarily thought about marrying a soldier, but of something or other that never came to pass. Some things are just not meant to be, I suppose, or one didn't seize the opportunity ... Anyway, you will wait here, Miss Alice, until Her Majesty's valet calls you. Take a seat and feel free to browse the magazines. Would you like some tea?"

"Thank you, sir, but I am far too nervous. Butterflies, you know."

Christopher winked. "A sedative?"

"Oh no, sir. I shall be just fine."

Fifteen minutes passed, during which Alice tried unsuccessfully to calm her tension by flipping through a fashion magazine.

*I should be praying*, she pondered as she laid the magazine aside and stared at the green opalescent marble floor. *And I am, you know. But it's just that I have to, like, imagine as if I'm just waiting in line at the post office, or even for some legal biz. I know you understand.*

"I most certainly do."

Startled, Alice looked up at a dark-haired, bearded young man who had suddenly settled into a chair beside her. He was browsing the same magazine.

*Most handsome*, Alice thought. *Looks almost like...*

"She's intriguing, dost thou not think?" he asked, stopping at a page and showing it to Alice. "Much like you. Blonde ... pretty to a degree, but *deep*."

"I d-do suppose," said Alice.

"Look into her *eyes*," said the young man. "Real, without digital enhancement."

"Hmm ... true."

"So, what sayest they?"

“Her eyes? Maybe they’re ... oh, it’s ever so silly.”

“Say on. Speak from within.”

“Very well. They’re saying ‘I’m not taking things at face value, not even you, Mr. Photographer!’ Oh dear, this sounds most awfully cynical...”

“No, no, no. Thou art right on, Alice.”

*He knows my name and I haven’t been introduced?*

“That’s right—I know thee very well. Anyway, carry on.”

“Well ... she is saying, ‘Prove your love—*prove* your assumptions.’”

The young man smiled and turned a page. “Good. Now, what about her?”

“Oh, this one is easy, actually. ‘You *want* me, don’t you? Well you can’t *have* me...’ sneering eyes ... oh goodness gracious, is there such a thing?”

The young man nodded and flipped the page. “Thou art doing excellently. And *her*?”

“Let me see ... *sad*. She’s thinking ‘What is my future? Why am I doing this?’ and stuff ... suchlike. She is ever so pretty, but she’s...”

“Excellent, Alice. Now thou canst put these unfortunate women on thy prayer list. Their names are at the bottom of the pages.”

“Most certainly.”

“Good,” the young man said, and at the announcement that Her Majesty Queen Marina requested the attendance of Miss Alice Pleasance, he arose from seat. “Thou shalt do wonderfully with the Queen. Farewell for now.”

”F-farewell,” said Alice.

As Alice entered the royal reception room, a butler bowed and extended a welcoming arm. The queen approached them, and Alice kissed the sovereign’s outstretched hand and curtsied.

“Impressive,” the queen remarked. “It appears you have been in such circumstances before. Someone coached you well. Your parents?”

“To some extent, Your Majesty.”

“Experience, then.”

“In a way.”

“I see. Are you affiliated with British royalty, or have you at least flitted about in those circles?”

“Umm ... not quite. I beg your indulgence of my vagueness.”

Queen Marina waved her hand. “*Pah*. We have only just met. Yet I have no small feeling that we have met before. Why is that, do you think? In another life?”

“In a way. I think that ... well, if I may be so bold—*here*, Your Majesty...”

Alice placed the volume in Queen Marina’s hands and stepped back.

“*Alice Cuts the Strings*,” the queen muttered, perusing the cover.

“Looks fascinating. And *this* personage—I presume it’s a puppet—bears no small resemblance to me! Is this a parody of sorts? Such variety of satire abounds, and unfortunately we puppet figureheads are powerless to publicly deem it treason.”

“Not at all, Your Majesty. If you read the story, you will see that it contains much insight into the plight of your country and your brave stand against the hidden hand.”

Queen Marina nodded as she browsed the pages. “They have even put out a cock ’n bull story that we have weevil flu, as I’m sure you know...”

“Yes, Your Majesty. My family and I saw it this morning on television.”

“I watched it too. And oh, how the media just *love* to whip us with those wonderfully wedded words such as ‘*flagrant* disregard’, ‘*blatant* irresponsibility’ or ‘*gross* negligence’ to describe our response towards the powers that be, while of course, my ‘*regime*’ is ‘*embattled*.’ I wonder why they don’t at least grace my rule with the name ‘administration’ or even ‘government?’” Marina stopped at a page of the book and burst into a giggle. “I see, I see. Remarkable. Very well, this promises to be a promising read and I promise to read it!”

Alice giggled too. Although she liked her, she could not compare the queen’s *in-cathedra* character and conduct to her *ex-cathedra* with which she was once familiar. Moreover, her speech bore little similarity to Marian in their “cutting the strings” spirit adventure. Nevertheless, Queen Marina’s diminutive frame, pixie-bobbed black hair, and large, long-lashed brown eyes strongly resembled her puppet alter ego; even her imperial apparel of gold-braided crimson velvet manifested the same fastidious attention to fashion.

“It is most odd, Alice,” the queen softly said as she leaned closer. “But I must assume you know why I requested your presence.”

“Umm ... Dame Drutherford mentioned something about it.”

“True, Alice. I have long desired to meet you. And I took no small notice of your emotional reaction to the play ... beautiful song by the way.”

“Song?”

“The closing one sung by Ailish Ryan, ‘Princess in Rags.’ You wept throughout it.”

“Oh, y-yes, Your Majesty. M-most touching.”

“Anyway, Alice, I wanted to know who you are. As I said, I felt as if I had met you before, and something—or *someone*—told me that you play a role of no small significance in the fulfilment of my dreams, or rather my *aspirations*.”

Alice dithered, being uncomfortable with a person in Marina's position behaving so informally with her. "I ... er ... honestly don't know what to say, Your Majesty..."

"You need say nothing. Oh, by the by, seeing as this ridiculous quarantine is delaying your leave, I recommend that you and your family visit the San Romani book fair in Catana, our largest city, forty miles from here. People come from all over the world to take no small advantage of purchasing globally restricted literature and negotiating with its publishers."

"Restricted? You mean umm ... *porno*, Your Majesty?"

Marina laughed. "Oh no, no, no. That sort of trash is freely available everywhere. I meant to say *treason* in the form of novels, plays, poetry, comic books and even children's literature that expose what's *really* going on behind the scenes. This 'cut the strings' volume could very well be publicised there."

"*Alice Cuts the Strings* is treason?"

"It appears so. From what I gather, it parabolically maligns those who are pulling the strings."

"I believe it does, Your Majesty."

"And you know the author?"

"Indirectly. He lives in another ... well, his own *realm* sort of thing."

"Such pundits always do. Nevertheless, I would take no small interest in meeting him."

"Oh, I don't know if that would be ... anyway, the book fair sounds ever so much fun, Your Majesty. Brandon and I just *adore* books!"

Suddenly, Queen Marina drew back; her countenance and tone was stern. "Thank you, Alice. That will be all. Christopher Robbins will escort you out, and Winfred Pugh will chauffeur you back to your hotel. It has been no small pleasure."

"F-for me too, Your Majesty."

Alice curtseyed and left the chamber. As she slumped in the back seat of the chauffeured Rolls Royce, she mulled over Marina's sudden withdrawal, and she wondered if the queen had checked herself on being familiar.

*Like thee, Alice, Queen Marina has to maintain a certain amount of distance.*

*Like me? But Joshua, you said we have to become all things to all men.*

*To a point, and when thou art in tune with me, that point is when thou also feelest checked and thou dost withdraw.*

*Withdraw?*

*Yes, thou must do so even at the risk of some deeming thee snobbish. But those that are worthy will maintain and even increase their respect for you. Thou shalt see. It is gracefully going and flowing with the royalty role that I have given thee. I am thy producer and director, remember!*



## THE MOMENT YOU WALKED UP...

Following the hotel's chartered coach excursion to Catana, Alice and her family disembarked at the entrance to a ruined Roman amphitheatre that had hosted the San Romani book fair for almost seventy years. Through a state-of-the-art sound system, classical, baroque, ethnic, and opera music bathed the scholarly atmosphere enjoyed by the straggling attendees who browsed booths and stalls that offered a variety of printed and digitally recorded fare. Brandon was especially taken with the graphic novel subdivision that exhibited the work of the genre's most controversial European artists and storyboarders, while Eileen and Malcolm browsed the religious, spiritual, and children's educational offerings.

Alice, however, strolled over to a tiny, non-descript and seemingly neglected stall stocked with tattered tomes.

*Second-hand*, she assumed as she approached a stooped, white-haired old man dressed in a brown, threadbare tweed jacket, who apparently presided over the wares. *Now, that I find most intriguing. And the gentleman seems ever so familiar.*

"G-good day, sir," she said. *Of course, it's...*

The man peered at her over his *pince-nez*. "Good day, miss. You are interested in something in particular?" "In particular, sir? Not really."

"That is a shame."

"What is?"

"To not be interested in anything in particular. An existence doomed to mediocrity."

"Well, sir," said Alice. "I am interested in a *lot* of things in particular."

"Such as?"

"Umm ... second-hand books for one."

"Ah. Well, you won't find any here."

"Oh?"

"No. These here are all my Onion publications. Why on earth would you be interested in second-hand books?"

"Umm ... I don't know exactly. A link to the past perhaps?"

"Don't ask *me*, child. I'm *tired* of it."

"Tired of what?"

"The past. On the other hand, however, the present has *little* to offer and the future even less ... *nothing*."

“How sad for one to look at it that way, sir.”

“Why?”

“Well, sir—at the risk of being terribly blunt—to have no memory to cherish, nothing to enjoy right now, and nothing to look forward to must be a most *awfully* dull existence. And yet to chide this ‘child’ for being interested in nothing in particular is, well...”

The old man chuckled, and leaned in to study Alice’s face. “Hypocritical?”

“I do s-suppose ... if you want to p-put it that way.”

“Have we met before?” he inquired, and as he did so, Brandon sauntered up with an armload of graphic novels.

“Hi, sis.”

“Hello, Brandon,” Alice said, then she continued to address the old man. “I believe we have, sir.”

“Hmm. I knew it the moment you walked up, young lady. Go on.”

“Very well. Is your name Mr. Sage and do you own a second-hand bookshop? Not a shop or a man that happens to be second-hand but sells books, nor a *bookshop* that happens to be second-hand, but more precisely a shop and a man that happen to sell second-hand books?”

The man’s mouth fell open in astonishment and broke into a smile. He dusted off his jacket’s shoulders, adjusted his *pince-nez* and straightened his bow tie. “Why, Miss ... er...”

“Alice, sir.”

“I knew it the moment you walked up. Curious, isn’t it?”

“Curiouser and curiouser, sir. Oh, and this is my brother, Brandon, by the way.”

“I knew it the moment he walked up ... pleased to meet you, young man. Actually, Miss Alice, I *did* have a second-hand bookshop until about five or six years ago—a shop that sold second-hand books, to be precise. The shop itself was anything *but* second hand—it must have passed through many more hands than that, being centuries old. Sorry, Miss, a trifling detail of the past...”

“No, sir, the past is anything but trifling. I am ever so fascinated by history—not the dates and the battles and things, that’s more Brandon’s forte, but the period. People’s personal lives and all that.”

“So I can see by your rather out-of-step wardrobe choice, Miss.”

“Not my choice, actually, sir. It’s ... circumstances.”

“I think I understand. But now that you mention it, the past *is* rather fascinating.”

“Yes,” said Alice. “Everyone has a most interesting past, present, *and* future. It’s just sad that so few people take the time to look into it—theirs or anybody else’s.”

“To look into what? Their past, present, or the future?”

“Well ... as I see it, sir, all three. The old reminisce on good old times and fear the future, the young speculate on the future and despise the past and almost *no one* is happy with the present.”

“A most thought-provoking thought, Miss ... I must remember to think about that. It just takes some adjusting for an old stick-in-the-mud like me to adjust...”

“So what happened to your shop?”

“Well, it got to the point that, due to the proliferation of internet sites such as Caxton.com, unless I debased myself and dealt in fly-by-night popular paperbacks or that which excited the interest of but a few antique buffs, I had to close up my shop.”

“That is most awfully sad, Mr. Sage. But during that time, did any special editions come in that you found particularly interesting?”

Mr. Sage chuckled and peered again at Alice over his *pince-nez*. “Are you quizzing me for a sort of survey, young lady?”

“No. More like personal interest.”

“Very well. Er ... let me see ... one volume in particular comes to mind. An odd but irreplaceable rare addition to my personal collection. A delightful but uncanny little fantasy tale about a lass much like you in appearance and demeanour with the same name—*Alice and the Cards*. The publisher was a company called Heaven’s Library. Ever heard of it?”

Alice grinned and nodded.

Sage laughed. “I knew it the moment you walked up.”

“Awesome,” said Brandon. “Don’t you think, sis?”

Alice nodded again. “But nothing surprises me these days.”

“In fact,” Sage went on. “There’s an old playing card character in it called Sage who seems to have been parodied after me. Charming, though. The author is anonymous, and although I am acquainted with many writers, for the life of me, I can’t think of anyone I know who would have written it!”

Alice, still smiling, shrugged. “Who gave you the book, sir?”

“How it fell into the pile, I have no idea. I generally dumped out a lump sum for a box of the usual well-worn fare—popular novelists and all that, and they were a safe bet. No matter how worn a copy of say, *Windblown*, *Treasure Trove*, or *Down the Bunny Hole* was, I sold it in no time.”

“Not surprising,” said Brandon. “They’re cool books.”

“Ah, yes. Classics all. But tell me, Alice. Since the moment you walked up, something about your knowing smile has told me you are somewhat engaged in this cards story.”

“You could say so...”

“And so I will, miss, I found the book most absorbing. I researched the publishing company and nothing came up. Then I sent it to my young niece, and she is even now on her seventh reading of it. But how does something like this happen? You are there in a novel written oh, say eight or nine years ago, depicted as a twelve year-old, and now you appear but a year or two older at the most.”

“Time is truly amazing, Mr. Sage,” said Alice. “Someone dear to me said that in his realm—the *truly* real world, time was like Nutty Putty. You can stretch it, shrink it, and even *bounce* it.”

“Potty Putty ... of course. So it says in that tale. Fascinating. And just who made this profound statement?”

Brandon chuckled. “One of ... or should I say her nearest and dearest beau!”

“Brandon, *please*,” Alice said, blushing. “This is neither the time or place.”

“*Nor* place, Miss,” said Sage. “Either or, neither nor. Nevertheless, Potty Putty is sadly in increasingly short supply in the here and now. Did you know that one can no longer purchase the substance in the Tottenham Court Road joke shop? The UNO WHO declared it toxic and approved a pitifully modified version that has little capacity to stretch or shrink. It doesn’t even *bounce*—at least not in my niece’s experience. By the way, would you believe that one of my perennial favourite novels is H. G. Wells’ *Time Machine*?”

“Oh yes, Mr. Sage. I watched the movie with Brandon years ago. Most exciting—at least I thought so then. Nutty Putty stretched to the max. But tell me, you are not selling second-hand books, I gather.”

Sage shook his head.

“Then what are all these rather ancient looking tomes?”

“As I said. *Mine*, Miss.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Although my books garner some approval here in San Romani, they all meet with caustic response and disdain in most of the rest of the world. Blacklisted, actually.”

“So sorry. Do you have a website?”

“No, no, no. I am unabashedly ignorant of such modern inroads into literary integrity.”

“I could set you up with one, though,” said Brandon.

“What? A modern inroad into literary integrity?”

“Of course not, sir. I can get your books and even your old catalogue back up and running online—auctions and all. Give Caxton.com a run for their money.”

“*Pah*. Not interested, young man ... why?”

“This whole thing is cool. A lot of people need to be woken up to what is really going on, especially in England.”

“Absolutely,” said Alice. “And this is about the only way to get the truth out these days.”

“Yes, yes, yes. But I do have my own publishing house, ‘Onion.’”

“So I see,” Alice said, picking up a volume and inspecting its dilapidated spine. “Named after your umm ... deceased wife, like in the cards book?”

“Goodness, no. Why on earth would I have named my publishing company ‘Onion’ if I had a wife fraught with such a name? Especially if she was deceased.”

Alice blushed and shrugged. “I am most sorry, sir.”

“No dear, I named it ‘Onion’ because once one starts peeling off the skins of things, you start discovering its ‘flavour’ so to speak. You know, an onion has many skins, the most I would venture to say of any animal, vegetable or ... I was going to say ‘mineral,’ but of course, minerals don’t have skins.”

“Well, some have *crusts*,” said Alice. “And ugly ones at that, yet underneath some of them one can see colours of indescribable beauty. I saw such at a diamond tour in Amsterdam when I was a little girl.”

“True. Poignantly true.”

“Then on the other hand,” said Alice, “we sometimes need to ‘put *skin* on things,’ as Peter says ... I mean...”

“Ah! Most perceptive.”

“I am digressing most childishly,” said Alice.

“Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings,” said Brandon.

“*Bible* ... interesting,” said Sage.

“But I am not a ‘babe’ in that sense of the word, sir,” said Alice. “At least not according to some of Brandon’s friends. Much less a ... er ... *suckling*.”

“Heaven forbid, Miss. But have you read any of my books?”

“I regret to say not.”

“I Dare Say’ was the title of my first one. An expose of the banking cartels...”

“*Cool*,” said Brandon.

“Dare I Say it Again?’ was the title of the second. An expose of the pharmaceutical industry.”

“*Far out,*” said Brandon.

“Same Old Story’ was the title of my last one. An expose of the controlled news and media. This one garnered me the most virulent of attacks.”

“*Awesome,*” said Brandon. “The titles, I mean.”

“I would love to read them all,” said Alice.

“And so you can, Miss. Here are complimentary copies. It has been a rare pleasure to have met and spoken with you ... *both*. Well, about the website idea, young man, maybe we should talk. Here’s my business card.”

“Mine also,” said Brandon, producing one from his jacket. “Let’s dialogue.”

Just then, a diminutive middle-aged woman with dark hair tied in a bun strode up to the stall and inquired after the merchandise. She was soon engrossed in a fascinating conversation with Mr. Sage, who, being so taken with his new customer, became oblivious of Alice and Brandon’s presence.

“*Most interesting ... Miss ... Mrs...?*” Alice heard Mr. Sage say to the woman as she and Brandon walked away.

“*Mademoiselle d’Oignon. Anne d’Oignon.*”

## A ROYAL TRYST

So how was the book fair, Alice?”  
“Most delightful, Your Majesty, and I met a most charming older gentleman by the name of Sage. It turns out he is a living manifestation of the character in that book.”

Queen Marina picked up the spiral-bound manuscript of *Alice Cuts the Strings* on the coffee table and smiled. “Really? I would be interested to meet him—one of the most fascinating characters in this story.”

“Well, he has a publishing company called Onion and he is very much supportive of your stand against ... you know, Truco and all that. The hidden hand.”

“Oh, Onion Publishing? I am very familiar and in no small accord with that company’s material. Admirable. I must contact him promptly.”

“I am sure he would be most honoured, Your Majesty.”

“Anyway, Alice, I have read this book *twice* within the last couple of days. I even had a palace scholar begin reading it to me a third time while I was getting a pedicure. I am absolutely fascinated. *Amazed*, actually.”

“S-so, you are not offended, Your Majesty?”

“Did you think I would be?”

“Well, s-seeing as some of the characters are portrayed as pup ... marionettes.”

“If you had expected such a response, then why did you give me the story?”

Alice was at a loss for words. The queen was evidently equipped with wit and canniness essential for her station.

“B-because Joshua told me to,” Alice blurted.

“Then in that case, who are you to doubt, and who am I to question? I am but a queen of a no large renegade country, and he is the no small Lord of all, am I correct?”

Alice nodded reverently, and decided to wait, watch, and silently pray more intensely.

“Then to whom should my people give obeisance? Should they salute the flag of San Romani, the hidden global rule, or your Lord Joshua?”

“He is *your* Lord, too, Your Majesty. By him kings and queens reign.”

“True,” said the queen, taking Alice’s arm. “Let us sit on the sofa over here. By the way, I asked to meet with you again because I sensed a discourse of no small significance would take place.”

“I am most honoured, Your Majesty.”

“Oh, would you like some tea? That is the British tradition, is it not?”

“Er, yes, in some cases... but n-no thank you...”

“Anything?”

“A bubbly water would be most appreciated.”

The queen laughed and motioned to the butler who was standing by the door. “Of *course*. Your beverage of choice in this fascinating novel! True in real life?”

“When I have a choice, I usually opt for such.”

“I see. But you did not fully answer my question.”

“Question? Oh, I s-suppose one should determine in one’s heart to whom to render obeisance...”

Alice paused. The butler approached with her requested beverage, bowed, and resumed his place by the door.

The queen lowered her voice. “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s, lest Caesar seizes that which is Caesar’s and *more*. Right?”

“In so many words, Your Majesty.”

“Good. I am glad you don’t mince them. I have no need of yes-persons and that is why I can trust you. Am I correct?”

Alice nodded.

“By the way, the pernicious puppeteer personage referred to in this book as ‘Truco’—do you know anything of him?”

“Very little in real life, Your Majesty. In fact, nothing. But I do know he must be behind things in some shape or form.”

“And don’t I know it, Alice! My father, King Alonzo, refused many lucrative offers to join the big ones. He died happy, knowing that I had not only reclaimed my crown but that he and I had rejected any allegiance to the secret global regime—an action cryptically described in your adventure.”

“But how do you survive, Your Majesty?”

“With no small difficulty. For instance, I ... we as a government buck on a generally accepted issue, and my ‘regime’ is immediately maligned as irresponsible, or worse. I tell my people that there’s nothing to worry about and what do the Global crime syndicate do?”

“Put out the news that you’re hiding the truth from your own people.”

“Most astute, Alice,” Queen Marina said, hiding a smile as she stirred her tea. “Could put you in no small danger—confabbing with renegade royalty.”

“But, if I may ask, your Majesty, how long can you maintain? Do you think that one day you must concede?”



“Oh, I concede to some minor issues and let them think that they’re making progress, but then I decline on a major issue and kick up a stink that cannot help but make news no matter how they try to stifle it.”

Alice chuckled. “Two steps forward one step back?”

“Exactly. For instance, this ‘San Romani has weevil flu’ is a fabrication to get us to toe the line on a trifling vehicle importation issue. We have manufactured cars for our country with which most of my people have been entirely satisfied, and we impose taxes on those imported—not that we buy so many of them anyway as we’re such a small country. Anyway, the global regime was less than pleased with that and so has sought to cripple our tourism, which in essence is all we have to offer on a worldwide scale.”

“How awful,” said Alice. “Not the fact that tourism is all you have to offer—your country is ever so beautiful—but what the global government can do.”

“Yes, but not so awful that I could not counsel and concede to the importing of foreign cars. For the sake of my people, I did, and tomorrow the global news agencies will report that the rumours of weevil flu in San Romani are fallacious. As if by a miracle, quarantine is over on Friday.”

“Sounds like Truco at work,” said Alice.

Queen Marina laughed. “Yes. Actually, did you know that ‘Truco’ is the name of a Spanish card game?”

