



PROLOGUE

4 JULY 1862

FOLLY BRIDGE,
OXFORD, ENGLAND

*She felt a little nervous about this;
'for it might end, you know,' said Alice,
'in my going out altogether, like a candle.
I wonder what I should be like then?'*

Thunder rolled in the distance, a summer storm brewing off to the west. They would have to finish the picnic and leave, but Alice wasn't ready. This would be their last outing together and she had to make them understand. Everything depended on it.

'Sit down, Alice. It was a wonderful tale, but you've not had a single bite since you began.' Emily pushed a plate of sandwiches towards her. Alice looked at her friend and their chaperones, the Reverend Thomas and Mr Dodgson.

‘Sorry,’ she said, and sat down on the blanket. Alice had been pacing as she’d read the story to her small audience. They all seemed engaged, yet none grasped the purpose of the story, how it was more than a tall tale constructed for their amusement. How could they?

‘I liked the tea party best,’ said Emily, ‘though all that business about time getting stuck at teatime was a bit odd, don’t you think?’

‘It might appear so on first reading,’ said Alice. She looked across the river to the meadow beyond. The simplicity of the setting, the normality of it, tore at her heart. Could she really keep all this safe? Was she prepared for the price it would exact? Summer light was casting dappled gold on the world around her, on the towpath, the arched bridge and the distant church. She scanned it all, her back straight, her neck stretched, like a creature of prey on high alert. Nothing caught her eye. Yet she knew they’d be coming for her. The Men of the Rose.

‘I will eat if you make me a promise,’ she said, taking a cheese sandwich.

‘Name it,’ said Emily.

Alice fixed her attention on the bespectacled writer, Mr Dodgson. ‘I want you to arrange for the book’s publication.’

‘Publication?’

‘Yes, and exactly as I have written it here, Mr Dodgson. Not one word can be changed. Not for any reason. Can I rely on you? Please?’

The group seemed a little stunned by the request.

‘Alice,’ said Mr Dodgson, ‘the tale is engaging, certainly. Imaginative, quite definitely. But no publisher would commit to such a flight of fancy, not one penned by a young and unproven writer, no matter how talented.’

‘I quite agree,’ replied Alice, ‘which is why you shall publish it under your own name.’

‘Me?’ Dodgson appeared flattered and confused in equal measure. ‘If it is to be published, it must be in your name. You must take full credit.’

‘Then use a nom-de-plume, some blend of us both. My middle name would do – you could write as Mr Carol.’

Alice had been reading her story from four thick school-books, every page covered in her own meticulous writing. She stood and placed the volumes into Mr Dodgson’s hands.

‘Mr Dodgson. As you rightfully point out, my age would be a barrier. So, I entrust this to your care. There are a few pages of instruction at the back. But please, not one single word of change. The text has been constructed to both mask and to reveal. There are keys buried within anagrams. There are riddles designed to obfuscate and there are entire phrases where the number of letters themselves will guide the reader on how to step through these puzzles. So not one word of change, Mister Dodgson. May I rely on you?’

‘I will do my best, young lady. That, at least, I can promise.’ Alice knew this would have to do. For safety, she had made three handwritten copies, but having it published was far safer; there would be multiple copies, hiding the secrets in plain sight. Others would need it one day if she was ever to be rescued.

It began to rain, and they scrambled for cover.

The downpour obscured everything as the carriage pulled up. A bolt of lightning cracked and lit the face of the manor house as Alice stepped down and raced for the front door. She glanced back up the driveway and saw no sign of pursuit.

For three weeks, she had sensed the Men of the Rose

closing in, and last weekend her encounter in a small Charing Cross Road bookshop allowed for only one explanation – they knew her identity. She had turned over too many stones in her search for the true history of the young boys. How cruel that an act of charity might lead to their deaths. Yet she might still save them, even at this late hour – two innocent boys and all the melancholy folk she had come to love.

Stepping into the hall, Alice shook the rain from her cloak. She must go tonight, without any farewells. It would be unforgivably cruel on her parents, but if she looked at their loving faces, her resolve might crumble.

