

Chapter 1 The Daisy Chain

Alice was feeling down. Down where, she wasn't entirely certain but she was sure it wasn't down the rabbit hole again. She'd know if it were. It would be much, much darker.

The sudden thought of Wonderland and those strange places and people she had encountered all those years ago made her stomach churn. She'd been too busy of late to waste time on those memories. But now and again, they crept up on her like ghosts from the shadows, with clammy fingers. She also found herself wondering if strangers were called so because they were strange. It was indeed true of Wonderland but of people in the real world she had too little experience to say for sure. All that was about to change.

Concentrate on what you will pack in your suitcase tonight, she told herself. Red shoes or blue? Or both? Black would be the sensible choice, she could almost hear her mother say. I'll take all three, Alice decided. One can never have too many shoes.

"Of shoes and ships – and sealing wax ..." the Walrus said.

Truth be told, the idea of returning to Wonderland both fascinated and terrified Alice. It was an impossible combination, rather like jam and gherkin sandwiches. *An oxymoron perhaps*, though Alice wasn't entirely sure. It brought to mind what her two aunts sometimes said about Uncle Percy, who, on returning home from the war, had apparently left a part of himself behind at the front line. That is, in addition to his right leg. Despite his ordeal, Uncle Percy yearned to return to the front line. Alice hoped that he would one day have a chance to search for what he had left there, though she doubted that the line was visible any more.

It was a hot hazy afternoon on a late summer's day. Alice lay by the riverbank, her toes dangling in the cool water, both teasing and terrifying the minnows. They wanted food, probably some white bread and butter, but all they got were Alice's toe jam. At the other end of her body, her hair twined like ivy around the cowslips and the daisies. The air was thick with the scent of meadow and earth, yet not quite masking the faint sweet odour of rotting grass. The low constant hum of honeybees was interspersed with melodies from finches, song thrushes and a solitary blackbird. Yet Alice knew this orchestra was also made up of wasps that stung and blowfly that carried disease.

To tell the truth, which was the only way she told things, Alice knew why she was feeling down. It was because the long summer vacation had come to an end. Schooldays were over for good. Tomorrow, she would leave home and board a train for London to study History at college. She wasn't exactly sure how she felt about this change. On the one hand, she was excited by the prospect of a new life. She was fed up with her boring life at home, where one day drifted unnoticed into the next. She was glad to leave behind the household chores, the ignorance that came with being a child, along with the stuffy attitudes of her home tutor and parents. Adults were forever sharing their "wisdom and experience" by ordering her about and dishing out annoying sayings, like "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger". On the other hand, the enormity of the change scared her. Now that she had grown up, she realised there had been a beauty to the innocence of childhood, a carefree existence she would never be able to recapture. Nowadays, she was "expected to know better" and "realise the consequences of her actions". It was funny how they expected her to behave like an adult but still spoke to her as if she were a child.

Leaving home also meant she would miss things that she had taken for granted; the old house (despite the Chippendale furniture her parents were so obsessed with); her sisters (not so much her brothers); and her ageing cat, Dinah, which she swore talked far more sense to her than any human. She would miss familiar faces. Even that of the good-looking boy at church, who had stared improperly at her while singing Onward Christian Soldiers off-key last Sunday. Living in London would be fraught with challenges, dangers even. Just the notion of it made her heart beat faster.

If she could make no sense of her feelings then they were obviously nonsense and she should focus on the facts. The fact was, tomorrow would be the start of her new life. New places and faces. One of her father's favourite (and most annoying) sayings was: "Look on the bright side." Admittedly, he had said it less of late since contracting a serious illness, though he still put on a brave face and would not hear a word said against Alice going away to study (when his memory didn't fail him). She knew her mother wanted her to stay with the family but who would deny what might be her father's last wish? Alice felt guilty about not postponing her studies. She didn't even know if she wanted to read History. As her sisters said, it was all in the past. There again, her father wanted her to become more independent, be educated and live life to the full. She would therefore try to see the bright side of leaving. Life in London would be exciting. Why, the train journey alone was bound to be an adventure.