“I knew it was a card game, but...”

“Well, Lionel my former butler was an avid player. It’s a game of deception and bluff. You literally have to *lie* to win!”

“Then Truco is a most appropriate name,” said Alice.

The queen smiled and lowered her voice. “Maybe it is as a result of reading this book, but I feel as though I can share all this with you in confidence.”

“I am most honoured, and I will shun mock modesty in asking Your Majesty why.”

“Good. You know anyway!”

“I do?”

Marina picked up the book and waved it in Alice’s face. “Of *course* you do! Tell me, all the events in this in the story happened to you in a dream?”

“A d-dream of sorts, y-yes, Your Majesty, but the experience seemed to go on for *ages* when I had only been asleep during an evening at a London theatre while attending a rather dreary play.”

“So I read.”

“But then another of my umm ... *adventures* spanned what seemed to be weeks and I’d only fallen asleep for a few hours on the plane.”

“Fascinating.”

“Exactly so, Your Majesty. In my last adventure where I traded roles, however, it spanned three days and the same in real time. Most awfully weird.”

“Amazing,” said Marina.

“Well, it *is* all rather out of this world.”

“Exactly. And that is exactly why I *love* this book.” Mariana took it and slammed it down on the coffee table. “But the princess a *puppet*?”

Alice gulped, taken aback by the sovereign’s sudden expression of revulsion. “U-umm ... Your Majesty?”

“She *refused* to be one, Alice. She bowed neither to the will of her counsellors nor to that of her people. That is why she abdicated and ran away. But then she found it a fate far worse to be the puppet of her own vagabond desires.”

“That is most profound. But how did Your Majesty, er ... the princess arrive at this realisation?”

“It was during her sojourn as a wandering princess in rags that she happened upon the book *Alice and the Baptism of Fire*. She found it in a Stratford-on-Avon second-hand bookshop and read it by gaslight in a Paddington bedsit. It took that time in the world of ‘people’ to help this prodigal princess to accept the fact that she did not belong there and convinced her to return to her elect position as heir apparent.”

“I-I see. But I imagine your ... this princess’s father was most awfully elated.”

“Oh, ever so. Alonso was heartbroken at her departure, but her return helped him to pass away peacefully. But tell me, Alice, why did the play move you so?”

“It ... er ... meant a lot to me. My destiny and stuff ... suchlike.”

“I assumed so,” Queen Marina said and arose from her chair. She walked over to a desk and pulled a thumb drive from a drawer. “Well, I could not abide the thought of my people bowing down to global puppetry. Understand?”

“Ever so, Your Majesty. More than I think you know; if you don’t mind me saying such.”

Queen Marina winked and handed Alice the thumb drive. “Exactly, and I know more than you think I know, that’s why I want to give you this. You will see that it contains specific names, faces, places, and plans regarding the ultimate world takeover.”

“W-well thank you, Your Majesty. But why give it to *me*? I am merely a...”

“As the theme outlines in your adventure, let the dodderly old conspiracy theorists rave on mocked and unheeded, but as a young female idealist, you have no small power to be a major thorn in our ‘Truco’s’ side. Even though many may regard you as naïve, they will listen to you and will take you seriously, some even as a voice from beyond.”

“I understand, Your Majesty. It was made most awfully apparent in my adventure with the cards. But what exactly do you wish me to do?”

“I realise it could present no small danger, Alice, but get a website going. Mine is blocked and hacked outside of my country and I can’t get my message out to the rest of the world. I have been in touch with Britannica about this and she recommended you.”

“The Queen of Diamonds? You mean she...?”

“Rich woman—one of the *unknown* richest in the world, way above the paltry so-called top ten. Don’t broadcast the fact, however. She is well aware of your potential.”

“I see, but this is all way above my...”

“I do not wish to pressure you, Alice. You can decline.”

“I cannot, Your Majesty. I do so wish to expose ‘Truco’s’ nefariousness to the world. Furthermore, I believe it’s what I am meant to do.”

The queen lowered her head. Alice felt uneasy and lowered hers along with her posture.

“Sit up, Alice. I am speaking to a future fellow servant of her people.”

Alice gulped and straightened her back. “B-but you know who my people are?”

“*Alice*. I have read the book, surely you understand!”

“The ... the ‘strings’ book or...?”

“Of course, the ‘strings’ book.”

“I am most dreadfully sorry, Your Majesty. But this is all rather overwhelming as I was not expecting my otherworldly ‘role’ to play out like this in real life.”

“None of us called to this station ever do, Alice. We are prepared for it, of course, by our parents, governesses, tutors and life experiences, but its reality doesn’t quite dawn upon us until the crown falls upon our heads.”

“Interesting,” Alice said reflectively. “When I was an OC, I mean like around eight or nine years old, I had a shep ... umm ... *teacher* type thingy who was especially hard on me and stuff, more than the other children. Oh goodness ... my speech...”

“Don’t worry, Alice. Go on.”

“Well, I never asked him, but I always wondered why. Then just before he left to go to another field ... er, country, he explained to my parents that he was tough on me because he saw that I needed to be groomed for leadership. I suppose that’s royalty in a way.”

“You bet it is,” said Marina. “All the protocol, the do’s and don’ts, the etiquette, et cetera, et cetera.”

Alice groaned. “Yah. It gets to you sometimes.”

“But you haven’t *chucked* it, have you?”

Alice shook her head. “Not to my knowledge.”

“Don’t. Don’t ever.”

“I shan’t, Your Majesty...”

“Listen, Alice. From here on out, call me Marina. In private of course—‘Your Majesty’ in public.”

“I will, Your ... M-Marina.”

“You may be younger than I, but I believe you understand that we both bear the burden of the crown.”

Alice nodded hesitantly.

“Good. Very well, Christopher Robbins will show you out, and Winfred Pugh will chauffeur you back to your hotel. It has been no small pleasure.”

“F-for me too....”

“And we must stay in touch.”

“Most assuredly ... er ... Marina.”

## PROMISED BLISS

**W**<sup>hat?</sup>

At Ailish Ryan's announcement, Alice felt her appetite leave and she paused from scooping her hard-boiled egg. Her mouth went dry and she guzzled some bubbly water. *I suppose I should not be surprised, though. It was ever so obvious.*

Although she would have preferred a sleepy late breakfast in her room, Alice, along with her family had accommodated Ailish Ryan's wish that they all, being recent and much appreciated acquaintances, would join her and Ronald for breakfast the following morning in the Julio hotel restaurant.

*And why on earth is she dressed up exactly like me?* Alice thought, seeing Ailish was wearing a royal blue Victorian dress with a white pinafore.

*And he, poor thing...* she mused at the sight of Ronald Trucker trussed up in a tight-fitting tuxedo, *as a lamb to the slaughter.*

"Aye," said Ailish. "Me and Ronny have decided to tie the knot! The date is set for this Sunday! And ye'll never guess where ... Ireland!"

*Oh, Joshua, do forgive me. I really ought to be happy for them. But it is most...*

"She looks stunning, don't you think, sis?"

"Who?"

"Ailish, of course. the Regency Vogue thing is especially becoming on her."

"I do suppose. But I don't quite get why she'd..."

"Maybe it was at Ronny's behest," Brandon said with a wink.

"I don't think so," said Alice.

"And so," Ailish went on. "Ye, the Godley family, at me and Ronny's request and my Uncle Conrad Connolly's bequest, have been invited to attend our marriage ceremony at his castle in Ireland's County Offaly for two nights, all expenses paid. It will take place there this Sunday afternoon. Of course, Ronny and I will take the bridal suite that night, and other guests—unless they wish to book an extra night—will be obliged to find alternative lodgings. I am sorry."

"Perfectly understandable," said Malcolm.

"That is so sweet of you all," said Eileen. "A wedding in an authentic Irish castle—how romantic."

"They must provide something extraordinary," said Malcolm.

“Do they!” Ailish said with a triumphant smile, picking up a brochure. “It says right here: ‘Connolly Castle provides the following wedding arrangements: red carpet and champagne for bride and groom upon arrival in a horse-drawn carriage at the castle’s magnificent entrance. Candles and fresh floral arrangements on all tables in the banqueting hall. Use of cake stand and ceremonial sword to cut the wedding cake. Personalised scrolled souvenir menus. Complimentary luxurious bridal suite for bride and groom on the wedding night, including traditional Irish breakfast the next morning. Dedicated wedding coordinator and banqueting manager ensuring nuptial perfection throughout your special day, along with luxurious surroundings providing magnificent photographic opportunities.”

Eileen sighed, looked at Alice, and dreamily rolled her eyes. “To *die* for, don’t you think?”

“I d-do suppose, Mummy,” her daughter replied, squirming and squinting on suppressed tears.

“But on the Saturday evening,” Ailish continued, “my uncle has invited us, along with other guests—again, all expenses paid—to participate in a whodunit night.”

“A whodunit night?” Malcolm asked.

“Over to you, Ronny,” said Ailish, handing her fiancé the brochure from which he began reading.

“Looking for a different way to entertain? Then why not take on the role of the butler, the dotty aunt, or even the police inspector as murder, mystery, and mayhem unravel around you.

“Aghasta Ritchie whodunit nights begin at approximately 8PM in the O’Carroll Restaurant at Connolly Castle. On their arrival at the hotel, the guests will receive an envelope containing information detailing the background story of the murder mystery and a cast list. Scenes continue throughout the evening, at the end of which, guests will receive a questionnaire giving them the opportunity of solving the murder mystery. When guests have completed and handed in their questionnaire, the mystery will be revealed, and prizes will be awarded to those who have correctly guessed the culprit. Although the evening activity honours Dame Aghasta Ritchie, the famous whodunit authoress, these murder mysteries are written and produced in-house.”

“So,” said Ailish. “Are ye all game?”

“Sounds cool,” said Brandon. “Don’t you think, sis?”

“I do suppose.”

“But your uncle is okay with all this, Miss Ryan?” Malcolm asked.

“Aye, when my uncle gives, he gives *big*, although a mite chintzy at first. Besides, it’s not without motive. He, at my parents’ not so subtle request, can find out whom I’m a-hobnobbin’ with! This is one way they can do so without appearin’ too nosey parker-ish.”

“But do we have time, Malcolm?” Eileen whispered. “As soon as we get back, we were going to have that meeting about—”

“Yes, Miss Ryan,” said Malcolm. “We’ll go.”

Ailish smiled. “My uncle will be as pleased as puddin’.”

“But we should run it by—”

“It’s okay, darling,” Malcolm whispered, giving his wife’s knee a reassuring pat. “We’ll do it,” he said.

“Good,” said Ailish. “Cos we would all need to book flights *a.s.a.p.* Oh, and one important thing is that for the whodunit, we’ll all need to dress appropriately for the period—that is Victoriana. Sherlock Holmes and all that sort of thing. Hence me outfit this mornin’ and throughout this whole event. Ronny paid a fortune at *Duds* last night. Alice won’t have a problem, of course, she’s already set for the part and fortunately for us both, this Regency Vogue style is the coolest thing right now.”

“Hmmp,” Alice muttered. “Catch it while it’s cool, sister.”

“But it’s not just the dress, sis,” Brandon whispered. “You’ll steal the evening.”

“Nice you think so.”

“So we will all have to hire period costumes and all again,” said Eileen.

“Or, considering the recent circumstances, even look into purchasing them once and for all,” said Malcolm.

After some time of pensive silence as the rest of the guests chattered and tucked back into their breakfast, Alice sighed and pushed her half-eaten boiled egg away from her. Looking up, she caught Ailish’s eye. The young woman was now sitting across from her and was spooning a salt-sprinkled grapefruit.

“Not hungry, Alice?”

“Not really. That was a most copious meal last night.”

“For sure. I didn’t pig out though, like *some*. So, what d’ye think o’ the news?”

“News?”

“Me and Ronny’s marriage!”

“I am ... er ... happy for you ... *both*. But why would you have requested my family to grace such an occasion?”

“To put it bluntly ... *you*.”

“Really? Explain.”

Ailish took a sip of coffee and lowered her voice. “My drama teacher taught me to perform as though to *one* person in the audience, no matter its size or society level. So, in light of that advice, I would usually scan the front row—easier, ye know, lights don’t distract.”

“I see.”

“On the closing night of this play, Alice, I was intrigued.”

“With what?”

“*You!* And ye obviously caught Queen Marina’s attention.”

“You noticed?”

“Aye. So, why should I not want the same endorsement for my marriage? It’s a blessing of sorts. Especially as it didn’t go unnoticed that ye were chauffeured—twice—to and from the palace.”

Glimpsing insecurity in Ailish’s eyes, Alice resisted the urge to get spiteful and smiled. “Be that as it may, Ailish, I do so wish to be a blessing,” she managed to say. “Thank you for the invitation.”

“You’re welcome, Alice. And I have one more request ... thought I’d run it by you first, ’cos, you know...”

“Actually, I don’t. I mean, I’d like to hear your request.”

“I ... *we* was wondering if it would be okay wit’ ye if Ronny asked your brother to be best man.”

“My brother? *Brandon?*”

Ailish nodded. “He was about to ask me brother Patrick, and he just took poorly. A fever o’ some kind. So, what d’ye think?”

“Hmm, I suppose Rum ... Ronald should ask Brandon himself,” Alice said with a shrug. “He’s over there getting some more Danish pastries.”



“Guess what, sis?”

“I know,” said Alice, as she and Brandon sat together onboard the flight to Dublin. “You are to be Ronald Trucker’s best man...”

“And Ailish’s too, of course. Cool, huh?”

“I’m happy for you.”

“You don’t seem so.”

Alice shrugged. “And Mummy and Daddy are okay with it?”

“Oh, yeah. Mum said I should just pray about it. Well anyway, sis, I am not so sure what all being best man entails, but it should be a snap.”



Alice laid aside the in-flight magazine she had been browsing, reached into her bag, and pulled out an envelope. She handed it to Brandon. "Ailish gave this to me just before we checked out of the hotel..."

Brandon opened the envelope and began reading from its containing document. "Interesting ... *'The twelve responsibilities of a best man...*

*'1. Make sure that the groom has the marriage license with him.*

*'2. Help the groom dress for the ceremony.*

*'3. Assist with luggage arrangements for both the bride and the groom so that everything will be ready for their departure...'*

"Oh, my gosh, sis..."

"Ailish said to wait until we were on the flight before giving it to you," said Alice.

"I see ... *'4. The Best Man will ride to the church with the groom.*

*'5. It is the Best Man's responsibility to make sure the ushers are gathered and ready before the ceremony begins.*

*'6. Check all the men's boutonnieres. These should always be worn on the left lapel, stem down.*

*'7. Perform any task or errand the groom or the bride's mother may request at the church...'*

"Whoa, sis. And there's no way of backing out now, right?"

"I imagine not."

"Well, it would have been good to have known beforehand what I was getting into..."

"Ailish didn't want to freak you out," said Alice and Brandon kept reading with fading voice.

*'8. Be first at the reception in order to welcome the bride and groom.*

*'9. The Best Man is responsible to make the first toast to the bride and groom at the wedding.*

*'10. The Best Man should act as a host, making introductions when necessary and helping to make the guests feel welcome.*

*'11. The Best Man should dance at the reception with the bride, both mothers, and as many of the bridal attendants and guests as possible.*

*'12. Help the groom change into his travel clothes after the reception. Find out when the bride is ready to leave and with the maid/matron of honors, help the bride and groom depart...'*

Brandon sank his head into his hands. Alice smiled and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Time to stretch and grow, dear bro'."

## CONNOLLY CASTLE

To transport Alice and her family along with Ailish and Ron from Dublin Airport to his castle in County Offaly, Conrad Connolly had chartered a unique luxury coach from his Galway Galleon coach service. The vehicle's interior motif was that of an old ship's galley, and instead of the usual rows of reclining seats, it was fitted with leather-upholstered couches each having individual video screens, oak desks, and Internet access. A bar spanned the back where Alice ordered a glass of cherry-flavoured bubbly water.

By early evening, after a leisurely two-hour journey through rolling green hills, the bus passed through Connolly Castle's gates and wended its way along the driveway—which to Alice was more like a motorway—until it pulled up at the foot of the castle's steps. As a pair of bellboys loaded their bags onto a trolley, a uniformed doorman welcomed the passengers into the castle's lobby.

"Looks like the real deal," said Brandon. "Suits of armour and all."

"Of course it is," said Alice. "Why would it be anything but? S-suits of armour and all."

"Hey, sis, what's up?"

"The sky ... oh, goodness, I'm sorry. I just feel something *is*, and I can't explain why."

"Phew," said Brandon. "Sometimes you're a total puzzle. I can see why Mum gets a bit perturbed. Me too, but, you know..."

Alice waved her hands in frustration, and directed her attention to a welcoming ambassage comprising Conrad Connolly, his wife Kathleen, and Ailish's youthful looking parents, Sean and Megan Ryan.

"Seems your Best Man responsibilities are kicking in," said Alice.

Conrad was a stocky, ruddy-complexioned man in his late thirties with light-brown hair that flopped over his face. Observing that both he and his wife, a slender brunette, shared the habit of sweeping their hair out of their faces as they talked, Alice wondered why neither of them took the trouble to cut fringes or, in Kathleen's case, use hairpins.

"So this is the happy, dashing groom we've heard so much about," Ailish's mother said, grasping Brandon's hand. "Dashing is indeed the word..."

"No, Mum," Ailish said turning to Ronald. "It's *him*..."

"Oh. Dashing, too ... in a different sort of way."

“Er ... thanks, ma’am,” Ronald said rather glumly.

“And *happy*, too...,” said Ailish’s father. “I hope?”

“Of c-course, mister. Why?”

“Well, this has all gone by us so fast, never had a chance to meet you and all ... but there’s no other reason for the sudden decision?”

“Like?”

“Like if my daughter is, you know—”

“Oh, and do feel free to enjoy all facilities, everyone,” Kathleen quickly announced and continued as though reading from a brochure. “Connolly Castle boasts excellent cuisine, fine wines, open peat fires, and candlelight. Wildlife is abundant and undisturbed. Leisure facilities include fishing, *clay* pigeon shooting (thank goodness it’s not the real thing) and a fully equipped health spa and leisure centre.”

“And opportunities for solitary scenic walks and suchlike?” Alice said, drawing a disquieting smile from Ronald.

“Of course. You can stroll or canter on horseback through unspoilt woodland and lose yourself in the peace and tranquillity of their surroundings. Oh, and be sure to enjoy our fascinating falconry display, courtesy of a most charming young gentleman...”

“And remember the cost is on me for this event,” Conrad interjected. “My niece’s marriage.”

“B-but please, do get settled in your rooms,” said Kathleen, “and we shall see each other tomorrow at champagne brunch?”



While the rest of the entourage stayed in the Charles state executive suites located in the castle’s newest wing, Alice and her family occupied three of twelve coincidentally named Lewis Baronial rooms. All forty rooms in the castle were named after historic persons and places linked with the building’s long history; Alice’s was named after a Duchess Caroline whose darkly varnished portrait hung domineeringly over the dresser.

*This is like living in one of my spirit adventures*, she thought that night as she sank into the four-poster bed’s sumptuous down quilt and gazed around at the oak-panelled walls. Her eyes fell on a small bookshelf. She jumped up and perused it.

“What? Another Alice story?” she muttered as she pulled out a large paperback entitled ‘Alice and the Quest’. “The girl on the cover does look a bit like me—though on a bad hair day. Curiouser and curiouser.

“And who wrote this one? ... Elvira Plappern ... never heard of her.”

Alice flipped through the book, and turned to the blurb on the back cover.

*Alice and the Quest is the controversial phantasmagorical tale of a beautiful but selfish, scheming thirteen-year-old who, lured and consumed by the evil power of a cruel, twisted Queen of Hearts, embarks on numerous licentious liaisons and descends into a life of lasciviousness. Plappern’s heart-warming and compelling Pulitzer prize-winning bestseller, translated into twenty languages and recently visualised in a Grammy award winning box-office blockbuster, has captured the childlike whimsy of five to fifty-year-olds alike.*

*Controversial?* Alice wondered. *Strange that I never heard of it. And even Brandon has never mentioned it. He of all people would have known about it.*

Captivated by the first three paragraphs of the novel, Alice undressed and snuggled under the bed sheets to continue reading. Midway through the third chapter, after feeling a chill pervading the room, she stuffed the book back into the shelf and her eyes fell upon another title, *Hidden Agendas*. She, being as always a night owl, was wide-awake and so retired to the bed with the book. Its back cover predictably boasted it as being a New York Times bestseller, which Alice found rather odd, considering it purported to reveal covert actions and agendas designed to overthrow and rule the world.

Inside the front cover, a scrawled dedication to Conrad Connolly read, “We’re with you, brother. Here’s the scoop”.

The “scoop” comprised accounts of a Pope assassinated after but a month in office and the mysterious disposal of his confidants, and another was a concerted ploy of a group of doctors, pharmacists, and media moguls to propound PVC piping as carcinogenic, thus filling the coffers of those concerned with providing a replacement. After some thought, Alice perceived these exposés to be credible, but accounts such as those asserting the Martian abduction of rock singer Johnny Soul arranged by the CIA, and a plan masterminded by the ‘Secret Order of Lucifer’ to kill and can thousands of third-world babies for American dog food she deemed preposterous.

*I wonder if Truco has anything to do with all this?* Alice drowsily pondered, perusing the book’s spine. At the base was but a logo depicting an embryo. She checked the title page.

*Ah ... Court Publishing House, Bathwater Street, London E.C.1.*

“Oh, I see ... the embryo, the baby ... fishy...”

Alice laid the book aside and decided to read one of Mr. Sage's complimentary volumes and found it intriguing. Before long, with *I Dare Say* fallen open across her chest, she slipped into slumber and found herself attired in her customary Victorian pinafore dress stumbling through a forest at nightfall. She was clutching a small golden torch and was making her way through the undergrowth towards distant cries for help.

Finally she stumbled upon a large cave from where those cries emitted and around its entrance scurried a horde of armoured ants, wielding swords and daggers. Alice realised she was quite small, as the surrounding grass towered above and the ants were knee-high to her. Across the cave's mouth stretched a giant web in which hundreds of ants were bound, some were dead and others were crying for release. From inside the cave, Alice heard a bloodcurdling cackle.

One of the leading ants turned and upon seeing her, gave a joyful whoop.

"She hath come!" he shouted to his companions.

"Who?"

"The one for whom ye have been praying! *Alice!*"

"Our deliverer!" the others answered almost in unison.

"Me? Thy deliverer?"

"Aye," said the leader. "See? Many of our comrades, relatives, wives, and children are caught in that web. Didst thou bring thy keys turned to scissors?"

"Nay, but I have this golden torch," said Alice.

"Hmmph, what can *that* do?"

"It hath lighted my way here, and can help you to see all the better."

"Verily? Well, we were expecting thee to use thy golden scissors to cut the strands."

"But ye are all armed. Can ye not do the job yourselves?"

"Ah, we try and although there are hundreds of us, the web is much too intricate, and the strands appear faster than we can cut them. Besides, many of us, while trying to do so, are caught and die in the web too. It's a losing battle."

"Hmm...", said Alice. "Ye do slash in vain."

"What? Thou deemest our noble efforts such?"

"Well, have ye considered attacking and killing the spider itself?"