‘Alice?’ Her mother had been waiting. Of course she had. There would be supper laid out. They would want to hear about her picnic, and there would be cards and laughter. The little things that made life so precious.

‘Hello, mother. What a storm!’

‘Straight from the Old Testament. The puppies have tunneled under the hearth rug.’ Light from the library spilled into the hallway behind her mother, a theatrical backlight that made her seem ethereal, almost translucent, as if Alice’s decision to leave was already draining her life.

‘We’re taking supper in the library. You’re soaked!’

‘A little. We were a band of pirates keeping ahead of a storm. Mr Dodgson was all but spent at the oars when we finally made it to the boathouse.’

‘Splendid!’ Her mother clapped her hands in delight. ‘Come and tell us all about it and with as much embellishment as possible. Your father had a testing day in the city and would welcome the distraction.’

It was too much. Alice ran forward and threw her arms around her mother.

‘Goodness, what’s this about?’ Her mother returned the

embrace, but her body had stiffened. Alice looked into her eyes; there was nothing but love there, loved wrapped in the steel of a woman ready to absorb whatever bad news her daughter might deliver.

‘You know I love you. And Father. You know that, don’t you?’

‘Well, of course. And we love you. Unconditionally. Do we need him here or is this a conversation best kept between women?’

‘What?’

‘If you’ve fallen for the ancient Mr Dodgson, no amount of brandy would brace your father for that news.’ Alice almost exploded with laughter.

‘Mother! That is beyond naughty – how dare you.’

‘Then what?’

‘I just wanted to tell you, that’s all. I love you both more than you will ever know. Whatever happens, you must remember that.’

‘Whatever happens? This is very theatrical, even for you.’

A violent crash of thunder shook the house, rattling the windows and toppling a vase from its stand near the front door. They turned to see it strike the tiled floor, but Alice hardly noticed – she’d seen movement through the glass panels, the distorted image of a black carriage pulling up outside.

She ran up the stairs without another word.

‘Alice!’ Her mother followed, alarmed now, as a bolt of lightning struck an ancient oak that towered three stories high in front of the house. The tree ignited like a torch, its light shivering on the faces of three men as they stepped from the carriage. They wore long black coats and sported white roses in their lapels. They had put the pieces together. They had come for her.

Alice took the stairs two at her time, cursing herself for

leaving it so late. She ran to her room and slammed the door behind her. Her mother reached the bedroom door a moment later and hesitated.

'My darling, what is it? Please tell me. Whatever it is, we'll face it together.' She opened the door and pushed inside, her heart beating in her throat.

The room was awash with light from the tree burning outside. There was no sign of her daughter. Then her eyes settled on the large antique dresser they had bought for Alice's tenth birthday.

There was Alice, in its mirror, waving goodbye; her face wet with tears, her image fading even as her mother reached out to it.

CHAPTER 1

DAY ONE

NEWTON UNBOUND

'Oh, you can't help that,' said the Cat, 'we're all mad here.'

'How do you know I'm mad?' said Alice.

'You must be,' said the Cat, 'or you wouldn't have come here.'

'Yes, but something must be outside the bubble. Got to be. If the universe is expanding like a bubble it must be expanding into somewhere.' The boy was sitting two rows across from Ali; he had a chin like pink nougat and was getting all worked up. He seemed genuinely interested in the debate. And stupid.

'Dickhead,' sighed Ali. It was painful listening to feeble-minded crap from the other students, all locked in their Newtonian straitjackets. She turned her attention back to her forearm where she was inking a fake tattoo with a blue pen. The face of a cat, grinning.

'There is no "somewhere" for the universe to expand into.' The teacher had started to pace in front of his desk. 'I know

this is hard to picture, that's why we need maths to describe it. The universe isn't expanding into anything because the universe *is* everything. There's nothing outside of it, so there's nothing for it to expand into.'

'So, it's just making it up as it goes along?' Nougat Chin again.