Alice had done her homework. She had already learned most of the new London Underground stations off by heart, just in case she got lost in their dark and windy tunnels (Alice was understandably afraid of tunnels). They sounded like marvellous places, albeit some of them were not yet open. Alice imagined that the people at Bayswater and Ealing all had boats and liked fishing; Baker Street must have the loveliest of aromas; Shepherd's Bush must be quite rural, as was perhaps Moorgate: the people of Aldgate were clearly elderly; the inhabitants of Barbican, Cannon Street and Gunnersbury sounded aggressive, whereas the people at Elephant & Castle must be positively batty. She was sure she would like those people most of all.

As Alice was recalling the station names in her head and conjuring up a fanciful picture of London, she heard the piercing whistle of a distant train. It was somehow out of place in the gentle murmur of the summer countryside. It sounded wrong and it startled Alice out of her daydream. The noise was followed by a rustle in the undergrowth nearby. There was no telling if it was a bird, a hedgehog or even a fox. Or something more dangerous that shouldn't be there. Alice knew some of the names of the surrounding plants - green spleenwort, mountain melick and hart's tongue fern - and could easily imagine a wolf or goblin creeping through such menacingly-named vegetation. Or a white rabbit. She shook her head and laughed at herself for being so jittery, while deep down reassuring herself that the creature making those noises had nothing at all to do with Wonderland. As if to answer her fears, a large jackdaw hopped across the meadow and stopped to stare at her.

Would she return to Wonderland given the chance? With all its nonsense and lawlessness? With all the disbelief and torment from her siblings and parents afterwards? Not forgetting the images that still came to her in her sleep. Would she cross the line if invited? Like Uncle Percy?

The train blew its whistle again, a faraway echo, yet so clear one would think it were within arm's reach. This time the noise didn't stop. Alice sat up, her heart beating just that tiny bit faster. Why did the sound linger? As she waited for her head to clear (the head often finds it disagreeable when the body decides to sit up quickly) she caught sight of a movement in the water behind the reeds. A water snake appeared to be winding its way slowly across the surface of the river. Or was it a snake?

Alice rubbed her eyes as one does when something appears to be out of place and looked again. This was no snake. There, about six feet from the riverbank, was a tiny train; a black steam engine with the words "Brighton Express" on the side, pulling a dozen or so carriages along behind it. It was drifting along, though judging by the amount of steam coming out of the funnel, the train seemed to be trying to fight the current.

The spectacle itself was strange enough, yet could have been explained by a boy having dropped his toy train into the river. What was more difficult to comprehend was the sight of tiny heads and arms leaning out of the carriages and faint but desperate cries for help.

The scene was quite beyond belief. And as Alice had first hand experience of what lay beyond belief, she felt inclined to jump up and run home as fast as she could. But Alice was also very curious. And she wasn't the type to walk away from someone in danger, as these poor people clearly were.

Alice jumped up, crouched by the water's edge and leaned forward to take a closer look. Sure enough, there were scores of frightened passengers in the carriages. The more she stared, the more detail she could make out, as if the train were growing larger or she were getting closer to it. It was like looking at something down a telescope, without the telescope.

It unnerved Alice to know that the train was a good six feet away, while simultaneously feeling like it was within an inch of her face. She could see the panic in the people's faces; the fear in their wide-open eyes that said they had no idea what was happening to them or why. Their screams became clearer and she was sure she heard a tiny voice shout "Crazy train!". It was a crazy train for sure.

There was an important decision to be made; whether to run away or try to help those poor people. Alice being Alice meant there was no real choice at all, so grasping a clump of sedge in one hand, she leaned out towards the train. As she focused her eyes on the carriages, she saw that the tips of her fingers were within a few inches of the outstretched hands of the passengers and, somewhat frighteningly, appeared to be the same size. She pushed her face closer still to the train and felt the wind and spray in her face as the locomotive sped across the water. She heard the roar of the steam engine's pistons as they fought the current.