"*Spider?* What on earth is that?"

"The one who is behind it."

"Behind what?"

“Spinning the web, of course. Do ye not hear its cackle?”

At Alice’s statement, the ants burst into laughter.

“What on earth is so funny, pray tell?” Alice asked.

“That is preposterous, dear girl! Something or someone behind the spinning of it? Nonsense. And as far as hearing a cackle...”

“Well, it is true, I *heareth* it. And wherever there is a web, most assuredly there must be a spider.”

“Hmmp. Hast thou actually seen one?”

“Of course I have. In my world ... umm ... *realm*, whatever, it is most perfectly logical. Webs do not just appear out of nowhere!”

The ants fell into further fits of laughter.

“I am most awfully sorry,” said Alice. “But I fail to understand the reason for such mirth.”

“Simple,” said the leader. “Thou hast insinuated that not only are we short-sighted—possibly even blind—but also *deaf*.”

“Very well,” said Alice. “Do ye all like music?”

“Of course!” the ants chorused.

“Then we all agree that when we hear music, someone has to be playing it. Music doth not play itself, right?”

Alice smiled and waited.

“So be it,” she stated in response to no response, and shone her torch into the cave.

The ants fell silent and drew back; some even dropped their weapons and scurried off. The beam of Alice’s torch had revealed a monstrous black spider that, with bared mandibles, appeared mortified at its exposure. It had also ceased its cackling.

“Attack it and kill it!” Alice shouted. “Ye have the weapons and the more of ye that do so, the more effective it will be!”

Although bewildered, at Alice’s command, the remaining ants swarmed towards the spider wielding their swords and daggers.

“Stop!” another of the leading ants shouted. “We need not get involved with this loony little girl! She is evidently delusional, sincere but deceived. Beside herself!”

The ants stopped, evidently respecting this intellectually persuasive ant.

“Alice is mad, Baron?” one whimpered.

“Aye. Loony. It is not real.”

“What is not real?”

“This horrific thing the loony little girl doth call a ‘spider’.”

“What meanest thou, ‘it is not real?’” said Alice. “See for thyself!”

“Simple, child. Thy contraption is merely *projecting* an image into the cave.”

“Thou speakest of my torch?”

“Whatever thou callest it, yea. It is most irresponsible and foolish of thee to project images of fear into the minds of my fellow ants, leading them to believe that such an evil creature could ever exist. Switch off thine accursed talisman.”

Alice did so and the ants gasped.

“See?” said the ant. “The image was just that—an image. Now let us get back to the *real* work of freeing our fellow ants.”

With a roar of agreement, the ants returned to their task of slicing at the strings of the web and Alice heard the cackle resume from within the cave.

Then Alice awoke. Brandon was standing over her smiling and holding a tray with what appeared to be iced tea.

“D-do they kill it?” Alice drowsily inquired.

“Kill what, sis?”

Alice rubbed her eyes. “Th-the spider. Oh, my goodness gracious, what a dream...”

“Dream?”

“Curiouser and curiouser,” Alice said, and went on to recount her nocturnal adventure to her fascinated brother.

“But what do you think it means?” she asked finally.

Brandon smiled and stroked his chin. “Ah, am I to be your Daniel, O Queen, interpreting thy dream?”

“Oh, do be serious,” said Alice. “Anyway, I suppose it shall be revealed in due time. But how did you get in here, pray tell?”

“Room service was bringing you this at my behest, and I intercepted,” Brandon replied, placing the tray on Alice’s lap. “I told them I would deliver it myself. Although it *is* almost midday and time for that champagne brunch.”

“Thank you, bro’. Good m-morning. But I didn’t order iced tea.”

“Obviously not, sis. This is Irish whisky on the rocks!”

“Well I certainly didn’t order *that*. Must have been a mistake. Anyway, how are the Best Man responsibilities?”

“Heavy duty. They fitted me with a pager, so I can be on call at a moment’s notice. At least I get to hang around Ailish a bit, though. She’s cool. Last-minute details had me staying up late last night.”

“I see. I must admit I stayed up rather late last night, too—reading.”

“As usual, sis. Anyway, I also brought you this. It’s an envelope containing your personalised copy of the Aghasta Ritchie Whodunit script and plot.

The bellboy gave it to you, but you left it on the reception counter last night. I didn't look at who your role is."

"Oh dearie me," said Alice as she read. "This must be the most awfully corny murder mystery ever."

"Yes, and I'm supposed to be the stable hand with a crush on the Lord of the manor's daughter! I mean how corny is that?"

"Wait a minute!" said Alice. "It seems I got the wrong copy!"

"The wrong copy?"

"Yes, this copy was meant for—" Alice jumped out of bed, threw on her bathrobe and dashed out of the room.

After frantically learning of the girl's hotel room number from the desk clerk, Alice banged on Ailish Ryan's door. A sound of "hold on" and scuffling followed before Ailish, with dazed eyes, dishevelled hair, and dressing gown tied askew peered around the door.

"*Alice*. I thought this was room service with me drink ... anyways, mornin'. How do ye do?"

"Umm ... m-most f-fine, thank you..."

"Hi, Princess! To what do we owe this unexpected pleasure?"

Ronald Trucker was sitting on the bed and pulling on his jeans. Alice said nothing in reply, but blushing mumbled her apologies for interrupting and handed Ailish the envelope.

"There seems to have been a mistake," Alice whispered. "The bell-boy passed me the wrong envelope for the role in tonight's whodunit."

"I see. So this one is mine?"

"Yes. Have you checked yours?"

"Er ... nope. As ye can see, I've been a mite busy!"

Ronald handed Alice an envelope that was lying on the dresser. "It's supposed to be a secret, you know," he said. "Not to spoil the plot. Specifically when it comes to the identity of the murderer or *murderess*..."

"Seems as though we had a case of mistaken identities here," Ailish said after looking inside her envelope. "But hey, we need to get on down to the champagne breakfast!"



## A FIVE-FINGERED BEAST

Alice is a unique child,” Alice overheard Kathleen Connolly saying to her parents and Brandon, as guests gathered for the champagne breakfast buffet.

Alice had been casually chatting with Ronald Trucker when she halted behind a grilled partition to listen; curiosity and a little desire for vainglory having got the better of her.

“She most certainly is,” said Malcolm.

“She’s the coolest,” said Brandon.

“Specifically speaking,” Kathleen went on, “for a girl of her age to take up the torch and challenge the powers that be ... it’s admirable.”

“Powers that be?” Eileen asked.

“Those behind the *real* iron curtain, dear. As long as Alice and others like her, such as my husband and Queen Marina, keep roaring like the proverbial mouse, there is hope for our children’s future and for the whole human race. Be that as it may, you probably don’t quite understand what I am jabbering on about. I apologise.”

“I believe we do,” said Malcolm. “Alice has an amazing destiny. She is to proclaim Christ’s coming Kingdom.”

“Of course, of course,” Kathleen clucked. “That is exactly to what I am referring. And to proclaim that Kingdom in truth will soon be considered nothing short of treason.”

“*Treason?*” said Eileen. “To preach the simple umm ... gos-good news?”

“Undoubtedly. Even to *suggest* that a better government will usurp this imminent global new world order shall be considered such. In those days, if but one faction, no matter how seemingly insignificant, seems remotely out of concord with that oligarchy, its stand will be seen by everyone.”

“It sounds as though you believe there actually *is* some sort of a conspiracy, Mrs. Connolly?”

“I’m surprised you even *question* it, Mr. Godley. I not only *believe* in it, but my husband and I are personally acquainted with many of those involved. Furthermore, I have it on good authority that Alice will challenge many of their children to stand for the true kingdom.”

“It always gets around to this in my adventures, one way or another,” Alice whispered to Ronald. “Now it’s kind of passed over into real life.”

Ronald was scratching his head. "Okay, kid ... whatever. But I agree. You're incredible."

"Er ... thank you, young sir, but..."

"Look, Alice, I'm sorry. It's just that you bring out the 'big brother' protective-type instinct in me."

"B-big brother?" Alice said with a tone of disappointment.

"Yeah. It's hard to explain, but it's like you're the kid sister I never had ... anyway, it's great getting to know you."

Ronald kissed Alice on the cheek and took his plate. As she made her way to join her parents and Brandon, Alice mused on Ronald's parting words. They sounded familiar.

*Of course, that note in the trailer park...*

"Your daughter's a natural," Conrad Connolly whispered; the guests having finished the champagne brunch's last course and were enjoying digestives (some being the chocolate variety) and desserts.

"Absolutely," Malcolm said as he drained his glass.

"Another?"

"Umm ... no, thank you. But why do you say that?"

"She carries herself with perfect aplomb for this occasion," Conrad replied, snapping his fingers at the waiter. "An actress?"

Malcolm laughed. "I perceive that Alice has her dreams!"

"Dreams are important if we as parents can help to make them happen, Mr. Godley. I failed wit' *my* daughter, and what is she now? A rock-singing dissipated dilettante. Whatever ye do, don't fail wit' yern."

"By God's grace, I won't," Malcolm muttered. "Apparently Alice has an incredible future, a future that I'm afraid to say scares me sometimes..."

Alice winced as she tucked into a bowl of chocolate mousse. Unbeknownst to her father and Conrad, who had assumed she was absorbed in her conversation with Brandon who was sitting at her other side, she had overheard theirs.

*Oh, Joshua, I am hearing and overhearing much praise and suchlike these days.*

*Yea, and our adversary hath desired to sift thee on this.*

"Oh, Alice," Conrad said suddenly, with a glance at Malcolm. "Would you care to join me for dinner tonight?"

Alice stammered something and looked over at her father, who nodded his approval.

“M-most certainly, sir...” said Alice. “And what would be the purpose of such a rendezvous?”

“To put it bluntly, Miss. I am intrigued. You see, my daughter Allison needs ... well, as I was telling your father, whatever you have that is intriguing.”

Alice blushed and turned to Brandon who shrugged and smiled.

“Seems you’ve been commissioned, sis,” he whispered. “Oops, my pager just beeped...”



“Conrad Connolly, rascal rake at your service,” the castle’s owner said with a bow as he greeted Alice that evening. “A glutton, a winebibber, and companion of publicans and sinners!”

Surprising herself again, Alice curtsayed and blushed.

“Impressive, my dear girl! *Most charmin’.*”

“Thank you, sir,” Alice said, feigning nonchalance in the flushed face of her bleary-eyed host. “It seems you know some scripture.”

Conrad grinned. “My wife is a Protestant and I’m a Catholic. She converted me. At least she dragged me to a Protestant altar!

“Come,” he said and led Alice into a small dining room adjacent to the main restaurant. A butler kept watch by the door, and in the middle stood a candlelit, black oak table set with decanters of water, wine, and juice, and three plates flanked with knives, forks, and spoons. Menus and serviettes lay at their side.

“I had detected your wee bit o’ hesitancy in joining me alone this evening, Alice, so I have invited my wife to join us. She will be here in a few minutes. Some pressing and unfortunate business.”

“Ever so sorry to hear that, sir. But I must say your castle is beautiful. I don’t think I’ve ever like, been in such an authentic historical surrounding. At least not actually *living* in one, well ... except for ... never mind.”

“To be candid, Alice,” Conrad said, lowering his voice, “the unfortunate business is regarding the castle itself. It won’t be a-mine much longer.”

“Oh really? That is most awfully sad.”

“The bank has foreclosed on it. I just don’t understand it; I’ve done everything in my power to jump through all the legal hoops.”

Alice, not wishing to appear too inquisitive and wondering why this eminent man was divulging such information, turned her attention to the large, oil-painted portraits adorning the red velvet walls.

“Excuse me, sir, but some of these people most certainly resemble you. Ancestry?”

“Ye guessed it. This more private room is where my wife and I entertain special guests; so naturally, these paintings make for good conversational pieces. He up there is my great, great grandfather Lord Ellison.”

“Very noble looking,” said Alice.

“The portrait next to his is of his wife, Dona Camilla. Spanish aristocracy.”

“Beautiful,” said Alice.

“And the young man over there is her cousin, Don Lothario.”

“Ever so handsome,” said Alice.

“And that’s my great, great aunt, Lady Clodagh.”

“Hmm,” said Alice.

“Aye. Formidable by all accounts. Anyways, in case ye’s a-wondering, I have good reason to disclose the unfortunate downturn of my holdings...”

At that moment, the door opened and a waiter approached holding a notepad. “Do you or your young guest wish to order, sir?”

“Ah, do give us a moment, Alec. We haven’t even looked at the menu. Alice, please...”

Alice picked up a menu; her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open.

*Roast pheasant with scalloped potatoes, creamed asparagus, black artichokes baked in truffle sauce and palm hearts ... 200 Euros. Braised duck with ...*

“Not to your liking?”

“N-no, not that, sir. It’s j-just, well...”

“Care to open with an appetizer?”

“W-well, I shall take whatever you recommend, sir.”

“Okay then, Alec. We c’n start with shrimp cocktails, and I’ll take the usual—roast pheasant with the scalloped potatoes and so on. Oh, and do wait until Kathleen arrives before bringing the orders. Er ... ye need a few more minutes to decide, Alice?”

“Umm, no ... your r-roast pheasant thingy sounds ever so cool, sir. Thank you.”

“And to drink?”

“A bubbly water, please.”

“You mean a carbonated soda water?”

“Er ... yes. That’s what I usually ... y-yes, thank you, sir.”

“So to get back to my point,” Conrad said once they had laid aside their menus and the waiter had departed. “I understand ye have been in touch with Marina?”

“Queen Marina?”

“Who else? Ye see, Alice, she’s a close friend o’ mine—a charming and beautiful young woman. Her ancestry is linked with mine—some Spanish, some Italian, and Jesus Christ knows what else was in the recipe! Aristocracy has the potential to be rather incestuous, ye know! Accounts for some o’ its barminess, I reckon. Anyways, Mari has taken many a holiday here at the Castle. One o’ which was immediately following her coronation.”

“Wow. That is most awfully awesome.”

The door opened, Conrad stood up, and the butler pulled out a chair.

“Kathleen, me darlin’! Ye must cheer up for the sake of our young guest.”

“I do apologise, my dear lass,” she said, managing a smile. “I am not sure you know, but we are having some difficulty regarding the castle.”

“I had informed her,” said Conrad. “Let’s enjoy the meal. Cheers,” he added, raising his glass.

“Enjoy? How so?”

“A feast is prepared for laughter, my dear Kathy. Is that not what ye remind me?”

Although she felt a little uneasy, Alice was relieved to see that the couple’s banter was lightening what portended to be a serious meeting.

“What am I in for, pray tell?” she asked with a giggle.

“Let Kathleen order, and then we will proceed,” Conrad said, motioning to the waiter.

Once Kathleen had done so, she spoke in low, confidential tones. “My husband here has bitten the hidden hand that ‘feeds him’—or so it says.”

“So *what* says?”

“Don’t look so puzzled, Alice. Ye know exactly what my wife is a-talking about! Anyway, to put it bluntly, my connection with Queen Marina of late has not gone unnoticed, and her association with you has the potential to cripple that hidden hand—at least render it arthritic for awhile.”

“I assume you are talking about some files that Queen Marina gave to me, exposing that very hand’s agenda.”

“Exactly.”

“But how on earth would anyone have found out about that? It was strictly confidential.”

Conrad shrugged. “Somehow word has slipped out to the Hidden Hand, Alice.”

The waiter entered with the shrimp cocktails, he asked for their choice of beverages and the atmosphere lightened once again.

“I’ll take a Guinness, Alec,” said Conrad.

“And I, a glass of Bordeaux,” said Kathleen. “Alice?”

“Another bubbly water, please.”

Once drinks were served, appetisers followed. Alice’s shrimp cocktail arrived in a large glass. She stared at it for a few moments and picked up a spoon; a creature was swimming amid the pink sauce. Suddenly a seahorse popped out.

“Hi, kiddo! remember me?”

Alice looked furtively about her and was relieved to see that Conrad was intensely conversing with his wife about their castle’s demise.

“Er, yes,” Alice whispered. “You were ... *are* a strange truth.”

“Right. A *very* strange one.”

“Most assuredly,” said Alice. “Especially now that you are appearing to me in ‘real’ life. But look, I can’t talk to you now...”

“Why not?”

“Well, my hosts will think I’m...”

“What? *Crazy*? So? Look, you are going to need me in the next couple of days.”

“Why?”

“I know who commits the murder.”

“So who is it?”

“The murderer, of course!”

Alice sighed. “Big help *you* are.”

“Hey, just kiddin’, kiddo. If I told you who it was, then where would the mystery be? Bingo, the culprit is da-da-da. End of story.”

“I suppose you’re right. Not such a fun game.”

“Game? What game? Anyway, kiddo, let the mystery be a mystery. It’s up to you to do the math...”

“Everything all right, Alice? The cocktail not to your liking?”

“Uh ... n-no, sir. I mean it’s just fine. Why?”

“Oh, we noticed your hesitancy to eat,” said Kathleen.

Alice blushed, tentatively stuck her spoon into the glass and swallowed a scoop.

“Most awfully good,” she said with a gulp and a smile. Presently the second course arrived.

“I’m at the mercy of a five-fingered beast, Alice,” Conrad softly said, following a period of munching and sipping, punctuated only with murmurs of approval.

“F-five fingered beast?”

“Aye. Picture if you will the dismembered black ghost of a hand.”

Alice shivered and found herself merely pecking at her food. One of the candles flickered low and went out.

“D-dismembered?”

“Aye. Picture that dismembered, invisible hand with a will of its own. Imagine that it can travel wherever it wants, do anything it wants—albeit only evil.

“I-I am trying, sir,” said Alice.

“As Kathy knows, I ain’t done everything above board, mind ye. But who in my position has? ‘Let him that is without sin,’ right? I bit that five-fingered beast that thought it was a-feedin’ me and what does it do?”

“Er ... tries to strangle you?”

“Aye. Takes away my holdings, spins yarns about me and my family, signs away my life.”

“The hand has that much power?”

“Aye. Is not a hand required to sign a document or even a will. On the other ‘hand’ it can grasp, push, and even *kill*.”

“You speak as though this hand has a will of its own, sir.”

“That it does.”

“But if I may say so, sir, a hand is only subject to a brain. There must be such controlling it.”

“Hmm ... interesting point.”

“Oh, and if it be well with you, sir,” Alice added. “Could we relight the candle? I do feel that the topic of our conversation merits a little more light on the subject!”

Conrad and Kathleen laughed.

“Of course, dear, sorry,” said Kathleen and with a flick of her finger, the butler was at the table with a candle lighter. “But I find your comment about the brain most perceptive, Alice. For without it, the hand can do nothing. Yet, by following its ‘boss brain’s’ instructions, it can write, paint, play music, and bring unseen and intangible to reality. Much ultimate expression of the soul is through the hand.”

“Not the voice?” Alice asked.

Kathleen shook her head and took a sip of her wine. “Not *ultimately*—the hand is the last bastion. For without the employment of the hand to record such, the mouth remains unheard for posterity.”

Alice stared at her hands. *They are not slender and fine like Marina’s*, she mused, *but not as blunt and clumsy as Ailish’s*. *They are...?*

“*Determined*,” said Kathleen.

“What?”

“Your hands. I know what you were thinking!”

“M-most awfully amazing,” said Alice.

“This is fun, is it not, Con?”

“Very, darling.”

Kathleen reached out to Alice. “Let me hold them ... your hands...

“My oh, my!” she exclaimed and let go. “They’re feminine, no doubt about that, but they’re too much, power-wise. You have the insignia. If *your* hand was as free to roam dismembered, it would usurp the hidden one!”

“I do believe that is the plan for me, ma’am. Not to have my hand dismembered, of course, but Commission-wise.”

“Commission?”

“Aye, darling,” said Conrad. “Queen Marina mentioned something about that. A true liberation of minds, souls, and even bodies.”

“So what do we do?”

Conrad shrugged and looked over at Alice who was unable to hide her mystification. The main course arrived and Kathleen placed a hand on Alice’s arm.

“It would be wonderful for you to make friends with our daughter, Allison. She’s about the same age as ye ... give or take a couple o’ years. She’s fifteen.”

“I’m thirteen, Ma’am.”

“Well, she will be here tomorrow for the wedding,” said Conrad. “Don’t know if she’ll show up, though.”

“She’s the rebellious sort,” said Kathleen. “Dresses in S. & M. leather and everything. Already messed her skin up with piercings and tattoos.”

“And she sings lead and plays acoustic guitar in an all-girl alternative rock band called ‘Pet Kittens,’” said Conrad.

“Sounds like a most interesting person,” said Alice. “I’d love to meet her.”



## The DUNGEON

Dinner with Conrad and Kathleen Connolly being over, her parents having retired to their room and Brandon being about his best man duties, Alice wandered fascinated through Connolly castle. She stopped to admire the enormous oil paintings bedecking the walls of stairways and halls, and recognized many of them from her schoolbooks on art history. As though in answer to her wondering if the works of art were actual originals, a gentleman passerby gruffly remarked to her disappointment that they were mere copies, and Alice continued her exploration.

After descending a flight of stairs and inching her way down a darkened passageway where she bumped into a suit of armour, she found herself in the dark-lit Dungeon Bar.

“So this was actually a dungeon?” she asked the barman.

“Aye, up until ’bout a couple o’ centuries ago. Quite a macabre history, as ye can imagine. Ye can almost feel it comin’ off the walls.”

Alice shivered and grimaced. “I d-do s-suppose...”

“Well, one cannot expect to cover centuries of beheadings, incarceration, dismemberment, and torture with pitch and blood-red velvet. Anyways, Miss, a drink? Appropriately enough, our special this evening being Friday the thirteenth, is Bloody Mary.”

Alice faltered. The barman had not asked her for ID, as it seemed that he, like many others, had assumed from her attire that she was involved in a special event.

“W-well, I don’t know, sir. I mean—”

“It’ll be on me,” said an elderly woman who was sitting at some distance down the bar. A silver stranded net contained her long grey hair in a bun, and pins secured her brown velvet toque. Alice thought she looked familiar—something in her eyes. The woman moved to a closer stool.

“Oh, no, madam,” said Alice. “I mean I can’t...”

“I insist,” the lady said and addressed the barman. “A Bloody Mary, appropriate for her age and taste. Heavy on the tomato juice and bubbly water and light on whatever else. For me, the opposite. Light on the tomato juice and bubbly water—”

“I understand, Ma’am. Comin’ right up.”

The woman fell silent until the barman returned with the drinks.

“To my namesake,” she said as she and Alice clinked glasses. “We meet again.”

“Again?”

“The rabbit hole, remember?”

“Oh, yes! In my ... er ... dream, right? But you were just...”

“A little girl like you.”

“But then you must be a descendant.”

“No descendant. I’m Alice Pleasance herself.”

“You are? *Wow*. I mean, goodness gracious. How so, ma’am?”

“Tell me,” said the woman, “how does it feel being ‘Alice’ in the *Heaven’s Library* stories?”

“It’s okay, I suppose. It just gets a bit complicated living two lives. Brandon’s fine, my daddy up to a point, but I think mummy especially thinks I need ‘help.’ Peers tease me, too.”

“It’s a crown *and* a cross, right?” the old woman said and sipped her chosen brew.

“Being Alice? Well, yes. I have trials—I mean, battles ... umm, you know, *issues*...”

The old woman smiled. “I had them too as I grew into womanhood. When people met me, all they thought and said in so many words was ‘Oh, *weren’t* you Alice in Wonderland?’”

“That must have been most awfully trying,” said Alice. “Especially the ‘weren’t you?’ thingy.”

“Truly, child. They did not see me as a person here and now, but as an imaginary character that they had come to know and love through printed pages. It was especially hard, as I didn’t look the same as the artist depicted me. They would say ‘Oh, but you are not as pretty as...’ that sort of thing. Image is so important to us when we’re here in and on earth—it’s pitiful. But for the sake of the ‘Alice’ aficionados, I finally learned to take it gracefully in my latter years, realising it was a role that God had intended for me to play.”

“That’s a most awfully good way to look at it, ma’am. Joshua ... the Lord does use me to teach lessons in a palatable way! Even if perchance I oftentimes come across not so umm ... *cool*.”

The woman chuckled and wagged a forefinger. “Ah, yet you make the *perfect* ‘Alice’—a little older, of course. But you need to reach the world. Expand through your dream.”

“Dream?”

The woman nodded. “Actually, that reminds me, I have put in a word.”

“Put in a word?”

“Yes, to someone very much concerned. Through a thought, a dream ... an inspiration.”

“I am most awfully sorry, ma’am. But what do you mean by, ‘to someone concerned?’”

“You will find out in time ... oh, dearie me, it seems the time is now.”

“*There* you are, darling!”

“*Lewis*,” the woman said at the approach of a slim older gentleman with greying hair parted at the side and wearing a black suit.

“I’ve searched all over this wretched place looking for you,” he said.

Alice recognised him as an aged Lewis Charles, and as had been her custom during the last few days, stood up and curtsied. She sighed and sat back down.

“So what brought you by, my dear?” the woman asked.

“Trivial. Just wanted to make some small appearance in this scenario. What with you, Aghasta Ritchie and Dorothy Leigh, I felt a bit left out. Would not wish to spoil it, though. You seem to have the whodunit broth adequately covered.”

“The ‘broth’ can use a little whimsical ‘spice,’ dear ... oh, excuse us, Alice. I must explain.”

“No need to, ma’am. I am sure this ‘story’ needs all the spirit ... er ... *spice* it can get. It *is* turning out rather plain, in my opinion. Meeting the queen of San Romani, the castle, and all has been ever so much fun for me, of course, but for the readers ... oh, I don’t know. And as far as a whodunit, it’s just going to be, you know, a game.”

“That is true, child. But hang on to your hat...”

“Anyway, dear, we must retire,” Lewis said to the woman. “It’s late, and this young lady needs her beauty sleep.

“Although that is arguable!” he added and kissed Alice’s hand.

“So, Alice, we shall see you shortly—,” the woman said, gathering her gloves and handbag.

*See me shortly?*

“Wow, fancy meeting you tippling in the deep, dark dungeon bar!”

Alice turned at hearing Ronald Trucker’s voice. “Oh hi, er ... *hello...*”

“What are you doing, Princess? Practising Whodunit lines?”

“No. I was merely having a Bloody M ... a drink with...” Alice turned, and then turned back to Ronald. “B-but... it seems they’ve—”

“Are you okay, angel? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“W-well, I do s-suppose.”

*Oh dear, in real life?*

*Yes, Alice. Be not afraid.*

“Speaking of practising lines,” Ronald said, after ordering a drink. “Have you ever done any acting?”

“Not really, I have but performed in a few skits for our local prison ministry and stuff and suchlike. Why?”

“Just wonderin’, Princess. I’m toying with the idea of you maybe taking the role of Alice in the *Baptism of Fire* movie. We’re cutting the ‘Alice and’ bit—too long. Shorter sound bites grab.”

“I see. And what makes you call me ‘Princess’ and ‘angel’?”

“Dunno. It just came out. Anyway, your brother says you’re a natural actress.”

“Oh he most undoubtedly would. Neither of us can do any wrong in each other’s eyes!”

“That’s awesome. Never had that experience. That’s why you’re like the—”

“I know. The kid sister you never had.”

“Hey, don’t get cynical on me. I mean it.”

Alice sighed and brushed her hand across her forehead. “I’m sorry, Rum ... Ron, I feel a little sleepy. I do think I shall have to excuse myself.”

Ronald raised his hands and cocked his head. “Sure, angel. I understand. See ya tomorrow. Breakfast?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” said Alice. “Goodnight, Ron.”

## PRETTY INTERESTING?

The following morning, after devouring a room service Irish breakfast of bacon rashers, sausages, fried eggs, black pudding, soda bread, sliced potatoes, and fried tomatoes, Alice wandered sated and grateful for the unhampered opportunity to explore the grounds of Connolly castle. The Irish hills were rolling lush and emerald against the grey overcast sky and Alice clutched a closed umbrella in preparation for the inevitable.

She had listened to a little of what she considered “cool stuff” from Maria Fontaine’s website downloaded onto Brandon’s I-Touch, and in an attempt to introduce more flexibility into her life, Alice had substituted her usual choice of bubbly water that morning with an infamously strong “Barry’s” Irish breakfast tea. She was now paying the price with a pounding heart and black spots flickering in her vision thwarting her enjoyment of the scenery.

Nevertheless, Alice was curious about the falconry display. Following the concierge’s directions, she strolled over a hill to a forest-flanked field where a youth sporting a soft dark beard and long black hair was feeding titbits to a falcon perched upon his leathern-gloved left hand. He looked familiar and welcomed Alice over to him as though he was expecting her.

*Ever so handsome*, she thought.

“Glad thou thinkest so, Alice,” the youth said.

“Think what?”

“That I am indeed comely.”

Alice blushed. “So you are a mind reader?”

“Of sorts, dear lass,” he said and with a gesture of his hand, tossed the falcon into flight. “Ah, there she goes—she will be bringing back my lunch presently.”

“Really? Your *lunch*?”

“Aye, a pheasant. Elijah benefitted from the butlership of a raven, I that of a falcon. Hast thou ever eaten roasted pheasant?”

“Well actually, just last night for the first time in my life, and it was most delicious.”

“Then care to join my father and me for a lunch of such?”

“I am most awfully sorry, young sir, but right now I am like, exceedingly pigged out ... I mean, *replete* from a full Irish breakfast. I think a ‘fast’ without the ‘break’ would be most in order at this point.”

“Well said, well said!”

“So do you do this for a living, young sir?”

“Nay...”

Just then, a familiar voice addressed Alice from a few yards behind her.

“Hey, Princess! Didn’t see ya at breakfast. We had a date, remember?”

“I said I was unsure, Master Trucker, if I recall.”

“Oh, and who is this?”

“Excuse me, I’m sorry. This is ... oh, goodness...”

“Falconer,” said the young man and extended his hand. Ronald shook it. “Josh Falconer.”

Alice gasped. *Josh! Joshua? Oh dear, where have I been?*

*A little distracted, dear!*

“Nice to meet you, man. A friend of Alice?”

“Aye. Goes back years. Childhood sweethearts, thou mightest say.”

“Great. So you’re into this falconry thing?”

“Occasionally for leisure,” the young man replied as a falcon alighted onto his glove. “I am an open-heart surgeon by profession.”

“Phew, I can imagine you need a break from that every once in a while.”

“I never have a break from it—it is my full-time occupation. Anyway, as thou canst see, my fine-feathered waitress hath brought me my lunch, and I must roast that which she hath caught in hunting. Farewell, my friends.”

“See ya,” said Ronald.

“F-farewell,” Alice said sadly, as the young man walked away.

“Oh, and do not be ashamed of thy dream, Alice,” he called back. “And especially of fulfilling it!”

“Weird dude,” Ronald remarked.

“Not so weird,” said Alice.

“So, angel, did you think any more about what we discussed last night?”

“About what?”

“My proposal.”

“Oh *that*. The acting thingy. I haven’t thought too seriously about it to be honest, because I didn’t think *you* were.”

“I am. You’re a natural, Alice.”

“But Ailish is seasoned, and she is undeniably most phenomenal. My brother thinks so, too.”

“Yeah, but you are the real deal, Princess. At least consider it.”

“Look, Ron, I don’t even have to ‘consider it.’ I have no wish to hurt Ailish. Besides, she is to be your wife.”

“That’s neither here nor there, angel. Domestic life is one thing—career is another.”

“Well, it’s just not charity to go about it this manner.”

“What manner? It’s merely a business proposal.”

“The subterfuge and suchlike...”

“You’re getting the wrong idea, Princess. Look, I love Ailish. She’s fantastic, but—”

“I see. You love her and ‘she’s fantastic but.”

“Hey, I wasn’t expecting to get into an ethical debate over a mere request. My matrimonial obligation has little or nothing to do with my career advancement.”

“They should, I do believe,” said Alice. “Oh, I am most dreadfully sorry, Rum ... Ron, but I am awfully uncertain about all of this.”

“But *I’m* certain, Alice ... I find you ... your *face* interesting. It would be stunning on camera, on *screen*.”

Alice fumbled with her fingers. “My face—interesting? Like watching the falcon?”

“Don’t kid around, Alice. *I’m* not.”

“Neither am I, Ron. But do you not mean ‘pretty’ or suchlike?”

“Of course. That’s a given. But ‘interesting’ in the long term is more interesting than ‘pretty.’”

“More interesting than pretty’...” Alice mused. “I presume that is a compliment?”

“Of course. ‘Interesting’ usually gets more ‘interesting’ as time goes by, while ‘pretty’ only fades or clings to surface prettiness with a lot of evident high maintenance and anything ‘interesting’ in what was once ‘pretty’ becomes nonexistent!”

Alice giggled. “Whoa, Ron, you most certainly have it ever so eloquently sewn ... summed up!”

“I’m serious, angel. Take a book or a picture for instance. What keeps your interest the longest? A pretty picture or an interesting book?”

“Most certainly, an interesting book.”

“Right. Even though the covers get worn and dowdy, right? The pages dog-eared and torn?”

Ronald turned his head and looked up at the grey sky.

*Never quite noticed before*, Alice thought, *but he does have a noble profile*. “To be sure, Ron, you are exceedingly deeper than I imagined.”

“Oh? You thought I was like, *shallow*?”

“Umm ... I’m just a little surprised. It’s nice, though.”

“Well, being almost incinerated in a warfare tank can do that to ya, Princess. I come home from the war with an eye wound. Still can’t totally see through it, as you can tell...”

“Hadn’t noticed, to be honest,” Alice said and blushed.

“Love is more than half blind, angel,” Ronald said, his smile intensifying Alice’s discomfiture. “Anyway, it’s a miracle that Ailish wants anything to do with a man so seemingly incapacitated.”

“She must really love you.”

“I guess. Although I wonder if ... never mind.”

“Anyway, I’d ever so much rather be interesting than merely pretty,” Alice softly said following a sober yet not uncomfortable silence.

“You’re both,” said Ronald. “And ... you know how they say that when you lose one of your senses, one or all of the others get intensified?”

“I have heard such,” said Alice and started walking back towards the castle. Ronald fell in step with her.

“Well, that’s another reason I want you in the movie role, Princess. Since I have almost lost the sight in one eye, I have been tuning in to your *voice*.”

“My voice? I do sing sometimes, but not like Ailish.”

“I’m not talking about singing – although I’m sure you’d do great, but I’m talking about your speaking voice. That in itself is a hit. There’s a *lilt* in it—is that the word?”

Alice shrugged. “I do suppose.”

“Well it’s like a *caring* lilt, angel. Sympathy, understanding, and all that good stuff. I guess it’s just plain love.”

Alice quickened her pace. “I do suppose,” she said again. “That’s what we ... I mean *I* believe in. It’s the answer to all the world’s ills. Oh dear, that must sound awfully trite.”

“It does,” said Ronald.

Alice’s face fell and she stopped in her tracks. “Really?”

“Yeah. When most anybody else says it but you.”

Alice blushed again, mumbled something, and directed her attention to the falconer’s distant display. “Amazing, is it not?”

“Yeah, Princess. The way of a falcon in the air and the way of a man with a maid.”

“You quote the Bible,” said Alice. “Most interesting. I never would have...”

“My grandparents. They slipped the scriptures to me under Mom’s nose in the form of a red-letter, nine-eleven commemoration Bible. A birthday present wrapped in stars and stripes.”

“Under Betty’s nose?”



“Yup. But I didn’t mind. Hey, did I tell you her name is Betty?”

“Umm ... m-maybe you did.”

“Anyway, Mom tried her best, but bein’ raised in a trailer park don’t give you much other moral trainin’.”

“But she did a wonderful job, Ron. I mean, being a single mother on the road all the time is not easy.”

“How do you know that, angel? That ain’t the sort of info I freely give out. ... Oh, by the way, I almost forgot...”

Ron pulled out his cell phone and tapped on it. “Need to check on what time she’s flying in.”

“Who?”

“Mom, of course. Got to get her here for the whodunit tonight ... Mom? Yeah, hi! ... Okay, great. A taxi will be at Dublin airport to bring you straight here. Listen, do you happen to know a British chick called Alice? Beautiful, blonde, about thirteen years old? High-bred type?”

Ronald looked at Alice and shrugged.

“Don’t worry, Mom,” he continued. “Still going for it with Ailish. But this chick is supremely awesome. Seems she knows you—somehow. Hey, why don’t you talk to her?”

Ronald handed his cell phone to Alice who waved her hands in protest before taking it.

“H-hello? Miss Trucker? It’ll be ever so c-cool to see you again, I-I mean ... sorry, I beg your pardon? Oh y-yes, ever so. He’s a wonderful person ... actor. Oh, goodness gracious ... here, I’ll give you back to Rummy... What? Oh, yes—of course I mean Ronald.”

Alice exhaled and rolled her eyes as she handed Ronald his cell phone.

## FAMILIAR REFRAINS

Still painfully digesting her full Irish breakfast, Alice forewent the all-you-can-eat lunch buffet, but took advantage of a once-in-a-lifetime all-you-can-drink offering of Perrier bubbly water. With a bottle in hand, and unsuccessfully suppressing loud burps, she dawdled into the foyer to survey the coming and going of guests. Presently, her parents and Brandon joined her in a 'people watch' until a commotion around the entrance brought Ronald Trucker bounding down the stairs to pacify a woman who was outside shouting about a loss of luggage.

"Is this an example of Irish efficiency, baby?"

"Mom, it's okay, it's okay!" Ronald was saying as he led her into the foyer. "I'll cover it all."

"Betty Trucker!" Alice exclaimed as they approached.

"You know this lady?" said Eileen.

"Of course," Brandon said with a twinkling eye. "In literary terms!"

"I had my best outfit for the wedding in that suitcase, Ron..."

"Which one is that, Mom?"

"You know, gold patent high heels, black leather miniskirt and that scarlet satin chemise."

*Thank God*, Alice thought, and Ronald sighed with what she perceived as mutual relief.

"Well, like I told you, Mom, I'll cover it. By the way, this is Alice Godley, her brother Brandon, and her parents, Malcolm and Eileen."

"Howdy..." Betty shook their hands and peered into Alice's face. "Beautiful. Ronald's made a good choice."

"What? I mean, I beg your pardon, ma'am?"

"Sorry, I was just thinkin' .... jet lag, ya know. Gets one a mite disoriented. But ya do seem familiar. Haven't we met before?"

"In a way," said Alice. "I mean..."

Eileen shook her head. "This must be the question of the month. I don't understand it..."

"Mum," Brandon said under his breath, "if you were boned up on your daughter's spirit adventures, you would understand. It's awesome actually."

"I'm sorry. But as I have told you many times, I have a hard enough time keeping up with my basic..."

“Doggone, this is as far a cry from a Trailerville and Tamaulipas as one could ever get,” Betty said stepping back and gazing around at the castle’s antiquity.

“Tamaulipas?” said Ronald.

“It’s where she transports the soybean shipment to,” said Alice. “Mexico.”

Ronald turned to her. “You seem to know more about my mom than I do.”

“Oh, it’s all rather complicated.”

“We can handle complications, Princess. So what else do you know about my mom?”

“Umm ... let me see...”

“You’re the high-toned chick that talked to me on the phone?” said Betty.

“I am.”

“Then clue me in!”

“Go ahead, sis,” said Brandon. “You’ve got nothing to lose.”

*Yes, tell the truth.*

“Well...,” Alice began, “maybe you have a younger sister?”

“I do as a matter of fact, Missy,” said Betty. “And seein’ y’all are well versed ’bout my personal life, what might be her name?”

“T-Tammy?”

Betty caught her breath and nodded. “And?”

“She’s a secretary to a pastor TV evangelist?”

“That’s right ... Pastor Hal Hamstrung. And I have my suspicions... Founded, do you think?”

“Could be, ma’am,” Alice replied. “Late night ‘business’ and suchlike.”

“Hey, how come you know all this? Some kinda private investigations?”

“No, ma’am. It’s most awfully hard to explain—”

“So how’s *your* love life, Mom?” Ronald asked while Brandon smilingly directed the observers’ attention to the nuptial event at hand. “Did ya ever get it on with that old Spanish dude you met at that Comfort Zone Hotel? Mister Don Coyote?”

Betty smiled. “As a matter of fact, I did, baby. Jes’ a week ago the old wolf proposed to me in the back of Big Bertha. ”

“Big Bertha?”

“That’s the name of your mummy’s lorry,” said Alice.

“Her what?”

“Truck,” said Eileen.

Ronald shook his head. “Look, Alice, you’ve never met my mom, and you know all this about her? This is weird.”

“I know a little ... it’s rather hard to explain.”

“Another phrase of the month,” Eileen whispered to Brandon who again began explaining Alice’s *Heaven’s Library* connection to her when Ailish trotted up dazzling in her Regency Vogue costume and holding a large package.

“Phew!” said Brandon.

“The bride?” said Betty.

“You bet, Mom,” said Ronald, drawing Ailish to his side. “And what’s this, babe?” he asked, tearing open the package Ailish had stuck in his hand.

“A wedding gift,” Ailish purred in his ear. Ronald winced at the aroma of whiskey on her breath.

“It’s beautiful, babe. The book of what ... *Kells*?”

“Aye. It’s a facsimile. Seein’ as I am to marry a boondocks hick from ... where is it now, Ronny?”

“Er...”

“Trailerville,” said Alice.

“Right,” said Betty.

“Anyways,” Ailish continued. “Seein’ as I am marryin’ a whatever from wherever, I figured it would be appropriate to at least give him a bit o’ culture.”

“Okay, babe. But what the hell is it all about?”

“I can explain sometime,” Alice whispered to him, drawing a look of suspicion from Ailish.

“Can I ask ye somethin’, Alice?” she began, but more commotion at the castle’s entrance along with Conrad and Kathleen Connolly sweeping onto the scene distracted her. A portly, moustachioed man wearing a beige trench coat was mumbling and stumbling after them into the lobby.

“Jacques Truncheon!” Alice exclaimed as he approached. The man lurched to a stop in front of her.

“Oui, Mademoiselle. Seems my fame has followed me ... along with this elderly gentleman from ze San Romani book fair...”

“Mr. Sage! How wonderful to see you again.”

“Yes, Miss Godley. Following your and her Majesty Queen Marina’s referral, Mister Connolly requested me to come here to participate in tonight’s whodunit. A most unexpected surprise.”

“But I am so glad you could be involved in this most charming event,” said Alice. “And like me, you are naturally dressed for the part.”

“Naturally. And my fiancée shall join me after the wedding.”

“Your fiancée?”

“Anne D’Oignon. We met at the San Romani book fair if you recall.”

“Oh, I remember well, she was most attractive—”

Jacques Truncheon cleared his throat and extended his hand to Alice. "Nice to meet you, Mademoiselle...?"

"Alice. Alice Godley."

"Of course, of course. You seem ever so familiar. Have we not met before?"

Eileen chuckled. "The recurring 'haven't we met before?' refrain. But how do you know this man, Alice?"

"If you were a little more abreast of her adventures in *HL* land, Mum..." Brandon muttered.

"You are a French detective working in Ireland, Mr. Truncheon?" Malcolm asked.

"Mais oui. I am Belgian actually, but I am employed at Ireland Yard for my skills as a sleuth. I have never failed to sniff out ze vilest of villainy and ze most treacherous of treachery."

"So what brings you here, Monsieur?" Brandon said grinning. "Villainy and treachery?"

"*Brandon*," Alice said under her breath.

"Ah, young man, I am here for ze beer, you may say. Free board, banquet, and breakfast, and participation in a game of whodunit all courtesy of Madame Connolly."

"As a favour for his uncovering a dastardly embezzlement attempt on my husband's Galleon Coach business," Kathleen added.

"So naturally in this Aghasta Ritchie Whodunit night, your role is the detective?" Alice asked.

"Naturellement, Mademoiselle. It is okay if I smoke, Monsieur Connolly?"

Conrad winked. "I'm my own boss here. Knock yerself out."

Truncheon smiled and pulled out a pipe. After stuffing a small wad of tobacco into it and lighting it, he continued. "However, I must warn you zat wherever and whenever I take some time to relax, a murder happens."

"Oh dear," said Eileen.

"Ah, oui, madam. Would you say I am jinxed, Alice?"

"I do not know, monsieur, but one must admit that it could make this story ... *life* more exciting!"

"Alice, *really*," said Eileen.

"True," said Truncheon. "But it's just zat if my reputation continues as such, I would never be invited to a birthday, christening, or even a Christmas party. I would be considered an evil omen!"

"No need to worry about that, Mister Truncheon," said Conrad, lifting his glass. "This occasion is check out and chill out. Cheers. See you at the whodunit this evening."

Brandon turned to Alice and lowered his voice. "This is *weird*, sis."

"Weird?"

"Being in one of your adventures. What I mean is, I've always wanted to be involved in a mystery like this and it's cool that it's with you, finally."

"Mystery? This is fun, but not exactly a mystery."

"I don't know, sis, but I think I would rather be with you in one of your *dream* trips right now—at least they're not *real*."

"But they're ever so real to *me*. Besides, I never said anything about what's been happening is anything but a... Look, why are you saying all this?"

"Maybe it's the vibe of the place or something, but I have a weird feeling that this whole experience could take a turn which I am not sure is for the best."

"Please, Brandon. You're spooking me out."

"Okay, sis, sorry. So how many other characters from your adventures are going to show up out of the woodwork?"

Alice shrugged. "As many as possible, I hope—except for Truco, et al! But I suppose that is inevitable."

Brandon winked. "I have been hoping that Celia Spade would show up, I've always had a thing for her, you know ... oops, my pager. Duty calls. See you around!"

"See you, Brandon."

Feeling in need of a nap, Alice was about to take the stairs to her room when she noticed, standing at the castle entrance, the forlorn silhouette of a short, plump girl carrying a guitar. Not knowing what motivated her to do so, Alice approached her, introduced herself, and inquired if she needed assistance.

"None but me dad," the girl snapped.

Despite her tone and intimidating demeanour, Alice noticed a beseeching softness in the girl's eyes. "Then I assume you are Allison Connolly?" she said.

The girl ruffled her luminous pink and yellow-streaked black hair and stared Alice up and down. "That I am, and what is it to ye? And how did ye know?"