Alice wasn't sure whether it was the shock of touching one of the passengers' hands or the realisation that the sedge had become uprooted from the riverbank. Whichever it was, she became aware that she was falling. Any doubt about where she was falling to was washed away by the sudden and complete change in her surroundings, from warm air and yellow sunshine to a murky green world of ice-cold water.

Knowing the river was barely a foot deep near the bank, Alice tried to stand up on the river bed but her feet only found more water. In fact, the current was so strong that, if anything, it was dragging her further down, billowing out her white dress like a jellyfish. The noise of both the swirling water and steam engine nearby filled her ears. As bubbles of air escaped her mouth, Alice was sure she began to see her life flashing before her eyes. As it turned out, it was a flash of silver as two giant minnows shot past her.

It seemed she was destined to drown, become fish food or both, so it was rather peculiar that Alice found herself worrying instead about the red shoes that she had left back on dry land. Her mother had bought them for her the day before as a going away present and she would be cross should Alice lose them so soon. She could hear her mother's voice even now, "You must face the consequences of your actions."

The minnows lost interest in Alice as fast as they had appeared and the cause was soon revealed. A huge curtain of river weed swayed like poplars in the wind, then parted as the head of a hungry perch came into the open water. It glided slowly towards Alice, allowing her just enough time to regret not feeding the fish earlier. *One, two, three, four, five, once I caught a fish alive. Six, seven ...*

Alice was out of breath, literally. With a rush of adrenalin, she found the strength to kick her feet wildly and propel herself a short way towards the sunlight above her. Another two kicks and she bobbed to the surface like a fishing float. She wanted to tread water and catch her breath but she knew the cruel perch was hot on her tail. A quick look around told her she was half way between the riverbank and the train. The problem was that she no longer had the strength to swim to either, let alone outpace a hungry fish.

The solution to her predicament came in the shape of a large white lifebelt, which landed nearby with a slap on the water. She looped it over her head and as she felt herself being reeled in towards the train, two thoughts struck her; firstly, *what would the effect of bait skimming across the surface have on the perch* and secondly, *what was a lifebelt doing on board a train?*

In no time at all, several pairs of hands pulled her up the side of the carriage and in through an open window. She landed in a wet heap on the floor and a make-shift curtain of coats and blankets rose up around her. A single hand holding a bundle of clothes appeared from behind the curtain and a rather shaky voice belonging to a lady said in a West-Country accent: "Here you go my dear. Change into these dry clothes. They'll be too small for you because they belong to my grand-daughter. But at least you won't catch cold."

"Don't fuss so," said a male voice, "she'll have to learn to stand on her own two feet some time."

This was easier said than done. As Alice shed her wet white dress and put the clothes on, the train rocked from side to side. While she did this, she became aware that the train's whistle was in fact the combined noise of the shrieking passengers. *Thank goodness they've stopped screaming in this carriage*, thought Alice, imagining she would otherwise go quite deaf.

She soon found herself clothed in undergarments and a yellow dress two sizes too small. *Just the type of clothes my mother buys me*, thought Alice, *too small and child-like*. But she had to admit that at least her new clothes were dry and made her feel instantly warmer. She rubbed her hair dry and carefully sipped a cup of hot, sweet tea that had seemed to appear from nowhere. Once she was dressed, the curtain dropped to reveal a very bizarre group of people indeed. They were all very old with distinctive and highly unusual features – bulbous or long noses, large flat or pointed ears, beady or saucer-like eyes, thin or broad faces. Not one of them came even close to being normal. They stood or sat in a circle around Alice.

The carriage they were in, like its travellers, had seen better days. The leather upholstery of the seats was worn and the rugs that covered the old wooden floorboards were fraying at the edges. A musty smell of wood and tobacco filled the air.

"Are you all right my dear?" said the woman who had apparently handed her the clothes. She was an old lady with tight white curly hair and small rimmed glasses, which sat on the end of a long, broad nose. She wore what appeared to be a white sheepskin coat and a little too much jewellery. She reminded Alice of a sheep – one that was trying to look younger than her days. Her voice trembled as she spoke. "That was quite a fall you had."