"Your parents' description—tattoos, getup and stuff ... and suchlike."

"And what's with *your* getup, Goldilocks? You Regency Vogue tarts are all the same with yer airs and graces."

"This, what you call 'Regency Vogue tart' manner of dress, has been required for the whodunit night by your father himself. And I was in no wise demeaning your choice of vesture ... oh, goodness, do excuse my most affected speech."

“Talk about it,” said Allison. “Does that come along with the getup?”

“Most assuredly not ... it’s most difficult to explain. Look, let us inquire at the concierge as to your father’s whereabouts. He was here just a few minutes ago.”

“Don’t bother, Goldilocks—I’ll take care of that in time.”

“Oh, by the way, Allison. Despite the fact that I may resemble your fairy tale character, my name is actually Alice.”

“Aye. Funny to say so, but I knew it. Look, wanna get a drink? Bein’ the daughter of the castle’s owner I can get whatever on the tab.”

Alice glanced around the lobby. Brandon and her parents, along with many of the guests had gone. “Very well, Allison. We can grace the Dungeon bar, it’s down in—”

“I *have* bin here before. That’s what I had in mind.”

Presently, Alice, sitting in the Dungeon’s shadows sipping on a glass of lime bubbly water, was prayerfully striving to understand her newfound companion who sat in front of her sipping a second Bloody Mary. Allison had ranted against her family and upbringing, the perceived neglect, the rigidity of school and hypocrisy of religion, along with environmental exploitation, social injustices, and other issues that she was determined to expose in her songs.

“Interesting,” Alice said at length.

“*Interesting?* It’s more than just ‘interesting,’ Goldilocks, if ye’ve ever experienced it. Which I doubt ye have—strutting around like a castoff from a Jane Austen movie.”

“But ... being a daughter of the owner of a castle, Allison, have *you* experienced all you speak of to its full?”

“Aye. I chucked it all. Been livin’ on the streets. That’s *real* life.”

“No bailouts from Daddy Connolly?”

“Hah! Cynical. I like that! Well ... to be honest, he has in a pinch...”

“That’s sweet of him .... Hey, Allison, I would be most interested in hearing one of your songs.”

“Yeah?” the girl said and began unzipping her guitar case.

“Oh, I didn’t mean right now. But whenever is convenient...”

“No time like the now,” Allison said and began tuning her guitar. “What sort of thing do ye wanna hear?”

“Well, whatever song means the most to *you*.”

“Okay, Goldilocks,” Allison said and began strumming. “How about this one? It’s close to me heart, and I hardly have dared open it for scrutiny even to me boyfriends, let alone the rest of the band ... it’s called ‘Open-Heart Surgeon’...”

*Into your hands, I commend my life  
To the skill of your exactor knife.  
I surrender my throbbing heart to you,  
But who's the 'you' I'm talking to?  
Some call you 'This,' some call you 'That,'  
Some say you are the 'Where it's At.'  
The Light, the Great White Spirit and Horse,  
All-consuming Fire, the Force,  
Buddha, Krishna, Allah, the Christ,  
Abba, Vishnu, Heilige Gheist.  
Open-heart Surgeon,  
Give me a clue...*

Allison stopped singing and banged her fists on the table.

"That's a beautiful song," Alice said, wiping her eyes. "Please keep going."

"Oh, dear God..." said Allison and shook her head.

"That's *Him*," said Alice.

"Who?"

"Dear God. I mean, *He is* who it's trying to reach, Allison."

"What is?"

"Your heart. It's hungry, right?"

"Aye. *Starving*. So?"

"Well, blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, he that believeth on him shall never thirst ... oh, goodness..."

"Keep talkin', Goldilocks, it's cool ... no, actually it's *warm*..."

"Very well. Your open heart is seeking for the surgeon, Allison. I know who it is. He'll perform the healing operation without flaw."

"What be his name?"

"Joshua."

"The one who stopped the sun?"

"Yes, well ... the one named so on earth asked the one named so in Heaven to do so who frequents this abode. Oh, I do wish I had taken his contact details instead of just letting him go off like that ... I am sorry. It must seem like I am babbling."

The girl gripped her chest. "No. It's makin' perfect sense in *here*."

"Good. Anyway, he's the best. We must enquire at the concierge. No ... *wait*, you can contact him right now in fact, and you don't even have to know his cell phone number."

"So how do I do it ... contact him that is?"



“Speak to him right here.”

“Like into the ether?”

“The ether?” said Alice.

“You know, the atmosphere—the higher air.”

“I do suppose...”

“I’m getting into the higher air concept,” said Allison. “How do you think I write songs like this?”

“Umm ... spirit ... channelling?”

“Aye, you can call it that. Me and a few o’ me friends, we chucked Goth and all that and went for the overarching principle. It’s worked for some, but I’m still a mite confused. Actually, I want to form another band based on it and call it ‘Higher Air.’”

“An awfully cool name, actually,” said Alice. “Like the box of air dream ... well... Brandon would love your music, too. He’s my brother, you know.”

“It’s still in the dream stage,” said Allison. “But dreams *can* come true, right?”

“Most assuredly.”

“What’s *your* dream, Goldilocks?”

“Oh, umm ... it’s to be a better ... you know...”

“Person?”

“In a way. Oh, look, it is sort of *personal*.”

“That’s okay. Has it come true?”

Alice shook her head. “I have to see if it’s meant to be,” she said and reached for Allison’s hand. “Anyway, speaking of the open-heart surgeon...”

## THE BUTLER DID IT

Despite what Brandon referred to the Aghasta Ritchie night's Whodunit scenario as a "lame" plot involving jealousy over marital infidelity and skulduggery over a will, the game proved to be at least a "buzz" according to him, "most fascinating" according to Alice, and "charming" according to all involved who played their roles with unabashed enthusiasm.

Claire Mildred Beardsley, an aspirant Aghasta Ritchie and a young lady friend of Conrad Connolly and his wife (to some extent), had scripted the evening's "Murder in the Nth Degree" based on one of her many yet-unpublished novels. In it, Beardsley had predictably depicted Inspector Pryor, played by Jacques Truncheon, as the discerning detective and Dr. Whatnot—played by Mr. Sage—as his bungling, dull-witted subordinate. Malcolm and Eileen Godley played Lord and Lady Ormsby, the parents of Alicia Ormsby, the murdered victim played by Alice herself who returns as a ghost to her suitor, played by Ronald Trucker, and exposes the murderer. Brandon played an irrelevant role as a fawning young stable hand infatuated with an aspiring young dilettante actress played by Ailish Ryan.

And the murderer, played by Ailish Ryan, who disguised herself as the butler, did it. She committed the murder at the instigation of unseen forces intent on preserving her and their personal interests and not one of the whodunit guests guessed her involvement due to the scenario's hitherto stereotyped cast and plot.

Not one that is, except Alice.

"Not only having held everybody mesmerised at your 'performance,' sis," Brandon said, as guests mingled holding cocktails. "You won the whodunit!" He clinked his martini with Alice's glass of bubbly water. "Cheers. I mean, the butler doing it was so like, *generic*, who would have guessed? But you *did*."

"I did not *guess*, Brandon. I just figured. Like, how Truco has conditioned everyone to thinking 'no, it's too obvious,' then most likely the 'too obvious' could possibly be the truth."

Brandon scratched his head and rolled his eyes. "Wherewith dost thou receive this insight, dear sis?"

"Do not make fun, dear bro," Alice said, giggling. "You yourself have trained me in such perspicacity."

“Oh? And where and when?”

“Through as mundane a venture as watching a movie ... I can no longer enjoy even a light ‘love, type thingy’ film without spotting its hackneyed inconsistencies and—”

Suddenly the sound of musical instruments started up on the small stage in the corner of the restaurant where the whodunit had taken place. A trio of musicians consisting of a rotund, red-haired accordionist, a lanky, bespectacled acoustic guitarist and a burly double bassist were preparing to play. All three wore blue paisley shirts and bushy beards.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Ailish Ryan announced over the sound system to the audience, which now included numerous other hotel guests. “I didn’t know if it were goin’ to work out, but thank the good Lord, I was able to book me favourite Celtic band not only for the reception after the wedding tomorrow afternoon, but as a wee warmup tonight. I proudly present The Ribald Ramblers!”

Applause rippled over the continued tuning of instruments and one of the musicians introduced the first song. Alice gasped, recognising his guttural voice.

“Brandon! It’s *him*, the Vulgar Boatman. Stortok!”

“Oh, right! The big bloke on the cover of an *Alice Cuts the Strings* issue!”

Stortok cleared his throat, plunked a few bars on his bass, and began singing, bringing in the other two musicians with their accompaniment.

*Oh, she’s trottin’ up the stairs on a bright, sunny day,  
The maid with his Lordship’s breakfast tray.  
Then the crash of cutlery, plates, and a scream  
Bring the rest of the household rushing to the scene.*

*Whodunit? Whodunit?  
The poor geezer’s dead, dagburnit.  
Who did it? Who did it?  
It ain’t as if the killer will admit it.  
Whodunit? Whodunit?  
Better get Detective Truncheon on it.*

*Is it the local vicar with his Bible aloft?  
Or the gentle, blushing maiden with a voice so soft?  
Or the caretaker’s wife who screams like a hag?  
Or the doctor with a stethoscope and big black bag?*

*Could it be blackmail, a debt, or a will?  
That gave the guilty party motivation to kill?  
And let's consider jealousy as this inquest begins  
Along with the rest o' the seven deadly sins.*

*Whodunit? Whodunit?  
The poor geezer's dead, dagburnit.  
Who did it? Who did it?  
It ain't as if the killer will admit it.  
Whodunit? Whodunit?  
Better get Detective Truncheon on it.*

*Once we have established how the victim lost its life,  
Whether drowning, gun or poison, asphyxiation, or a knife.  
The question then remains, which proven facts decide  
Was it murder, merely accident, or even suicide?*

*Whodunit? Whodunit?  
The poor geezer's dead, dagburnit.  
Who did it? Who did it?  
It ain't as if the killer will admit it.  
Whodunit? Whodunit?  
Better get Detective Truncheon on it.*

As laughter and ovation met the closing chorus and Stortok beamed and bowed, Alice approached him.

“Excuse me sir, I do not wish to interrupt, only to introduce myself ... and that right quickly.”

The man's face lit up, his eyes flashed and he grasped her hand. “Alice ... Alice Pleasance, aye. I was a wonderin' if I'd ever see ye again!”

“Really? I mean, we *have* met, but...”

“Most certainly. Never forget the night at the Rainbow Trout—I got you and that disguised princess away from the law in my boat.

“Exactly, sir. But that was in a different ... oh, this is most odd. I'm ever so sorry if I seem a little disoriented.”

“Ne'er mind, Miss. Glad ye made it home safe.”

“Well, Mr. Stortok, I suppose you should be going about singing your songs.”

“That I should, Miss. But do ye have any requests?”

“Oh, I just love the Vulgar Boatman song and the one about Alice’s palace...”

“The one dedicated to you, Miss? Of course. I shall start with that’n.”

Apologising for the delightful but necessary interruption, Stortok, with a twinkle in his eye began softly talk-singing the song’s opening lines.

*A pretty young princess named Alice  
Dwelt in a peculiar palace.  
Its spire had been built  
At a ten-degree tilt,  
And was curiously shaped like a...  
Ah, but before I proceed,  
I am pressed with the need  
To explain amidst theories replete,  
Why so highly esteemed,  
And by all it was deemed  
Such a great architectural feat!*

*Well, I should clarify  
Looming there in the sky  
Like an obelisk stood this behemoth.  
But those who’d surround it  
Were perplexed and astounded  
At the spire’s most unusual azimuth.*

*The contractors would wrangle  
Just how could its angle  
Lean more than the famed tower of Pisa.  
Well, you can blame it on Alice  
After all, it’s her palace,  
And no other proposal would please her.*

*Aye, this pretty young princess named Alice  
Dwelt in a peculiar palace.  
Its spire had been built  
At a ten-degree tilt,  
And was curiously shaped like a...*

The audience tittered and gasped as Stortok paused until he closed the song with the word:

“Chalice!”

“Aye, shame on ye all. Where be yer minds?” he said to overwhelming laughter and applause, then he launched into a round of his classic bawdy songs, some of which Alice was familiar with in her published adventures and others even racier that caused Eileen some blushing concern at their having reached her daughter’s ears.

“And what’s more, you seem to be well acquainted with this character, Alice.”

“Yes, it’s another of those ‘long stories,’ Mummy.”

“Hmm. Well, at least the chap lives up to his band’s name,” Eileen said with a snort.

“O’course,” Stortok said after his final song, “the evening’s entertainment would not be complete without welcoming the delightful subject of my ‘Alice’s Palace’ song and winner of tonight’s whodunit trophy onto the stage. Ladies and gentlemen, Princess Alice!”

“Oh alas,” said Alice over the ensuing applause and whistles. “I had the most awful feeling something like this would happen.”

“Go on, sis. Your moment of glory. You’ll do great.”

“And I am sure ye will do us the honour of gracin’ us all with your beautiful voice,” Stortok said as Alice stepped onto the stage.

“Voice ... er, what do you mean, sir?”

“Singin’, me darlin’. Move this sorry lot to tears.”

“I am the one who is sorry, Mr. Stortok. I don’t quite know what you are talking about.”

“Yes, you do, Alice!” Mr. Sage called out. “The song you sang to us in the bookstore for instance! The one about the answer to somebody’s prayer.”

“But that was not in this life ... I mean...”

*Oh, Joshua, this is like, most dreadfully bizarre.*

Alice detected a chuckle in Joshua’s inward answer when he told her he was spicing up the ‘story.’

“Well, after all this fun-filled ribaldry,” Alice said to the audience, “I am not entirely certain that I should or even *could* move people to tears tonight. And besides, who here knows the song?”

“I do,” said the Ribald Ramblers’ guitarist.

Alice shook her head in bewilderment as the young man strummed the opening bars and the other two musicians fell sombrely into playing along as though they had accompanied Alice for years.

“Oh, dearie me, I do hope I can remember the words,” Alice said once she had cleared her throat. “It’s been almost six years since I last sang them ... I mean ... whatever...”

*Sometimes I stop and gaze around a thronging shopping mall,  
So many people with no sense of why they’re here at all.  
Occupied with biz or their like, ‘nova moda’ style,  
They act almost shocked if I should greet them with a smile.  
They think it’s odd that someone showed them just a little care,  
When I think it was the answer to somebody’s prayer.  
I think it was the answer to somebody’s prayer.*

*I don’t mean to come on “spiritual”— but then again, what’s wrong with that?*

*When what’s considered “spiritual” could be just where it’s at?  
We see darkly through the looking glass, but soon we’ll understand  
When hopes and dreams all come to pass in our new Wonderland.  
It would be more than merely chance if I should meet you there,  
I think you’ve been the answer to somebody’s prayer.  
I think you’ve been the answer to somebody’s prayer.*

“You see,” said Alice, as the accordionist played a solo refrain. “A series of events that are beyond our control have led us all to be here in this Connolly Castle whodunit at this time. It’s a little freaky I know, and I don’t even know what the result of our adventure together will be, but all I know is I’m fulfilling my part in the Commission, and all of you can fulfill your parts too.”

The music swelled, and tears welled up in Alice’s eyes as she went back into the chorus.

*We see darkly through the looking glass, but soon we’ll understand,  
When hopes and dreams all come to pass in our new Wonderland.  
I believe it’s more than mere chance that you should meet me there,  
I think I’ve been the answer to somebody’s prayer.  
I think I’ve been the answer to somebody’s prayer.*

At Stortok’s signal, the Ribald Ramblers dropped the music and Alice softly sang the final words.

*I believe it's more than mere chance we've met together here,  
I think we've been the answer to somebody's prayer.  
I think we've been the answer to somebody's prayer.*

"You see, sis?" Brandon said amid the applause as his sister settled dazedly into the seat next to him. "What did I tell you? You did fantastic."

"Beautiful," said Ronald Trucker, who walked over to her table and kissed Alice's cheek. "Just beautiful."

"Not a dry eye in the place," said Malcolm.

"Quite sweet," said Eileen. "Never imagined you could sing like that."

"And I never thought the tune could be that cool," said Brandon.

"And the musical arrangement," said Ronald. "Awesome."

"It was as though it was all around us," said Malcolm.

"Yeah, what kind of sound system was it?" said Betty. "Wanna get one for my truck."

Alice shrugged and shook her head at the compliments and questions. "I just wonder if any second I'm going to wake up in Winsley Barnes," she muttered.

"Does that mean we would all wake up there?" said Brandon.

"I wouldn't know," said Eileen. "But that would mean we would all have to be asleep first. In short, it is getting a little late for Alice in particular, who needs to be in tip-top form for tomorrow's ceremony."

Despite her mother's concerns, however, to Alice's delight, the evening finally closed with champagne toasts, some slow dancing, and in honour of her having guessed the murderer's identity, Conrad Connolly presented Alice with a small, marble bust of Dame Aghasta Ritchie set on a plinth.



Because the night had arrested her attention with one of Sage's complimentary books and a cup of hot chocolate, Alice had not been asleep for long when a rapping on her hotel room door awoke her.

"Who is it?"

"Brandon."

Alice jumped up, opened the door and darted back under her covers. Brandon sat on the edge of the bed.

"Sorry to wake you up, sis..."

"It's okay, we can sleep in tomorrow morning," said Alice, rubbing her eyes. "So what's up?"



“Well, things are looking very *up*, right now.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, like, I stayed up with Ailish until just now.”

Alice yawned and looked at her alarm clock. “Two-fifteen in the morning to be precise.”

“Yeah. She beeped me, ’cos she wanted to talk. They kept the bar open because of who she is. We have quite the connection.”

“I see,” Alice said.

“Much like you and Ronny have,” Brandon continued.

“I see,” Alice said again. “But what was she doing in the bar so late without her husband-to-be?”

“Drowning her sorrows. Seems Ronny’s been sort of neglecting her, ’cos he went to his room right after you sang that song last night to work on what he told her was some ‘important correspondence.’ Ailish was angry and sad, and didn’t want to talk about the specifics.”

“She probably didn’t need to,” said Alice. “After I sang that song her silent resentment positively *screamed*.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Anyway, the amazing thing was, she started coming *on* to me!”

“What? Like *how*?”

“Hinting at getting more intimately acquainted ... stuff like that.”

“Stuff like *what*?”

“How she was going to have a hard time sleeping in anticipation of tomorrow, and would appreciate some attractive company.”

“But she’s getting married tomorrow.”

“Right! She started singing ‘Get Me to the Church on Time,’ and then she said she wanted to make hay while the moon shone on her last night of single life.”

“It was most likely the whiskey talking,” said Alice.

“Maybe, but you know how liquor can bring out your true feelings. I always had the feeling that she was attracted to me.”

“That sounds ever so conceited, Brandon. *Please*.”

“Anyway, I ended up witnessing to her.”

“She got saved?”

“Well, she said that she’d had an experience with God when she was thirteen around the time of her confirmation—she’s Catholic, you know.”

Alice nodded.

“Okay ... so then, with tears in her eyes, she thanked me, said that she hoped it wasn’t too late, and dashed out, I presume back to her room.”

“Whatever did she mean by that?”

Brandon shrugged. “She seemed frantic about something.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” said Alice. “I didn’t tell you about Allison.”

“Allison?”

“Conrad Connolly’s daughter. You didn’t get to meet her yet, but she’ll be at the wedding. She’s all leather, tattoos, piercings, and suchlike—a bit overweight, but she gets cool songs. You’d love her style. She sang one to me right there in the bar, and some club owner heard her and booked her *Wet Kittens* band for this very night in Tullamore. Anyway she ended up asking Joshua to heal her heart.”

“You mean you referred to the Lord like that?”

“Yes. And what’s more, as her open-heart surgeon.”

“Wow! Why?”

“’Cos of the cool song she had written ... it was like a prayer to an open-heart surgeon.”

## TIL DEATH US DO PART

A buzz on her hotel room phone awoke Alice from a deep sleep. It was ten o'clock in the morning and an authoritative voice on the other end informed her that she was to appear in the Dungeon bar in fifteen minutes and that heightened security measures forbade anyone to leave the castle premises until further notice.

After munching a croissant and guzzling a bottle of bubbly water from the minibar, Alice brushed her teeth and hair—paying close attention to its lustre, assuming that she was to attend some wedding preliminaries. Twenty minutes later, having barely time to dress and adorn herself, she stumbled sleepily past the attendant police officer into the Dungeon Bar to face a dour assembly seated at the tables.

Her parents and Brandon, Conrad and Kathleen Connolly, and Ailish Ryan's parents were looking bewildered and Betty Trucker was staring into space next to her son who had his head in his hands. Sage sat in the corner scribbling in a notebook, and Jacques Truncheon was pulling at his moustache while pacing between the tables. Alice settled down next to Brandon.

"You're late," he whispered.

"Sorry. Anyway, pretty heavy security deal," Alice remarked, having noticed on her way that armed guards were flanking the castle entrances.

"Yes. Level six, apparently."

"Wow! You'd think Ailish's wedding was red-carpet royalty," Alice said with a giggle.

"This is serious, sis. Ailish Ryan has been *murdered*."

"*What?* You're joking!"

"Excuse me, Mademoiselle? Ze outburst?"

"I-I'm most awfully sorry, Monsieur," Alice said with a gulp. "I wasn't aware of the dreadful import of these proceedings."

"And you will be even more aware after I read you this letter found lying next to ze deceased's body..."

*Hi Princess,*

"From what I have gathered, I assume this is addressing you, Mademoiselle Alice?"

"Umm, I don't know ... unless the writer referred to Miss Ryan as such upon occasion."

“Judging by ze content of ze document, although the writer does not mention you by name, he is not referring to Miss Ryan, as you will see...

*This is like a major stepping out for me to write down all that I have tried to get across to you in person. Third time could be a charm...*

“Wh-what? That note was meant for Alice!”

“Most assuredly, Monsieur Trucker. Ze bellboy here, Monsieur...”

“O’ Clark, sir,” said a pimple-faced youth in a grey uniform edged with green brocade. “Alan O’ Clark.”

“Oui, merci. Monsieur O’ Clark, please testify to ze mistake.”

The bellboy sniffed and wiped his nose on his sleeve. “Last night...”

“After the whodunit?”

“Aye. Mister Ronald Trucker handed me an envelope with a heart drawn on it and asked for me to personally deliver it to Alice Godley. I confess I was a wee bit tipsy and I mistakenly gave it to Miss Ryan, thinkin’ o’ course, that she would be the recipient.”

“Merci, Monsieur O’Clark. I will continue to read.

*...but if you want to just tear this up after reading it and throw it in the trash, I’ll be cool with that ... well, at least I’ll understand!*

*Whatever, I just want to go on record as saying I think you’re a phenomenal and intriguing person. As you are aware, I have been watching you, and I want to say again that you are a natural, and like I told you, perfect for the movie role of Alice in The Baptism of Fire. Your natural performance at the whodunit was fantastic but your singing that song was the clincher. I was literally mesmerised. I mentioned that to Ailish, and she went into a jealous hissy fit and locked herself in her room. Understandable, I suppose, but not so great before your wedding day.*

*While Ailish is a fantastic actress and a great person, I still don’t think she has that special whatever which you have that the role requires. I think you know what I mean. Besides that, she is a few years older than the novel’s protagonist is supposed to be.*

*All that to say, I would consider it an honour if you would seriously consider my proposal. I have already called Max Steinberger, the producer and told him about you, and sent him a few pix of you (sorry for taking the liberty without asking). Bottom line, he’s flipped out.*

*Anyway, unless a hand of fate—or what you would call ‘God’ interjects, Ailish and I are on for the marriage Sunday, and I am willing to go through with it. It’ll be difficult, because I wish you hadn’t stepped into my life right now—.*

‘Ron.’”

“Alice, this is most disturbing!” Eileen whispered over the ensuing shocked silence. “Did you in *any* way lead this poor young man on?”

“You mean Ronald Trucker?”

“Yes.”

“No way, Mummy. H-he just seemed to take a liking to me as a friend—or, as he referred to me a few times, the little sister he never had. How anything else developed, I have no idea.”

“This note makes it quite clear how things were developing, dear.”

“With Ronald, maybe. Not me. These things just happen, as you have probably experienced.”

“Have you, darling?” Malcolm asked.

Eileen puffed. “Umm ... m-maybe. I have f-forgotten. It’s been many years. Why, have *you*?”

“Please, please, please, ladies and gentlemen,” said Jacques. “Let’s stay attuned to ze matter in hand.”

“A question I have,” said Brandon. “Is why didn’t Ailish immediately call Ron when she had received the misdirected letter?”

“Yeah,” said Ronald. “Why the hell didn’t she get back to me right away, going ballistic over the error?”

“My question exactly, Monsieur Trucker. I put it to you zat upon reading ze note, Mademoiselle Ryan must have controlled her initial response, cooled down, and decided on a different course of action...”

Jacques Truncheon paused and lit his pipe, allowing his suggestion to stimulate the hearers’ minds.

“And what would that have been?” Ronald asked.

“After reading such a devastating note, she probably wanted to get back at you and Alice in a more subtle way,” said Eileen. “I mean, it doesn’t do to overreact under such circumstances. For instance, if my husband were to—”

“Exactemente, Madame Godley. If ze recipient of ze note would be of a more calculating character, such would be ze case. Is zis not so, Monsieur Trucker?”

Ron nodded. “Ailish is ... *was* a shrewd chick. She could lose it sometimes, but she wasn’t one to behave rashly.”

“But I still smell ze cat,” said Jacques. “Her death was premeditated.”

“Er, Mr. Truncheon...”

“Yes, Monsieur Trucker?”

“I have a confession to make.”

“Then continue if you please.”

“I am guilty.”

“Of what, Monsieur Trucker?”

“Of Ailish Ryan’s death. I killed her.”

Those present gasped and Alice buried her face in her hands.

“Wiz what?”

“Umm...”

“Name ze weapon, Monsieur Trucker, or ze poison.”

“I don’t know ... r-remember off hand.”

“Non, of course you don’t. You literally believe ze letter killed her and you are willing to take ze blame. *Pourquoi?*”

Ronald sat down, trembling. “S-suicide is usually a result of circumstances, Mr. Truncheon, and more specifically *people*. I cannot live with the knowledge that she took her life indirectly at my hand.”

“Suicide? What makes you think zis is suicide?”

“It’s not?”

Jacques Truncheon sighed and emptied his pipe in the ashtray. He refilled it as he continued. “This is not suicide, Monsieur Trucker.”

“You mean she was murdered?”

“Oui.”

“By whom?”

“That is what we are here to determine. Why do you think I would have called you all here as suspects for a suicide?”

“Why *are* we suspects, Monsieur?” Malcolm asked.

“You will see. First, we must explore motives and establish alibis. According to ze coroner’s autopsy, ze murder took place in ze early hours of ze morning—between say, two and three o’clock. So, who here would have had ze motive to kill Ailish Ryan?”

Blank stares and shrugs met the detective’s question.

“*You*, Madame Trucker? Where were you last night between ze hours of two and three?”

“Up there snuggled in that high-toned four-poster.”

“No one to vouch for this?”

“Nope, detective. I wuz alone, sad to say. And as far as motive goes, not me, baby. I admit I wasn’t too hot on the chick, considerin’ the way she looked down her perked-up nose at me, but I had no problem with my son marryin’ into money.”

“*Exactement*, Madame. It would have been more lucrative to have committed ze crime *after* ze marriage transaction, for you and your son would have stood to inherit ze Ryan family’s sizeable fortune. Zat in

itself also excludes *you*, Monsieur Ronald Trucker from implication, even though you could have benefitted from your future wife being unable to thwart any plans, as proposed in your note, to promote Miss Alice Godley in her stead.”

“The thought is totally unthinkable,” Ronald muttered.

“Ah, zen zat unthinkable thought brings me to...” Jacques Truncheon paused to light his pipe then turned to Alice. “*You*, Mademoiselle, where were you at ze hour in question?”

“In bed ... er, with Brandon. I mean, he was with me in my hotel room. Oh dear ... like, for only about fifteen minutes or so. He had just been with Ailish Ryan here in the Dungeon bar.”

“The barman will vouch for that,” said Brandon.

“Ah, but you, Alice, would have *every* motivational motive for murdering Miss Ryan.”

“*What* ... I beg your pardon?”

“Let me explain. You, Alice Godley, could have only profitably *profited* from this diabolical deed—ze disposal of Ailish Ryan!”

“For goodness’ sake, Monsieur Truncheon,” said Alice. “How on earth could you even *conceive* that I would do such a thing?”

“Easily, Mademoiselle. Along with ze obvious *ressentiment* of your paramour’s affection for ze deceased, you would have gained a much-sought celebrity role in ze movie, *Baptism of Fire!*”

At Jacques proclamation, Alice burst into tears and despite Eileen and Malcolm’s objections, continued.

“Go ahead and shed ze crocodile tears of self-indulgent sympathy, Mademoiselle, but zey do not absolve you from suspicion of guilt.”

“Brandon,” wailed Alice. “I can’t *believe* this.”

“Ah, you may turn to your beloved brother for pity,” said Jacques. “But it is in *vain*. For could it not be zat you *and* he plotted Miss Ryan’s demise? You both stand to gain, yes? Brandon could then revel in his little sister’s glory.”

“Nothing could be further from the truth, Monsieur,” Brandon said, taking Alice in his arms to sob on his shoulder. “Your French inspector friend is really on a roll,” he whispered.

“I am not sure he is a friend anymore,” Alice whimpered. “Oh, Brandon, this is most sorrowing.”

“I must say,” said Eileen. “I take offence at your blatant accusations of my children, Mister Truncheon.”

“Me too,” said Malcolm.

“Of *course*,” said Jacques. “You both, as ze parents would have had a lucrative share in ze spoils of ze crime. In fact, could it not be zat you *all*—ze *un*Godley family, conspired to put Ailish Ryan to death at ze hand of a hired killer?”

“With all due respect, Monsieur,” said Sage, who had been eying the proceedings with perplexity. “Being but a bystander, I find your allegations most preposterous.”

“Is zat so? But what about *you*, Monsieur Sage? You think zat you will escape suspicion of motive Scottish free? I put it to you zat *you*, through Ailish Ryan’s death, would, as you say, ‘sweep up’ with ze profits accrued from a bestselling novel that you are even now working on, entitled *She Knew Too Much*?”

“What has my novel to do with the case in hand?”

Truncheon tapped his head. “*Think*, Monsieur Sage. Does not ze title *She Knew Too Much* imply a past tense where ze victim is already dead, rather than *She Knows Too Much*, insinuating that ze victim is still alive?”

“In light of the protagonist’s harassment over the years, Monsieur Truncheon, I have recently been toying with the notion of writing such a literary work and have spoken of such to some with reference to your aforementioned title. How you perceived of it, I can only attribute to just that—your uncanny but somewhat apprehensive perception of human nature. But to use a title or theme of a novel as grounds to accuse me of murder is, quite frankly *absurd*.”

“*Pourquoi*?”

“A novel, Monsieur Truncheon, does not imply *fact*. It is usually based on imagination, assumption, hypothesis, or one’s own experience at best. Besides, the novel was not in dedication to Miss Ryan.”

“Then who?”

“Miss Alice Godley.”

“Ah, ze plot thickens. A case of mistaken identity. So on what of ze aforesaid bases are you basing your novel?”

“Well, after my in-depth reading of Miss Alice Godley’s adventures involving the recovery of a pack of talking playing cards, hypothesis fuelled my attempt to describe her demise based on what could have possibly happened should she have pursued her quest in real life.”

“And what quest is that, Monsieur Sage?”

“Exposing the shenanigans of the hidden hand. Even questioning, speaking against, let alone *exposing* the seemingly benign power of the



GWC for example, is enough to garner worldwide censure, even public outcry. An activity amounting to nothing short of treason.”

“Ah ... treason. An issue zat we are not in a position to discuss here. Let us move on. But consider this, if all of you here were to look into your own hearts—even you, her parents, is not ze murder of Ailish Ryan a crime that not *one* of you is incapable of committing.”

“Us? Her parents?” Ailish’s mother asked. “What would have been the motive of us killing our very own daughter?”

“T-to be honest, Madame, I have absolutely no idea...”

As Jacques Truncheon’s words left his lips, he staggered to a seat and sank his head into his hands. He called for a bottle of Bordeaux, and at the snap of the attending officer’s fingers, a waiter brought his request to his table.

“I apologise ... as always, no matter where I happen to be, when I feel something is amiss I follow my intuition. However, I must attract zis sort of thing ... I am sorry...”

Alice hesitantly stepped up and laid a hand on the detective’s shoulder. “Poor Monsieur Truncheon. We ... I totally understand that it must be awfully distressing for you to be unable to enjoy a holiday, a visit with friends or even a simple whodunit night without a murder happening.”

“And you say I am not jinxed?”

“No, Monsieur. I believe God has given you a cross to bear of being present where He knows you’ll be needed, and I promise to pray for you.”

“Merci, Mademoiselle. Now go your ways—I will call for you all later once I have dissected ze clues...”

## SHE KNOWS TOO MUCH

See?” Eileen said as the Godley family gathered in her and Malcolm’s room at the castle. “I had been getting checks all along that we should have prayed more and sought counsel before we agreed to all this.”

“All this *what*, Mum?” said Brandon.

“Coming on this whole trip and here to this castle. Risking weevil flu and now this murder.”

“But this venture seemed good to us all, Mum,” said Brandon. “Confirmed by prophecy.”

“And besides, who was there around to counsel with?” said Alice.

Malcolm cleared his throat. “Look. I, for one, appreciate your caution, Eileen darling,” he timidly said. “But sometimes it can be a little er ... stifling?”

“Okay, I admit it, and I’m sorry to be a killjoy—although what we’re going through is hardly what one could call *joy*.”

“Just for everyone’s information,” said Alice. “This very situation we’re in right now is making an *HL* adventure.”

Malcolm chuckled. “A hell of an adventure, that’s for sure.”

“But thank God that apparently Alice goes ahead by faith in her adventures. Right sis?”

“In truth, I don’t have much choice, Brandon. I am most often alone and in the thick of it, and I just sort of am swept along, with Josh ... Jesus’ help of course.

“That’s what’s cool about it,” said Brandon.

“But this is not just one of your fairy tale adventure stories, Alice,” said Eileen. “This is real life and we all just ‘sort of got swept’ into this predicament and I still think that we could’ve avoided it if we had just gone a little slower and erred on the side of caution and counsel.”

“And most likely still erred,” Alice muttered.

“But it *is* exciting in a way, Mum,” said Brandon. “You must admit.”

Eileen managed a smile. “True, I suppose. But if this is going to be a published adventure, you mean to say that we don’t have a say as to what gets put in print?”

Alice shrugged. “Not sure, Mummy. But I venture to say that it behoves us all to mind our ‘P’s and Q’s’.”

“In other words, be a sample of faith,” Eileen said softly.

“Even in our thoughts and attitudes,” Brandon said with equal softness. “They get recorded, you know.”

“They do,” said Alice. “Although the thoughts are mostly mine, sorry to say.”

“God bless you, dear,” said Malcolm. “I understand it would be a major trial to have them so exposed.”

“Whatever,” said Eileen. “We are in this adventure together as a family, and we just need to pray and trust the outcome to the Lord. Who knows, but that maybe we are meant to meet some key people through all this?”

“It seems we already have, Mum,” said Brandon.

“Like who?”

“So far only a couple of up-and-coming Hollywood movie stars, the queen of San Romani and the owner of one of the biggest castles in Ireland,” Brandon replied with a grin.

Eileen grinned too. “Of course. But I am curious, Alice ... the elderly gentleman writing a novel about you...”

“Mr. Sage.”

“Yes. What on earth would you know that is ‘too much’?”

“Couldn’t be drugs or crime,” Malcolm said. “You’ve never hob-knobbed with those types, of course.”

“Except maybe in your adventures that don’t get printed, sis!”

“This is no time to be joking,” said Alice.

“Or, if you don’t mind me asking, have you been involved in some kind of a *s-scandal*?” said Eileen.

“Alice is a bit young, Mum.”

“Well, nothing is surprising me these days.”

“We’ve covered two of the big three,” said Malcolm. “So, what about politics? Political secrets?”

Alice gasped. “Oh, my goodness! How most dreadfully stupid of me. ‘Knowing too much’ ... I wonder...”

“Wonder what?”

“Actually, Mummy, I hate to say it, but I believe the murderer was really after *me*.”

“But why on earth would anyone want to murder *you*, Alice?”

“Like Sage’s novel says, Mum. She knows too much.”

“What *do* you know, Alice?”

“It’s hard to explain, Mummy. Stuff about Truco’s global takeover and stu-suchlike. Specifics, actually.”

“Like what?”

“I am not at liberty to say until the right time when I post it online. It’s all in an encrypted file that Queen Marina gave me and she has it all coordinated with Queen Britannica.”

“And didn’t the gentleman say something about you could be found guilty of treason?”

“Yes, Mummy,” said Alice. “You see, GWC and all are but strands of a worldwide web, and Mr. Sage and many of us, including Conrad Connolly, put ourselves in dire jeopardy when exposing the ‘spider’ himself.”

Eileen sighed. “Honestly, Alice, I think you need to get a grip on it.”

“On what?”

“Your real life. This whimsical fantasy is all well and good, and may be very entertaining for some, but there is a time when you need to come back down to earth. Even for sample’s sake.”

“But, as you said, it’s no longer whimsical fantasy, Mummy. In fact, I sometimes wish it *were* but that. As I told you, this is a real life, in-your-face, Alice Godley *adventure*. Alas, this is most distressing.”

Eileen shook her head. “Really. This is all far too much for a thirteen year-old girl to be involved in. You should be sticking to preaching the simple love of Jesus in the Offensive. And without all this affected speech, I dare say.”

“Yes, Mummy. It’s most awfully scary, but Joshua told me He has laid this in my lap and that it is part of my mission.”

“When you think of it, darling,” said Malcolm, taking his wife’s hand. “We shouldn’t be surprised these days at what the Lord will be asking of some of our children. Joan of Arc was a maid not much older than Alice when she got her calling from Heaven.”

“Y-yes of course,” Eileen said and burst into tears. “I-I’m sorry, Alice. To be honest, I’m worried. I just don’t want you to meet the same end.”

Alice sat down next to her mother and hugged her. “It’s okay, Mummy, really. I’ll be ever so okay.”

## DIVINE CONFESSIONS

That evening's dinner passed silently and soberly, with few of the "suspects" enjoying the sumptuous fare, and once the meal was over, they dispersed to their various sanctuaries; some to their rooms, some to the bar, and Alice to the damp yet fresh air of the castle's grounds. She had strolled for barely a few minutes to collect her thoughts when her mother approached her.

"It's okay, Mummy, I shall be retiring very soon."

"Oh, Alice, this is far from a time for any of us to be nitpicky. Least of all myself. I would just appreciate some talk time."

"Oh. About me and my attitude and stuff?"

"No, dear. About *me* and mine. I want to apologise, and I want it all to come out right without any justifying on my part and any misunderstanding on yours." Tears welled up in Eileen Godley's eyes as she took Alice's hand and continued. "I love you, Alice, I really do. Do you know that?"

Although taken aback by her mother's uncustomary candour, Alice nodded.

"No, I mean it. Do you really *know* it?"

"Of course I do, Mummy, like a mother naturally loves her ... offspring. But..." Tears began to fill Alice's eyes also as she answered. "I do sometimes feel that you are not interested in or even *aware* of my experiences and feelings because either you don't have time to be, or you are just dismissing them as whimsical nonsense. Daddy and Brandon are a lot more understanding *and* interested."

"Well, I must confess, Alice, that Malcolm's favour towards you in particular has caused me to feel as though I need to be a balance in your life, to the point that I have felt impressed to single out your weaknesses and areas you need to improve in, rather than your evident strengths..."

"Exactly, Mummy. And to be honest, I..."

"Wait, Alice. I admit that I have defaulted to that and not always been led of J..." Eileen's tearful countenance broke into an impish grin, "Joshua's spirit. Isn't that what you call Him these days?"

"Th-that's sweet," Alice said with a smile. "Yes, I do because He told me to."

"Well, that's one of the many things I admire about you, Alice. You obey Him no matter what, and your faith puts mine to shame sometimes. On the other hand, I see much of myself in you, and I suppose I want to jump

in and by a sort of by proxy, correct my own flaws in the flesh—you know, vanity and whatnot! I don't always do it right, I admit, and I so often see three fingers pointing back at the beam in my own eye! Oh, you're probably not getting my drift..."

"I am, Mummy. I am learning that physical beauty is a cross."

"Okay. Anyway, bottom line, I just want to tell you that you are a daughter to be proud of, and I am really sorry if I have not made that sufficiently clear and I want to do all I can to encourage your evident talents and virtues."

At this point, mother and daughter fell into each other's arms and blubbered on each other's shoulder. At length, they drew apart and wiped their eyes—Eileen's on a paper napkin and Alice's on her sleeve. Eileen smiled and lowered her voice.

"I must also confess that besides being convicted about the way I have been treating you, I have become a little self-concerned at the way I am coming across to any readers our adventure may have. I have been fearful, judgmental, and narrow minded—you name it. So forgive my ulterior motive, okay?"

Alice giggled. "Of course, Mummy. We all must needs be forgiven for ulterior motives..."

Alice paused at seeing a figure approaching through the settling mist and her face dropped. It was Ronald Trucker and he looked haggard.

"Oops, sorry. Bad timing ... hi, Mrs. Godley."

"Hello Ronald, I was just leaving. Goodnight, Alice."

"Goodnight, Mummy," said Alice, and Eileen, bestowing Ronald with a gracious smile, took her leave.

"Phew. Your mom's a *doll*. I can see how that beauty runs in the family."

"M-mummy's most awfully cool. As a *person* too."

"Er ... yeah. Anyway, I've been looking all over for you, Princess."

"Please don't call me that ... at least not right now. I mean, that *note*..."

"Hey, don't rub it in. I most likely feel worse than you do. *God*, if we could just turn back the clock."

"I don't know if nutty putty works that way," Alice muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Look, Alice, it may seem insensitive so soon after my ... Ailish's death, but time, tide, producers, and publicity agents wait for no man. I just got a call from Max, and I have to give him an answer ASAP regarding a substitute role in the movie."

"What?"

“Yeah. I told you. You should take the starring role.”

“I don’t know, but I could never portray me ... I mean, *that* Alice, like Ailish did. She moved me to tears with her performance.”

“But you’ve got the talent, Pr ... angel. What’s the problem?”

“Nothing, Ron. I just feel it’s ... yes,—as you put it—insensitive right now. Let me think about it.”

“*Think* about it? You mean you haven’t all this time?”

“Well ... yes, quite a bit in fact, but with these recent events ... Actually, I just need to *pray* about it.”

And so that night, after clambering into bed with her mind reeling from the day’s events, Alice did just that. With the need for divine guidance pressing upon her, she felt indisposed towards burning the midnight oil with her usual cup of hot chocolate and a book.

Consequently, her plea for direction regarding Ron’s insistent proposal had barely left her lips when she fell asleep and found herself strolling along a path winding through a meadow towards a farmhouse. The green, rolling terrain resembled that of Ireland, although the sun was extraordinarily, yet comfortably bright. Larks twittered and fluttered, sheep were bleating and cattle were lowing in the distance and someone was approaching her—a girl dressed as an old-fashioned milkmaid and carrying a pail.

“*Ailish!*”

“Aye.”

“Wh-where are we? I mean, what are you doing here? I thought you were ... you know...”

“*Dead?* We of all people should know there is no such thing for us.”

“Of course. According to Brandon, you got umm ... converted, apparently when you were about my age.”

“Aye. No ‘apparently’ about it.”

“Of a truth. But where is this?”

Ailish waved her hand at their surroundings. “Where do ye think?”

“Heaven, I do suppose. It’s beautiful, but it’s so like, *normal*. I was imagining...”

“Golden steeples and choirs of angels?”

“Not exactly. What we ... I mean, *I* knew as Space City is ... well, I do suppose it has its ‘down-to-earthness’ in some places. I really should ask Brandon about that. He’s all into studying the afterlife right now.”

“Good fer him,” Ailish said and sat down on the grass; she patted the ground beside her. “Sit down, Alice. I have a wee bit o’ somethin’ to tell ye, so brace yerself.”

Alice complied and peered into the girl's face as she continued.

"How's Ronny, by the way?"

"He's okay, all things considered. It's taking him time to get over it—you passing on. Understandably."

Ailish closed her eyes and took Alice's hand. "Father, I ask Thee for Thy abundant help and for the grace of the blessed Virgin as I confess my sin to dear Alice..."

"But why did you not appear to me earlier and tell me all this?" Alice asked once the girl had finished speaking. "You could have saved us ever so much trouble. Was it for the sake of the story?"

"Maybe, but that would've been none o' me beeswax, Alice. No, I just hadn't the heart to confess to ye. I wasn't ready, see? I had to go through some mighty repentin' aforehand."

"I understand," said Alice. "And you seriously want me to tell Ronald all this?"

"Aye. And tell him you'll take the role of Alice in the movie."

"What? I've been most resistant to the very suggestion."

"Ye're meant to do it, Alice, despite *any* circumstances. Even when they seem totally contrary."

"Meant to?"

Ailish's eyes twinkled. "Aye. Ye always dreamed of bein' an actress, right?—Specifically a movie star!"

"I d-did? ... I mean, how do you know? I never told anyone, not even Brandon. It's not a burd ... a desire or dream I've necessarily been proud of, and I mean no offense, seeing as you ... Anyway, I haven't even had the faith to tell Joshua."

"Ye don't have to, silly goose! He knows yer downsittin' and uprisin'."

"Of course," Alice said somewhat despondently. "I suppose it was more that I didn't want to admit it to myself."

"The thing to admit is the answer to the question, 'why do I want to be a movie actress?' I asked meself that, ye know."

"Hmm. I never really have, come to think of it. But I suppose I just like to play other people, imagining them and their feelings and stuff ... and suchlike. I'd love to act the part of an old queen of bygone days, for instance."

"Perfect answer, perfect motive, Alice."

"Well what was *your* answer?"