"We all have falls," barked an old man next to her (the one who had spoken earlier). His large ears, bloodshot eyes and grey moustache that extended into long whiskers made him look like a bloodhound. "Especially at our age. She's young. She'll be fine. Just needs to toughen up a bit."

Alice felt she should speak up. "I'm fine really, all things considered. And thank you very much for rescuing me."

"It was you, who was supposed to rescue us," grunted a rather corpulent man, whose broad face bore some unsightly bumps on his cheeks and jowls. He looked like a wart-hog. "Didn't you hear us shouting 'Daisy Chain!?' You were supposed to make one and use it as a lifeline to pull our train ashore." He shook his enormous head and added a few words under his breath. "Wretched youth!"

"Don't scold her!" said a rather tall, elegant lady with a long neck and large lips. She would have been quite beautiful had it not been for the large liver spots all over her skin. She reminded Alice of a giraffe. "She tried her best. You can't blame *her* for the situation we got ourselves into."

Alice looked closely at the other people gathered around her; a small old man of swarthy complexion and red eyes dressed in a black leather coat, who reminded Alice of a fruit bat; a thin lady with smooth shiny skin and the kind of tiny black eyes, nose and mouth that wouldn't have looked out of place on a snake; a short, fat lady with a thin, pointed face and a huge head of bristly hair like a hedgehog's; a positively ancient gentleman whose wrinkly neck and face poked out of his stiff-collared shirt like a tortoise's head; and a rather large old woman, whose huge eyes sat high on her fleshy head, reminding Alice of a toad. Alice sighed inwardly as she did not relish the company of old people. They seldom spoke of anything else but "the good old days". And they often smelled strange.

The momentary silence that ensued allowed Alice to spit out several questions that were teetering precariously on the tip of her tongue. "Please, could you answer me something. Where on earth am I? Who are you all and where are you going? How come this train is so small and what's it doing in the river?"

The hedgehog-lady spoke up. "I'm not sure we can answer all those questions in one answer. In fact, I'm sure we can't. It would take quite a time to construct such a long and complex answer."

"Impossible!" snapped the dog-man. "Can't be done. One at a time. Only way."

Alice recalled someone saying that they could believe six impossible things by breakfast and it was now well past lunch-time. But she remained silent.

"Let me start with who we are," said the giraffe-lady, who seemed to be sipping a dry martini. "My name's Marjory. You'll have noticed that all of us are old. I think that's probably why we are all on this train."

"Except you," mumbled the wart-hog-man, looking at Alice. "You don't belong here."

"The funny thing is, none of us can remember how we got here," said the toad-lady.

"I remember I packed my suitcase for a visit to my daughter's family," said the sheep-lady. "But then...after that ... I can't remember."

"I can remember vivid details from my childhood like it was yesterday," said the hedgehog-lady excitedly. And then began to sob. "But I can't remember yesterday."

"Well if it's any consolation, I can't remember yesterday either," said Alice trying to comfort her.

“And that’s why you’re here!” said the dog-man with a little too much self-satisfaction. He faced her and bowed. Alice curtsied back. She had never seen a dog bow before, though she’d heard many make that sound. “The name’s Pavlov, Colonel Pavlov from K9 division. Name, rank and number is all I need to give. Good job really ‘cos it’s all I remember.”

“Pleased to meet you. But how did your train get in the river?” asked Alice.

“Before we departed, I distinctly heard the train driver talking about wanting to wet his whistle,” said the hedgehog-lady. “Could that be of any help?”

“Often is,” said Marjory, taking another sip from her glass. “I say, I wonder if this is some kind of cruise?”

Typical of old people, thought Alice. She was getting nowhere fast. “Were you all going on an outing? A day-trip to Brighton perhaps?”

“Why would we be going to Brighton?” asked the bat-man timidly. His glassy red eyes frightened Alice but his voice was rather squeaky and it was all she could do not to giggle.

“Well it does say “Brighton Express” on the outside of the locomotive, you know.”