Ailish laughed. "Nowhere near as perfect in motive! Just vanity ... imaginin' me name in lights, celebrity magazine covers, Oscars an' all that."



“But you had—have *loads* of talent for it.”

“Aye. That I always knew. But I didn’t do it for others, I did it for me.”

“But you were absolutely marvellous playing er ... me ... I mean, I never told you, but I was moved to tears many times.”

“I saw it,” said Ailish.

“And your *singing* ... I don’t think I could play the role nearly as well.”

“Ye won’t be playing a role, Alice. Ye’ll be playing yourself, and that a-hurtin’ inside ye is what will be spellbinding. Ronny knows it.”

“And you’re not hurt about that?”

“Not anymore. I just hope Joshua lets me hang around a wee bit to help ye with yer lines!”

“That would be ever so nice. I’m sure He will let you, and I will be sure to ask Him.”

“Thanks,” Ailish said and giggled. “And I’d be mighty curious to see how things develop.”

“Develop?”

“Nothin’. Anyways, Alice, seems He’s a-handin’ ye that dream on a silver platter!”

“B-but I’ll only do it if He wants me to.”

“Who? Ronny?”

“No, Joshua.”

“Of course He does,” Ailish said as she rose to her feet. “It’s all a part o’ your Commission.”

“But how do you know?”

Ailish brushed off the back of her dress and smiled. “He told me so Himself. Anyways, ye’d best be a-gettin’ along ... and I need to milk the cows. Bye, Alice. Be seein’ you soon.”

*Seeing me soon?*

“Er ... b-bye,” Alice said and stood up. She hugged Ailish and woke up.



The next morning, after having wrestled with her reluctance to do so, Alice tiptoed up the stairs and timidly tapped on the door of the bridal suite.

“Who is it and what do you want?” the sharp reply came from within.

“It-it’s Alice.”

“Okay...”

A few seconds later, Ronald—bleary-eyed, unshaven, and wrapped in a crumpled maroon silk bathrobe, opened the door.

“I am most awfully sorry R-Ronald,” said Alice. “I do so understand your need for solitude at this most awfully trying time.”

“Yeah, Princess ... sorry, I mean ... Alice.”

“It’s okay. You can call me whatever.”

“Okay, ‘Whatever.’ Come on in.”

Alice perched gingerly on the bed, her hands folded between her knees.

“I am most awfully sorry...”

“So you said. God, I had a hell of a night. Hardly slept.”

“Umm, do you want me to order you a coffee or something?”

Ronald shook his head. “Hell, a wedding turns into a funeral. What do you make of that?”

“I don’t know. I’ve n-never ... but... I don’t know how to say this...”

“Hey, you don’t have to beat around the bush, angel. Cut to the chase.”

“Very well ... look, I have it on good authority that I have to star in your movie.”

“That’s great. But on *whose* good authority?”

“Ailish’s.”

“Ailish? What the hell do you mean?”

“Look, Rummy—Ron, this may be most awfully hard to swallow, but I met her in a dream last night and she told me to go ahead and take her role in *Baptism of Fire* with her blessing. In fact, she insisted.”

“Listen, Princess, I think it’s fantastic, but the idea of you meeting Ailish in a dream—”

“And she told me that if you have a hard time going with any of what I tell you, I just have to say the words ‘Peter Popsicle.’ She didn’t say why.”

Ronald blushed. “Oh, my God! Unless she told you what that means while she was alive, that’s ... friggin’ embarrassing. Awesome, but embarrassing.”

“She didn’t.”

“Thank God.”

“But what *does* it mean, Ron?”

“Never mind, angel. That was our sworn secret code.”

Alice giggled. “I’m sure Brandon could figure out the combination!”

“S-so according to your dream, Ailish is fine with you taking the starring role?”

“Apparently. But there is more she told me ... and, well, it’s not so good...”

Alice stopped and sank her head in her hands.

“Come on, Princess ... spit it out.”

“Okay. Basically, she had set the murderer onto *me*.”

“You, Alice? Why the hell?”

“After considering her possible reaction to your note to me, if one was to do the math, I think the answer would be most obvious.”

“A woman spurned, I guess,” Ronald muttered. “She probably acted in haste.”

“Hmm ... maybe at first. But Ailish said that as jealousy gripped her, she calculated the murder. She immediately hired a hit man to ‘bump me off,’ as she put it and, following the whodunit evening, she tried to seduce my brother in the Dungeon bar to further spite you and me. Thank the Lord, Brandon resisted her and spoke to her of salvation. Consequently, she felt ashamed and ran up to her room to make sure I was okay and to deflect the murderer, but she was too late. As she was entering her room, he showed up, shut the door and shot her in the head with a silenced gun. He had apparently mistaken her for me.”

“That’s crazy!”

“Not the first time it has happened since we’ve been on this bizarre adventure,” said Alice. “First the accidental switching of the roles for the whodunit, the bellboy mistaking Ailish for me in being the recipient of your note, then on top of this mistaken murder, there’s the hot chocolate scenario.”

“The what?”

“Ailish said for you to tell those involved in the investigation, who I assume is the police officer and Jacques Truncheon, to check the hot chocolate that was in the tray set outside Ailish’s door.”

Fifteen minutes later, Ron put down the phone and turned to Alice.

“According to Jacques Truncheon, it’s a refrigerated article related to the scene of the crime. So what’s that got to do with it?”

“Someone else was out to kill me, it’s just that the gunman got there first.”

“Who is that someone?”

## WhODUNIT?

I agree zat ze circumstances would have appeared less macabre had I chosen a more inspiring location zan this,” Jacques Truncheon said as he pulled at his moustache, puffed his pipe, and paced the floor between the dark oak tables. “But in order to enhance ze story, it seems necessary to gather you all here in ze Dungeon bar one last time to finalise ze outcome of Mademoiselle Ailish Ryan’s unfortunate demise.”

“Story?” said Betty.

“Oui, Madame. We, as Alice has pointed out many times, are all taking part in a cosmically written story. Am I correct, Mademoiselle Godley?”

Alice nodded solemnly. “Most certainly. As the great Bard put it, ‘all the world is a stage.’”

“Vraiment,” said Jacques. “Voltaire was a genius.”

“Not Voltaire, Monsieur, but William Shakespeare.”

“Ah, a fact most trifling, Mademoiselle.

“But in weighing up ze testimony,” Jacques muttered at length, after refilling and relighting his pipe and leaving those present waiting in suspense. “I grant you all zat not *one* of you here is guilty of ze murder of Miss Ailish Ryan...”

The atmosphere lightened as those present smiled and heaved sighs of relief.

“Thanks so very much, detective,” Betty Trucker said sarcastically.

“We appreciate the benefit of the doubt,” her son said.

“Actually, it is ever so encouraging, Monsieur,” said Alice. “That you consider not one of us guilty of such a heinous crime.”

“Absolutely,” said Eileen.

“Oui. Not *one* of you sitting in this room at present, but ... but *two*...”

The gathering gasped and groaned. Many of its members sank their heads into their hands.

Jacques chuckled gleefully. “Neither of whom is here at ze moment!”

“I do wish you would refrain from playing cat and mouse with us, Monsieur,” said Mr. Sage. “It seems to afford you some kind of sadistic delight.”

“I apologise. I often find it necessary to indulge in a little humorous relief under such circumstances.”

“Understandable, Monsieur Truncheon. But I think we would all prefer you not do so at our expense. We have all been through much trauma of late.”

“*D’accord*,” said Jacques. “Nevertheless ze two conspired, not with each other mind you, as they each had entirely different motives to bring about Alice Godley’s death...”

“Alice’s death?” said Betty.

“Oui, which backfired through human failure and foible...”

“So what the hell is going on here?”

“Allow me to explain, Madame Trucker...”

“Be my guest.”

“I admit ze circumstances are unusual. But on ze other foot, zey are rather predictable. I wish to call in Monsieur Conrad Connolly’s butler, Monsieur Alexander Crichton.”

Jacques nodded towards the door, which the attendant police officer opened. Crichton entered, stopped, put his hand to his mouth and gasped. “Alice! You’re still a—”

“Still a-what?”

“Er ... s-still a-*around*. I th-thought you had er ... ch-checked out.”

Alice shrugged and looked over at Jacques Truncheon.

“You thought wrong, Monsieur,” Jacques said as he turned to Alice. “Mademoiselle Godley was not to check out until ... Monday morning, am I correct?”

“I do believe, Monsieur,” Alice replied.

“Umm ... I was unaware,” said the butler. “I took a little poorly Saturday night ... stomach upset.”

“I see. But I do believe that you, Monsieur Crichton, *are* aware of ze unfortunate circumstances surrounding zis detention of ze castle’s guests ... specifically ze suspects.”

“A m-murder, am I right?”

“Quite so, quite so. An agonising death—”

“Yes, Mister Truncheon. Poisoning can be quite painful.”

“I meant to say agonising for all of us and her next of kin involved.”

“Of course, of course.”

“Mais oui. But ze poison ... I forget ze name... one reputed to be ze most dangerous man-made toxin.”

“Dioxin?”

“Ah, oui. It is ... let me check my notes ... 60,000 times more toxic than cyanide. True, Monsieur Crichton?”

“So I have heard. A dose of only 50 micrograms is lethal for a human—that’s a 1,000th of a small pill!”

“You seem well-versed, Monsieur.”

“I-I d-did study pharmacy as a young man.”

“Hmm. However, in Mademoiselle Ryan’s case we are not speaking of poisoning. Ze victim was shot in ze head with a silenced gun.”

Crichton’s mouth fell open and his face turned ashen. “Oh ... I was m-mistaken. M-maybe that’s why I n-never heard anything while being about my duties.”

“But you said you were taken ill on Saturday evening.”

“Oh ... yes, of course. Umm ... I was probably sleeping.”

Monsieur Crichton, can you tell us how you came to be in ze employ of Monsieur and Madame Connolly?”

“I-I w-was recommended by Her Majesty Queen Marina of San Romani, she being Mr. Connolly’s distant relative. I had been serving as her chief butler for many years.”

“And your brother, Lionel Crichton now serves Her Majesty in your stead, am I correct?”

“That is correct, sir.”

“Ah, bien. Now I would like to ask ze bellboy, Monsieur O’Clarke some further questions. Please show him in.”

The attendant officer complied and the youth entered, fidgeting and dithering.

“Monsieur O’Clark, on the night of the Whodunit, to whom did you deliver a cup of hot chocolate and at what time?”

“At midnight. I mistakenly put it outside Miss Ryan’s room. I had knocked on the door, but there was no answer. Not wishing to disturb the young lady, I left the tray by the door and notified her by email.”

“You say ‘mistakenly,’ Monsieur O’Clark. Why?”

“Stupid, I know, as it has been Miss Alice Godley’s custom since she has been here to order hot chocolate at around that time. Later, I realised that for some inexplicable reason, I had again presumed that Miss Godley was Miss Ryan. Especially as I had already made the same mistake twice!”

“Three times is a charm, Monsieur. Fortunately, for Mademoiselle Godley, ze beverage did not make it to its proposed destination. Tell me, Mademoiselle Godley, had you ordered a hot chocolate that night courtesy of room service?”

“I had, and I did wonder why it never came, but I was much too tired and ever so absorbed in my book—Mr. Sage’s book that is—to pursue it.”

“I see. I will now get straight to ze point.”

“No need, Truncheon!” the butler barked. “I know where this is heading and I am not too dumb to realise that the deck is stacked against me. But I am not going down without dragging the real culprits with me.”

“Ze real culprits?”

“Yes. Those that put me up to this—the ‘hidden hand’ as Connolly calls it. Yes, dear little Miss Alice Godley *does* know too much. She is too powerful a force in the world.”

“At her age?” said Eileen.

“Ah, it is precisely her young age, coupled with her perception and *influence*, not to mention her persona that makes her so deadly to our Lordship’s designs.”

“Who on earth is ‘our Lordship?’” said Malcolm.

“Truco,” said Alice.

“You mean to say that this fellow, ‘his Lordship,’ the baddie—Truco in your adventures—is in fact behind it all?” Brandon asked.

“I don’t know about whether or not in this dimension, his name is actually Truco,” said Alice. “Maybe it’s more er ... like, figurative?”

“Maybe so,” Ronald said to everyone’s surprise. “But someone is putting the screws on, pulling the strings ‘up there’—and I’m not talking about Alice’s God! *Someone* is behind the curtain puppeting us. I should know—I was puppeted into that damn war.”

“Hold on, son,” said Betty. “Let’s not get too heavy here. You went over there to fight for God and country.”

“No, Mom. I fought for the very designs that Alice is speaking out against.”

“And what designs are those?”

“World takeover,” Alice replied as Jacques Truncheon smiled, leaned back in chair, and puffed his pipe, leaving the butler to rant.

“Precisely! His Lordship could not countenance a thirteen year-old girl broadcasting subversive truth, despite our attempts to promulgate it as naïve and subjective!”

“Nevertheless,” said Mr. Sage. “I can see why Alice’s scantily explored ‘truth’ could most easily be deemed subjective, and even a little naïve in the context of her adventures, but *subversive*? What about me? I have often exposed the hidden hand agenda based on in-depth research.”

“Ah. *You*, Mr. Sage are one thing—a doddering old fart that despite your ‘in-depth research’ can fart on in our controlled alternative press about global conspiracy, and thanks to his Lordship’s demeaning portrayal of you, few take seriously. Alice, however, is another—a force his Lordship cannot tolerate!”

“A *force*, Mr. Crichton?” said Malcolm. “Let’s be reasonable.”

“In his Lordship’s very own words regarding your daughter, Mr. Godley, ‘one renegade such as Alice armed with initiative and truth is

infinitely more dangerous than ten million subdued and bamboozled by my program.”

Brandon laughed. “What? As much as I acknowledge the truth of her findings, my sister is just a little JT ... a teenage girl with cool but cuckoo out-of-time experiences.”

“Yes, but look at the facts, young man,” said Crichton. “Your sister has been committed to mental institutions almost three times.”

“Committed?” said Eileen. “When?”

“In her adventures, Mum,” Brandon whispered.

“Committed for what, Mr. Crichton?” Malcolm asked.

“Specifically for discovering a ring in his Lordship’s dungeon and exposing ... I mean, *watching* him forecast his devices in a rap and dance routine.”

“I wager that is enough to turn any jury’s verdict and criminalise me,” Alice said sarcastically.

“Listen, you!” the butler screamed at Alice, his face turning livid. “Your days are numbered.”

“Aren’t they for all of us inevitably? Including yours?”

“*Mine*, Alice?”

“Oui,” Jacques Truncheon said with a smile as he nonchalantly zipped up his attaché case. “Zey are most assuredly numbered for you, Monsieur Crichton. In ze presence of these witnesses, including chief inspector O’Flaherty of Ireland Yard, I charge you with ze attempted murder of Alice Godley through Dioxin poisoning.”

“But as I said, I was put up to it!”

“True. Ze hidden hand has been guilty of many murders—attempted and otherwise by ze fingers of another ... ah, take him away, officer.”

And so the attendant police officer restrained and forcibly removed the butler, screaming expletives at Alice, from the premises and deposited him into a paddy wagon.

“But how on earth did the gunman get the identities mixed up?” Betty asked.

“Ze same way ze bellboy passed ze letter to ze wrong girl. It was obvious zat ze murderer was someone who had not met Ailish in ze flesh, otherwise he or she would have realised that he or she was mistaken. He or she went by ze description, true, but ze two females involved, although a few years apart, did bear a remarkable likeness to each other, especially as they were similarly attired, is zat not so?”

The gathering, including the bellboy, nodded and Truncheon continued.



“And possibly, Ailish, being older, was much more of an assumed target for murder and romance, do you not think?”

The gathering nodded again.

“So, ze murderer, realising that he or she had killed ze wrong person, took Monsieur Trucker’s note and laid it on ze bed next to ze victim’s body, and after removing its silencer, put ze gun in Ailish’s right hand to make it appear as though she had taken her life.”

“But Ailish is left-handed,” said Brandon.

“Precisely. Not irrefutable evidence, but that was ze first clue that got me smelling ze cat.”

“Besides the one who actually fired the shot, Monsieur Truncheon,” said Malcolm, “you said there were *two* more culprits guilty of attempted murder. You have apprehended one, Crichton, the butler. Who is the other?”

Jacques Truncheon emptied his pipe, picked up his brief case and smiled as he exited the Dungeon bar. “Ah. I am afraid she is unavailable for comment, having been ze victim of her own devices. Good day, Mademoiselle, Mesdames, et Messieurs.”



“I must say that this has been a most mystifyingly mysterious, meandering murder mystery,” Mr. Sage said to Alice, as they and the rest of Truncheon’s ‘suspects’ filed out of the Dungeon bar.

“But I am ever so glad it is resolved,” said Alice.

“Absolutely, my dear. Nevertheless, it would make a most marketable novel.”

“Actually, the novel is being written even as we speak,” said Alice.

“So I understand, but who is the author, by the way? I wish to contact him or her.”

Alice giggled. “You would be *aghast* to know that it is Aghasta Ritchie. Deceased, as you are probably aware.”

“Yes, and that explains its complexity,” said Mr. Sage. “No matter what its tattered remains, any whodunit by the said lady sold within a day of landing in my shop. So, it has already been in print?”

“No.”

“Then you have an unpublished draft?”

Alice shook her head. “As I said, it is being written as we speak.”

Mr. Sage’s mouth fell open, but his face lit up with realisation. “Ah. Well, at least the culprit was finally brought to justice...”

“*Culprits*,” said Alice. “More than one.”

“Of course, attempted murder on the butler’s part. His intentions failed to realize.”

“His also,” Alice said with a cryptic smile.

## SHE KNEW TOO MUCH

The drizzle is certainly in keeping with movie funerals and whatnot," Brandon whispered.

"You can be most awfully insensitive, sometimes, you know," said Alice.

Brandon drew her closer to him under his umbrella. "So you have often said, sis. Sorry."

"It's okay. It seems to be a major characteristic with the guys in my life, anyway."

"And she so wished to be a movie star," Ailish's mother was saying as the procession trooped from the grave. "It was her lifelong dream."

"Sadly, that dream died with her," said Ailish's father.

"That it did," Max Steinberger concurred, solemnly lowering his head. Once Ailish's parents had climbed into their car, he drew Ronald Trucker aside.

"But it doesn't negate the cold hard fact that the 'show' must go on," he said, unaware that their conversation was falling within Alice's earshot.

"Right, Ronny?"

"Right, Mr. Steinberger."

"I didn't shell out for a business class air fare from New York just to shed a few tears at a grave."

"Right, Mr. Steinberger."

"So? Replacement casting has to begin ASAP, kid. Any ideas?"

"Uh-oh," Alice muttered to Brandon. "Get ready."

Ronald turned to Alice and her family who stopped behind them. "Right here, Mr. Steinberger. Alice Godley."

"Alice Godley right here for what?" Eileen asked.

"I know it may come across as a tad tactless at such a time, Mrs. Godley, but according to Mr. Steinberger here, timing is of the essence. We're talking about the replacement for Ailish's role in *The Baptism of Fire*."

Brandon gasped. "What? You're talking about my sister? *Alice*?"

Ronald and Max nodded.

"No way!"

"Absolutely not," said Malcolm.

"Well, Alice could at least consider it," said Eileen. "And she should most certainly pray about it."

"I have done both, Mummy."

“And what?” said Brandon. “You accepted?”

“Yes, I have.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, I am not. I believe it’s what Joshua and even Ailish herself want me to do.”

“You could have at least counselled with us beforehand,” said Malcolm.

“I was planning to, Daddy, but I wasn’t expecting it to be suddenly announced in this manner right after Ailish Ryan’s funeral.”

“Anyway, I’m not so sure, darling.”

“I agree,” said Brandon. “As far as big-time movie stuff goes, Alice, I can’t quite imagine it ... at least in real life. Maybe you should put it on hold for a spirit *HL* adventure.”

“From what I gather, there most likely won’t be anymore *HL* spirit story thingies of this sort. Besides, I’m surprised that you of all people are getting cold feet.”

“I dunno, sis. You being a superstar? It’s sort of...”

“Out of character?”

Brandon stopped and shuffled his feet in the wet grass. “Well, if it means you being gone a lot and all that. And there’s your ... like, what about your scholastics?”

“I’m sure something could be worked out,” Eileen said, putting a hand on Brandon’s shoulder.

“What do *you* think, Daddy?”

“A bit of both, Alice,” said Malcolm, rocking back and forth on his heels. “Your mother’s and Brandon’s views are equally valid. Difficult to say.”

“Well, it seems that the Lord has been leading you, Alice,” said Eileen. “With everything that’s changing and going on right now with the ... whatever, I am not surprised He told you to accept. I am sure you will do a splendid job.”

“Wow! Thanks ever so much, Mummy. I most certainly didn’t expect you to ... I mean ... that is most awfully awesome.”

Eileen smiled. “You had a mindset regarding me, Alice?”

“Anyway,” said Malcolm, “we should be packing up our bags and getting on with checking out of the castle.”

The funeral attendees were making their way towards their respective vehicles, when Conrad and Kathleen Connolly approached the Godley family.

“I just wanted to say goodbye to you all, as my wife and I are leaving immediately for Dublin. It has been a pleasure to meet you.”

“For us, too, Mr. Connolly, despite the unfortunate circumstances. Thank you.”

“In the middle of all this tragedy, however,” said Kathleen. “Conrad just received some wonderful news ... funny how that goes sometimes. Right, Alice?”

“I do suppose, ma’am. Like the sunshine peeking through that enormous black cloud up there.”

“Yes, we should look at it that way. The good news is that Queen Marina has bought Connolly Castle from my husband’s enemies and returned it to him. She will announce it this evening on public TV. Apparently, there is nothing the big boys and the banks can do about it without creating uproar with the Irish people who are already upset with what they consider the loss of an illustrious ancestry’s heritage with the public.”

“Two steps forward, one step back,” Alice muttered with a knowing smile.

“You refer to the queen’s strategy?”

“I do, ma’am. But will Her Majesty be visiting the castle?”

Kathleen shook her head. “She will fly straight to Dublin, and my husband and I will meet her there.”

“Please do convey to her my regards.”

“I will, Alice. And I am sure she will contact you regarding your commission.”

“Oh, by the way,” said Conrad, “an even more encouraging turn of events, at least for me during this time, is how Allison has changed.”

“Changed?”

“Aye,” said Kathleen. “Our daughter is a different person. More like the sweet girl that we knew when she was little. She even showed a genuine interest in my welfare by asking me how my blood pressure and cholesterol level was doing.”

“Although I’m a bit baffled by her now wanting go what she calls ‘Regency Vogue’,” said Conrad. “Something to do with Victoriana?”

Alice nodded.

“It’s all the latest,” Brandon said authoritatively. “And Alice wears it well.”

Conrad laughed. “Extremely well. But I didn’t think my mere clothing request for a whodunit would end up being in sync with the times!”

“Anyway our daughter’s remarkable change is obviously due to you, Alice,” Kathleen added.

“Due more to Joshua, really,” Alice muttered.

“Oh, right,” said Conrad. “She mentioned something about him. A boyfriend of hers ... yours?”

Alice's eyes twinkled. "Oh, er ... sort of. You can ask her to explain."  
"Will do! I want to meet this fascinating fellow."