“That doesn’t prove anything,” boomed the wart-hog man in a deep voice. “I’m wearing a Chesterfield coat but I’m not travelling there.” He then frowned and looked thoughtful. “My name’s Chester though. Funny that.”

Everybody suddenly began looking for tags on the insides of their clothing.

“I have an ulster coat,” piped up the bat-man. “But I’m not going there. Well, not that I can remember anyway. And my name’s not Ulster, it’s Kevin.”

“But names on coats are not quite the same thing as having the name of a seaside town on the side of a train, you know,” said Alice gently, aware that the elderly often took offence at being corrected.

“Are we on our way to Ireland?” inquired the snake-lady. “I’m a little deaf.”

“A little slow too,” said the Chester, the wart-hog man unkindly.

“I heard that,” hissed the snake-lady.

Alice decided to change the subject before things became more unpleasant. “Why are you all so small?”

“I beg your pardon! We’re the same size as you,” croaked the toad-lady in a deep, crackly voice. Speaking made her flesh ripple and Alice was rather glad she was on the opposite side of the carriage.

“I think I can answer that,” said the tortoise-man slowly, who until now had remained silent. “You see, I overheard my daughter ... saying to her husband ... ‘Jeremiah’s a waste of space.’ ... So if we are now smaller than we were ... we must be taking up far less space. Which is a good thing ... isn’t it?”

“Pardon me for saying so,” replied Alice. “But that doesn’t make too much sense.”

“That’s exactly what I told my daughter ... because they had a very large house ... you know. I wouldn’t have got under their feet. I could have lived ... in the basement. Or even ... under it.”

“No, I mean, how can you suddenly shrink when you get old?”

“It’s a scientific fact that you get smaller when you age,” said the wart-hog-man. “What do they teach children at school these days?”

“I’m not at school any more, I’m going to college,” said Alice, instantly realising that this wasn’t very relevant to the discussion. “In any case, ageing is a gradual process.”

“Tell that to the cabbage white butterfly in the next carriage!” said the snake-lady. The passengers immediately began talking to one another about who should inform the cabbage white.

The hedgehog-lady leaned towards Alice and whispered in her ear. “Let’s not do that, she’s sleeping.”

“Sleeping? At her age?” said the toad-lady. “What a waste of a life!”

Alice was none the wiser and as it had become a heated conversation, she decided to stop asking questions and give the others time to cool off. She glanced out of the dirty windows and saw that they were floating past a huge grey boulder. Half an hour ago, this would have seemed the size of a croquet ball to Alice. Now it was the size of a house. What a strange dream this is, she said to herself.

Above the noise of the river and steam engine (the shrieking in the other carriages had thankfully died down), Alice heard the pitter patter of feet inside the train. The others heard it too and soon everyone stopped talking and looked from side to side to see where the sound was coming from.

All at once, the carriage was full of a loud ringing noise. Alice look down to see one of the strangest sights she had ever seen. In the middle of the floor was a black telephone. Although it was a relatively new invention, she knew what a telephone was, as she had seen images of one in her father’s newspaper. It had been headline news because England, France and America were once again arguing over who had invented it. How clever of them to invent a machine that let people from different countries argue with each other without travelling abroad. Alice was certain that once countries had figured out that they could also talk about nice things with each other over the telephone, there would be no more wars.

But it was not the telephone as such that struck her as strange. It was the fact that it had arms, legs and a face. Two spindly arms protruded from the machine and cradled the receiver, which Alice knew one had to use in order to talk and listen. Two equally thin legs supported the body of the machine. There was a circular face in the middle of the device with numbers and letters that were currently positioned to form a rather angry expression. The telephone’s face was bright red and every time it rang, the receiver shook so violently that the machine’s arms clearly struggled to hold it in place.

“Someone should answer it!” cried Alice. “Before the poor contraption explodes.”

“Do you know how?” asked the hedgehog, for by now the passengers had become more creature than human. “Because I don’t.”

“Nor me,” sighed Jeremiah, the tortoise. “It’ll need someone ... a lot smarter than me ... to make it work.”

“Well, I am going to college, you know,” said Alice, regretting saying it a second time in the space of five minutes. Nevertheless, she had inadvertently volunteered herself and bending down, lifted the receiver from the telephone’s hands and held it to her head.

“Huuuuuuah!” is the correct spelling of the noise the telephone made as it exhaled loudly.

“27 seconds!” shouted the telephone. “It took you 27 seconds to answer me. It’s simply not good enough! Do you know the number of calls I have to make in a day?”

“I’m sure I don’t,” replied Alice, apologetically. “I’m very sorry for the delay. But please, could you speak a little more loudly?”

“Try turning the receiver the other way round, Alice,” said the telephone smugly and calmed down enough for its face to turn from red to pink. Alice felt rather foolish whereas all the creatures thought she was terribly bright to get even this far.

“Thank you,” said Alice. “I have to admit this is the first time I’ve ever used a telephone.”

“That is abundantly clear.” The telephone’s face had almost reached white but now it returned to a deep pink again. “However, I am not a mere telephone, I am a MOBILE TELEPHONE!” it shouted and added more calmly, “Perhaps you saw the legs?”

“I do apologise. That must make you an extra-special telephone then.”

“Yes, it does. You’re right, it does.” The telephone was clearly pleased with Alice’s observation and the pink colour of its face receded to two small dots on its cheeks as it blushed. Alice suspected the telephone had something important to tell them and figured that tact might be the best approach.

“And you knew my name. That was very clever of you too.”

Shifting its digits, the telephone frowned. “Not really. I know the names and whereabouts of everyone in Wonderland. That’s how I found you. MESSAGE!”

Everyone in the carriage jumped as the telephone screamed out the last word at the top of its voice.

“I knew there was something I had to tell you, Alice. It’s a message from the Cheshire Cat. He can’t talk to you himself as his phone is engaged. In any case, it’s only a fixed telephone.”

“No legs?” enquired Alice.

“No legs.”

The telephone coughed, arranged its digits to look serious and spoke in a very formal manner. “Listen carefully, Alice, for I cannot repeat the Cheshire Cat’s message to you again:

Take your time and when you rhyme, pay heed the weir-wolf’s measure,

For then a leap comes next.

Follow true advice to you, all the best, from Cheshire

Dial 4 to get this as text.”

With that the telephone took the receiver from Alice, folded its legs up underneath itself and to all intents and purposes, went dead.

"How peculiar," exclaimed Alice.

"Very strange," agreed Marjory, the giraffe, who struggled to hold her head upright. "It didn't say goodbye."

"I meant the message. Very peculiar message."

"What does it all mean?" squeaked Kevin the bat and drew his coat tighter round his body in fear.

"The first part was quite clear to me," said Pavlov, the dog. "No rushing. Look before you leap. Think first, then action. Sound advice to me."

"But what's that got to do ... with rhyming?" drawled Jeremiah, the tortoise, sticking his neck out for once and looking more confused than ever.

"I don't like the sound of a werewolf," said the sheep shakily. "Any kind of wolf is too much for me. They sometimes come at you in disguise, you know."

"And a leap?" gulped the toad. "What's all that about? If anyone knows about leaping around here it's me."

"Here are my two cents, for what they are worth," grunted Chester, the warthog. Alice was about to say that two cents would be worth exactly that but after a cold stare from him she thought better of it and closed her mouth. "The word 'measure' and 'Cheshire' rhyme badly. That could be an important clue to understanding the whole message."

I very much doubt it, thought Alice, but held her tongue. She heard the train's whistle, which meant people in the other carriages had begun screaming again. She looked out of the carriage window and saw that they were sailing at quite a speed past a cliff face the size of a castle. She realised there was something else than dirty window panes clouding their view. It was clouds of spray from the river. Not for the first time that day, Alice's tummy took a tumble. Increasing speed, water spray, louder noises and rocks. She put two and two together and came to just one conclusion.

"Listen up everybody. We're heading towards the weir!"