In light of the unfortunate circumstances, Conrad and his wife had granted the bereaved group of Alice, her family, Ailish Ryan's parents, along with Betty and Ronald Trucker, another three nights' lodging at the castle free of charge until the day of the funeral, including expenses such as meals, telephone calls, and internet use.

"But what about all those minibar purchases?" Eileen inquired of her husband.

"All taken care of, darling. Unbeknownst to us, it was understood that all expenses incurred outside the price of the rooms were on Mr. Connolly's tab."

Brandon winked at Alice. "All that hot chocolate and bubbly water, sis!"

"But where is this Mr. Connolly?" said Betty. "We should thank the guy."

"He and his wife are accompanying Queen Marina and her entourage in Dublin where she is to deliver a televised speech to all of Ireland tomorrow evening," said Alice.

"Apparently in honour of returning Connolly Castle to its rightful owner," said Ronald. "And ... *wow...*"

His mouth fell open. A blonde girl a little older than Alice, bearing a strong resemblance and wearing similar clothes, was trotting into the castle foyer with a porter pushing an overloaded trolley of luggage behind her. She seemed familiar to Alice; an impression confirmed when she turned and she and Alice's eyes locked.

"Hey, haven't we like, met before?" the girl said in a pronounced American accent.

"I do believe so. My name's Alice by the way, Alice Godley."

"Wow, I just *knew* it, and I dig your outfit. Genuine article it seems—hard to find amongst tacky copies like mine. Purchased them in a Duds outlet near Varminton. Victorian silk taffeta, right?"

"Apparently."

"Miss Dudley? Deidre Dudley?" the desk clerk inquired.

"Yep, that's me," the girl replied, still staring at Alice. "So, just where *did* we meet?"

"C-could it have been at a mental wellness spa, of sorts?" Alice tentatively asked.

“In other words, a *nuthouse*?”

“W-well...”

“Hey, Alice, we all have to face our demons eventually. Mine was AERS—Acute Era Reversal Syndrome.”

Alice groaned. “Oh, yes. Once upon a time, I was psychiatrically diagnosed with the same. It’s ever so ridiculous, because I was really only being myself in unavoidable circumstances.”

“Same here. That’s what you get for doing that these days. I just wanted to dress like this. But it worked out great, ’cos the sensational publicity of me having just come out of a loony bin landed me a role in the movie version of a Regency play, Grace Alsop’s *Mallory Park*. Heard of it?”

“Of course.”

“Anyway, it won a couple of Oscars and now our type of gear is all the rage.”

“All aboard, me hearties, the Galleon coach is ’ere!” Malcolm laughingly announced, and the Godley family along with Betty Trucker began to troop out of the reception. Alice said goodbye to Deidre and turned to Ronald, who was still standing staring at the castle’s attractive new guest.

“Are you coming?”

“Er ... go ahead, Princess. Maybe I’ll stick around here a couple more days.”

Alice was disconsolately joining her family, when a gunshot startled them.

“Maybe it’s the clay pigeon shooting,” said Malcolm. “It’s around this time.”

“But coming from that third storey window?” Brandon said, gazing up at the castle. Another gunshot rang out.

Alice clutched her chest and staggered, Brandon caught a hold of her and she slumped into his arms. Blood was welling up between her fingers.

“Alice, *no!* What is this?”

“M-maybe it is meant to be,” Alice gasped.

“What? For the sake of some *HL* story?”

“No ... just for ... w-well, yes, maybe...”

“Then tell the authors to *change* it, sis! Change the plot! You’re meant to be a...”

“A *what*, Brandon?”

“A star! At least for this movie. I know I wasn’t behind the idea, but that’s way better than *this!*”

By now, Malcolm and Brandon had carried Alice into the coach, laid her out on a seat and Brandon had pulled off his sweater and was swabbing

the blood soaking through Alice's pinafore. Police car sirens were sounding in the distance, and a number of hotel guests, including Ronald Trucker and Deidre Dudley, were gathering in the castle driveway. Upon learning of the reason for the commotion, Ronald dashed into the coach and knelt at Alice's side.

"D-Deidre will take the role..." Alice was hoarsely whispering.

"Who?" said Brandon.

"Deidre Dudley. For Rummy's sake ... it's meant to be..."

"It's *not* 'meant to be', Princess!" said Ronald. "You were the 'meant to be' in the role."

"He's right, sis," said Brandon. "And what about your destiny, the commission, your royalty role ... all this 'crown' business ... the *Kingdom*? Tell me that this is just another of your *HL* adventure spirit trip thingies and we'll all wake up."

"The Kingdom, Brandon?" Alice muttered, as her eyes were falling shut. "K-kingdom come... *Thy* Kingdom come ... oh, Father! One's deathday is more important than one's birthday..."

"Now don't go all heavy on me, sis. This is *serious*."

"I *am* serious, Brandon."

"Alice ... *Alice!* Think of the readers, your *fans!* You owe it to them to leave on a hopeful note. This is like, no way a happy ending!"

"It's not an ending, Brandon," Alice whispered. "It's a happy *beginning*. It's all good ... *all* positive. And I don't feel any pain ... take care of Dinah..."

Brandon and Ronald were on their knees sobbing, Malcolm was on his cell phone calling for an ambulance, Eileen was fervently praying, and the sounds of the scene were ringing in Alice's ears when she felt herself drifting upwards into a sparkling golden haze.

"Welcome, Alice," she heard a familiar voice say and through the haze, she recognised the form of a dark-bearded young man.

*Joshua!* Alice exclaimed, although she thought she did so in her mind.

Yes, said the young man and swept Alice up in his arms *Fly with thy Falconer apace*.

"But that's me down there bleeding in the bus!" Alice wailed.

"Hast thou not heard the mountaineer's creed, 'don't look down'?"

"Oh, poor Brandon, Rummy, and my parents of course ..."

"They will understand ... as thou hast said, Alice, they must see it as a sad ending of one life but the happy beginning of the next. In light of the changes entering theirs and the readers' lives, this is a sorrowful yet sweet way to wrap up thine adventures."



“I understand, but Lord...”

“But what, dearest?”

“But nothing. I just wondered if there was some other way. Oh alas, I am ever so sorry.”

Presently, the haze cleared and Joshua gently landed Alice feet first upon the same road leading to the thatch-roofed cottage that she had seen in her dream two nights ago.

“I will see thee later,” he said, then kissed her and disappeared. Three beautiful girls dressed in Victorian-styled diaphanous dresses approached Alice and embraced her in turn.

“Hello,” the first softly said. “I am Faith.”

Alice, sorrowing with a hand pressed to her chest, stepped back and looked into the girl’s face. “Alice Pleasance? *Faith?*”

“Yes, and I most assuredly had need to impart this virtue for the channel to receive your adventures and for you to engage in them!”

“Curiouser and curiouser,” Alice muttered.

“Welcome,” said the next, taking Alice’s hand. “I am Hope.”

“Ailish Ryan? *Hope?*”

“Aye, and ye surely needed such to accept me.”

Alice squeezed the girl’s hand and managed a smile. “Oh, but I *do* accept you. We all make mistakes.”

“Such as my plotting a friend’s murder?”

Alice was speechless until the third one spoke.

“Last but not least, I am Charity.”

“Saint Aleydis. I suppose that’s obvious, considering the love you possessed.”

“Oui, and although I declare it in all humility, you needed my virtue to help you to cover dear Ailish’s sin.”

“I see. I must say, I was rather amazed at the grace I had when she told me. It was almost like a non-issue ... most bizarre.”

Ailish burst into tears and hugged Alice. “Thank you,” she said.

“I suppose you should thank Aleydis,” said Alice.

“Come,” said Alice Pleasance. “Let us go up to the cottage. A meal of spit-roasted chiblets and fermented fizzola awaits us.”

“Chiblets and fizzola,” Alice said as she and the girls walked arm in arm. “It has been quite awhile since I partook of such fare. The adventure with the cards, actually.”

“But don’t eat too much,” said Ailish, “because this evening Joshua himself has prepared a banquet for your welcome home! So many are

invited ... Lance Williams and Anne Hastaway, my mother and father and my sisters Charlotte and Mary, Lewis Charles and Charles Lewis, Father David of course, and a host of others. Even Dickey Lewd who died of an overdose. It's a *dream*."

"But ... is this not more than a dream?"

The three girls looked at one another, and Aleydis spoke. "Maybe, Alice. It depends much on the collective desire."

"I am sorry. Collective desire?"

"The *pull* of those you love and love you, and even your own. In some cases such as this, there is an element of decision involved. Ah, the light is dimming and we must hasten. The broadcast is happening about now..."

## SPEAKING OF ALICE...

Upon entering the cottage, Alice Pleasance switched on a small, oak-encased television set and shook it until it flickered to life.

“Bad connection,” she said.

“So this is heaven?” Alice asked.

“Where do ye think?” Ailish said as the other girls giggled. “I thought I told ye! Do sit down.”

“Well, if it is,” Alice said, settling into an embroidered Victorian Beauchamp settee, “why is a TV looking ever so ... like, *ancient*, and it doesn’t even switch on properly? I was expecting something a bit more far-out, you know ... cosmic high tech, the kind that Brandon imagines. This reminds me of the one my great grandmother had once upon a time. Not that I mind, mind you. Actually I rather like it.”

“I suppose that is the way we like it too,” said Alice Pleasance. “And *look*, it’s only in black and white.”

“And that in itself is significant,” said Aleydis. “This is the way most poor humans perceive this dimension—if they even perceive it at all and sometimes only through a faulty connection. And this is how we see *theirs* from here, as though through their eyes—a tiny, two-dimensional, black and white screen. Helps us to relate to their perspective when necessity arises.”

“Anyways,” said Ailish, “isn’t this ever so cosy?”

“Most certainly,” said Alice. “But I can hardly for the life of me, enjoy it at the moment. My parents, Brandon, Rummy ... they must be most awfully heartbroken. Not to mention the readers.”

“Yes, there will be some sorrow, but it is only for a season. Joy will come in the morning.”

“I do suppose,” said Alice and tuned into an announcement crackling through the television set’s tiny speaker. “It’s Queen Marina!”

“Besides the death of Ireland’s rising star, Ailish Ryan, casting a nationwide pall upon this victorious return of Connolly Castle to its rightful owner and the heritage of the Irish people, it is with no small regret that I must pass on some further distressing news. Alice Godley, a dear young comrade-in-arms and royal station, passed away today at Tullamore Midland hospital from a critical gunshot wound delivered by the hidden hand of a vicious enemy, which fortunately has since been apprehended by the Irish authorities.

“Providentially, for those of us with ears to hear and eyes to see, Miss Godley has left us with no mean legacy of veiled truth in a series of parabolic fantasies which I am hitherto patronising in no small volume through the Onion Publishing House.”

Queen Marina paused and held up copies of *Alice and the Cards* and *Alice Cuts the Strings* to the cameras.

“So Her Majesty is financing fairy tales?” Alice and her companions heard a crowd member scornfully remark.

“And I will be signing purchased hot-off-the-press editions at Boundaries Bookstore here in Dublin’s fair city tomorrow from half-past ten in the morning until midday.”

“Hey!” said Ailish, giving Alice a playful nudge. “Your books are to be famous!”

“Not *my* books, actually. I believe they were ...*received* from certain Messrs. Lewis Charles and Charles Lewis.”

“Most certainly so,” said Alice Pleasance. “Of which I played no little part!”

“Yes, m-most certainly so,” someone said as the door opened behind them. The four girls jumped up.

“Joshua!” chorused Alice and Aleydis.

“Lewis Charles! Charles Lewis!” chorused Alice Pleasance and Ailish.

The three men looked serious and Joshua bid the girls to sit back down.

“There has been much pandemonium upon reading this chapter’s turn of events,” said Lewis Charles. “Consequently there has been a suggested change of plans.”

“Precisely,” said Charles Lewis. “A great uproar has ensued regarding the development of the plot, resulting in a tentative modification of proposals.”

“Pandemonium and uproar from whom?”

“The readers.”

“Those ingesting its printed word.”

“But this story hasn’t even been edited, much less *printed*,” said Alice.

“Nutty Putty,” Joshua whispered to her.

“You mean Alice won’t be staying with us?”

“Depends upon Alice herself,” said Lewis Charles.

“Yes, the decision has fallen upon the shoulders of Miss Alice Godley herself,” said Charles Lewis.

“May I have a fizzola while I explain?” Lewis asked. “Strawberry to be precise, if it is little bother.”

Alice Pleasance jumped up to perform his request.

“I’ll take the same as we elucidate,” said Charles Lewis. “Specifically blackberry, if it is not too much inconvenience.”

“Not at all,” Ailish said, blushing. “I’ll get it.

“I just *adored* yer books, by the way,” she added in a whisper. “Must’ve read ’em a hundred times.”

Alice jumped up. “And y-you, Joshua?”

“A grape fizzola, perhaps...?” Aleydis asked.

“Naught at the moment, thank you,” Joshua replied, his eyes fixed upon Alice as he walked towards her and took her hand.

“Look thou and listen on...,” he whispered, drawing her closer to the television set.

“For those deprived of the privilege to have met Alice Godley in the flesh...,” Mr. Sage was now saying as crowds and flashing cameras surrounded his frail frame hunched over a book-laden table set in Dublin’s main branch of Boundaries bookstore. Queen Marina was standing by.

“But this is supposed to happen a couple of days hence,” said Alice.

Joshua winked. “Nutty Putty, remember? I am *shrinking* it.”

“I will, however,” Sage went on, “set forth my own attempt, humble as it may be, to describe the visible and non-visible attributes of this hitherto unrecognised personage that has been most brutally torn from us. In short, this maiden was the manifold manifestation of beatific perfection itself.”

“Oh, Joshua, *please*,” said Alice. “How embarrassing. This is a bit overkill. ...”

“Granted, my dear. The gentleman can be somewhat lavish in his praise! But do listen on.”

Mr. Sage stood up, pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket, cleared his throat, and continued. “I would venture to suggest that while poet, painter, or sculptor would have adequately portrayed Alice’s sublimity, I shall proceed with reading a poem I wrote last night in honour of her passing. A form of eulogy if you may.”

*The glowing inner essence  
That enhanced her outward presence.  
Delighted all who this vision did behold.  
Yet no poetry of a Pushkin,  
Nor the writing of a Ruskin  
Could begin to plumb the beauty of her soul.*

“Oh my goodness, Lord,” said Alice, blushing and covering her ears. “This is most distressful. Brandon and my friends reading this would make ever so much fun. Do I really have to listen to it all?”

Joshua nodded and put his arm around her. “For thou hast a decision to make...”

*Should this pleasing task be given  
To depict this being of heaven,  
To a hundred Rubens, Renoirs, or Vermeers,  
Their pigmented portrayal  
Would miserably fail,  
Though they wrought their masterpiece a thousand years.*

“But, Lord, this is most awfully excruciating. Hearing all this is like ... eating too much ... er ... *birthday cake* or something. Well, at least it’s purging any vain yearning for man-worship within me.”

Joshua smiled. “As a fining pot for silver and a furnace for gold, so is woman to her praise, Alice! Anyway, *I* inspired Sage’s poem and speech, so it behoveth thee to listen.”

*And even Michelangelo  
Would down his chisel throw,  
Having failed to grasp her lithe yet regal grace,  
Those subtly veiled smiles  
Hiding warmly winsome wiles,  
Hinting wisdom in that divinely sculpted face.*

Sage folded the paper, put it back in his pocket, and Alice breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thank you, thank you,” Sage said, acknowledging the applause and taking a bow. “As I said—a mere humble attempt. Anyway, as our Lord was taken from us and His own recognised Him not, so was this maiden taken and many of us recognised her not, but her legacy and testimony will stand strong in these volumes, which I now set forth by the grace and bounty of Queen Marina. Thank you.”

Further applause followed, Sage smiled at the television cameras, took another bow, and sat down. Queen Marina stood up.

“More by the grace and bounty of Alice’s Lord Joshua,” she said. “And let us not forget to purchase Mr. Sage’s forthcoming book dedicated to Alice Godley entitled *She Knew Too Much*. Care to elaborate, Mr. Sage?”

“Ah, it is to be a dissertation, based on the cryptic allusions in Alice’s adventures, that explores the grim reasons why she was murdered.”

“I and many members of the general public I am sure, look forward to purchasing a copy, Mr. Sage.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“You are most welcome, sir. And before I sign purchased copies, I would like to welcome an illustrious guest of no mean station in the Kingdom, an authoress who has made no small impact upon this lovely country of Ireland through her spiritual writings, and who would like to contribute no little acclamation of the deceased—Madame Maria Fontaine!”

A slender, silver-haired older lady wearing smoked glasses and a cloak patterned with red hearts took the microphone.

Alice gasped as she watched. “*Mam ... the Queen of Hearts!*”

Joshua nodded soberly and bid Alice to listen.

“I have no written words of my own to say of the deceased,” Maria said in a chirpy yet authoritative voice. “But as I thought about it, Joshua’s prophetic poem from one of these volumes came to mind, which express much better than I could regarding Alice’s role and commission in this world. A role that could yet be fulfilled according to your collective ‘pull’ in prayer. The poem is from Chapter Eighteen of *Alice and the Cards*.”

*In whose eyes they see light, in whose words they find hope,  
Destined and born for this hour  
Prepared for the lands where in darkness they grope  
She was nurtured and raised as a delicate flower*

*Winsome in manner and gentle in tongue,  
And yet she’s without trepidation,  
They’ll glimpse past and present in this one so young  
And be charmed by the curiously quaint combination.*

*So they shall come to this golden-haired lass  
Every suit without an omission  
Two-score, ten, and two weeks shall pass  
And she’ll have accomplished her unique Commission.*

Maria Fontaine bowed to a mystified yet intrigued gathering’s ripple of applause and stepped aside.

“Beautiful, Madame Fontaine and thank you,” Queen Marina said and picked up a pen. “And now I shall sign purchased copies, although I do wish Alice could be here to countersign...”

“With all due respect Your Majesty, may I?”

Sage sat bolt upright and Queen Marina drew back with a gasp at the intrusion.

“Alice!” they chorused and hushed awe fell upon the gathering.

“You are alive?” said Queen Marina.

“It is a ghost,” said Sage.

“Does a ghost pick up a pen as you see me do?”

“B-but you just suddenly *appeared*,” said Queen Marina, “when but half an hour ago, we received news that your body had just been taken from the Tullamore Midland hospital—eighty kilometres from here. Madame Fontaine, Mr. Sage and I were even planning to attend your funeral tomorrow.”

“Nutty Putty, if I may say so, Your Majesty. Need I say more?”

“No,” Queen Marina said, wiping tears of joy. “It’s wonderful.”

“Truly, and if it is well with Your Majesty. It will give me much pleasure to countersign the volumes...”

“What!” Alice exclaimed, turning to Joshua as she watched. “You mean that’s me actually *there* ... now?”

“Actually thee *there* now,” said Joshua. “Except that over here, *now* is left up to much conjecture! But over there is little time, though. Thou hast made thy decision I assume?”

Alice nodded and, feeling dizzy, steadied herself on Joshua’s arm. Her surroundings along with her heavenly companions were becoming a spinning blur and she closed her eyes. Opening them, she found herself lying in a hospital bed surrounded by her parents and Brandon, Ronald and Betty Trucker, Deidre Dudley, and even Allison Connolly. A doctor and a priest were also present.

“She’s come to,” the doctor said upon seeing Alice stir.

“It cannot be!” said the priest.

“Thank You, Lord, she’s alive!” said Eileen.

“*Goldilocks!*” Allison exclaimed with tears amidst the jubilant responses of the others present.

“I-I’m in ... what’s this place called ... T-Tullamore hospital?” Alice muttered.

“Yes, darling,” said Malcolm. “And up until just a few minutes ago you were pronounced clinically er—”

“Deceased,” said Brandon.

“Wh-what time is it?”

“Seven, sis. Seven o’clock in the morning.”



Alice sat up. "In that case, I need to get to Boundaries bookstore in Dublin ASAP!"

*So we close this book and chapter  
On a maiden who many a heart did enrapture,  
And lit our fires of imagination  
'Til she transcended fabrication  
In the mind of many a one who's read of the  
Whimsical ventures that lay ahead of her.  
Time would fail us to enumerate  
The folks with whom she did relate.  
Each one a uniquely colourful character  
Such as the illustrious Queen Britannica,  
Deirdre Dudley, Don Quixote,  
Wanda Mae, and Ace Belote.  
Marcus O'Hare, and Mister Hatter  
(Do you recall their silly chatter?)  
'Goodies' like Margot and Marian,  
And 'baddies' like Truco and Sharla Tann.*

*We joined Alice as she laughed and cried,  
With her beloved Joshua at her side.  
Who felt her joy, her grief, and loss,  
And shared the weight of her crown and cross,  
And granted her whatever permission  
She wished to fulfil her great Commission.*

*From Celia Spade to Mr. Sage,  
It mattered not to Alice their age.  
She did not judge by sight of eye  
Rich or poor, low or high,  
She gave them all consideration  
Regardless of their wealth and station.  
Whether sitting at a luncheon  
With Fauntleroy or Monsieur Truncheon,  
Wining and dining or munching a sandwich,  
She was acutely attentive to body language.  
Catching, while maintaining poise,  
The strain on face, the pain in voice.*

*Avoiding the hypocrite's wallowing trammels  
That strains at gnats while swallowing camels.  
Like Tammy Trucker who did belittle  
Alice with critical jot and tittle.*

*We joined with Alice as she laughed and cried,  
With her beloved Joshua by her side.  
Who felt her joy, her grief and loss,  
And shared the weight of her crown and cross,  
And bestowed on her great intuition  
To thwart the powers of opposition.*

*Consider how God in His wisdom stuck her  
With the lowly likes of Betty Trucker,  
Then caused her to wonder how she ever did get  
Involved with a wayward marionette.  
Yet on Alice's lips was always a song  
Of praise for Brandon who can do no wrong,  
And all her avid romantic yearning,  
Accompanied suitable lesson learning.*

*We felt her helplessness and dread  
At being abducted by Ned and Ted,  
Then suffering a trial by fire  
Of Baldo Striffolino's ire.  
And undergoing treatment most ugly  
In a mental asylum with Deidre Dudley.  
However, no curse or trouble could thwart her  
Insatiable thirst for bubbly water.*

*We joined her as she laughed and cried,  
With her beloved Joshua by her side.  
Who felt her joy, her grief and loss,  
And shared the weight of her crown and cross,  
And bestowed on her great commendation  
For overcoming condemnation.*

*She's graduating, and most of us deem  
It wonderful for Alice to follow her dream.*

*But let's not forget the other side of the coin.  
For the calling that she must always adjoin  
To the one that promises worldly glory,  
Portends a totally different story.  
Her refusal to forsake her heavenly crown  
Truco will never take lying down.  
So pray that she won't be afraid of the faces  
Of those she'll expose who reign in high places.*

*Let's join her in fight as she bucks the tide,  
With her beloved Joshua by her side.  
Who feels her joy, her grief and loss,  
And shares the weight of her crown and cross,  
And will welcome Alice with glad admission,  
Once she has fulfilled her great Commission.*

**The End**