'Not really.' The teacher smiled as he tried to find the right words. Ali liked him, Mr Kepler. The poor fart meant well, and he was still enthusiastic; he still liked to teach. Not like the rest of the staff, sleepwalking to their retirement.

'But if it's an expanding bubble, sir, then it must have an edge, must have a border,' said a second boy, no smarter than Nougat Chin. 'And if there's a border, there must be something outside that border.'

Ali shook her pen – almost empty. Her cat needed one last eyebrow. She would draw it arched. Amused disbelief.

'How about your border, newbie?' A whispered challenge came from behind her. Ali didn't turn. She knew it was the flathead with biceps for brains, the one who called himself 'Beef.' He'd been poking her in the back for a few minutes now, the courtship of a pre-schooler in a sandpit. 'Cross your border anytime, just text me.'

Ali disengaged, letting the voices fade to a background buzz, like summer insects. A teacher at her last school had shown her how to do it – a way to keep calm and stop the anger from grabbing hold. She could focus on her breathing and withdraw into silence, letting the world drift along without her. Mostly.

Through the window she watched a rabbit nibbling a fringe of lawn by the tennis courts. It was a good school, so she would try to make it work, try to keep her anger at bay and give her dad a break. He deserved it.

'Alice,' Mr Kepler's voice pulled her back.

'Sir?'

'Help me out here, any suggestions?' Ali looked down at her tattoo. Why had she doodled a cat? She didn't even like cats! Schrödinger's Cat, maybe? Her subconscious having an emergent moment.

'Like you said, Mr Kepler, you can't explain it with words. Just with maths.'

'Try.'

'Okay. The big mistake is to picture space without thinking about time.'

'And?' Mr Kepler smiled encouragement.

'Well, no one has a problem picturing tomorrow as empty space, do they? That's because tomorrow hasn't happened, so there's nothing there. Right?'

'Right,' said Nougat Chin, nodding slowly as if pretending to understand.

'Go on, Alice.'

'Well, the universe isn't an expanding bubble of space; it's an expanding bubble of space AND time. So, there's nothing beyond the edge, there can't be, because it hasn't happened yet. Out beyond the expanding edge of the universe it's always tomorrow.'

'Excellent.' The teacher beamed at Ali. 'Thank you.' Faces turned to look at her, the new girl they'd been warned about, the one with the temper. Another jab in the back.

'I like brains,' Beef whispered behind her, 'legs and brains. Real turn-on.'

'Can I steal that explanation for future classes,' said Mr Kepler, 'use it and claim credit?'

'Knock yourself out,' said Ali, 'just don't ask me to explain String Theory anytime soon.' Beef grabbed the moment to make a play for centre stage.

‘Sir. I have a string theory. I think newbie girl here can tug my strings any time she likes.’ He got his applause and stood to take a bow.

Ali stood as well, heating like a kettle towards the tipping point of her anger. ‘Mr Kepler, sir?’

‘Yes, Alice?’

‘Permission to teach the dipshit behind me one of Newton’s Laws?’ She turned and explained to Beef how a moving object keeps moving until it meets an opposing force. It was more a demonstration really. One moving fist coming to a stop when it met the opposing force of one grinning face. The face stopped grinning and started to bleed. Excellent.

‘Did you understand that okay?’

Suspended. Again. Ali sat in the principal’s office cursing her temper, and life in general. Her last councillor had called it Life Rage, rage in search of a new target because the old one was out of reach. She could kick and scream all she liked – her mother’s ghost wouldn’t hear.

‘I have no choice,’ the principal was saying. ‘Your teacher’s explained the provocation,’ she glanced at Mr Kepler, who was sitting beside Ali, ‘however that young man’s behaviour does not excuse violence. I have no wriggle room here, you see, not for a charge of assault. Suspension is mandatory.’ The woman seemed genuinely sympathetic, she even smiled when the school’s nurse came and confirmed that the victim’s nose was broken.

‘We’ve sent your father countless phone and text messages asking him to join us here, but apparently ...’ She frowned at a scribbled note. ‘... he is working in a lead box some miles under Wales. Is that even possible?’

‘Sure,’ said Ali. ‘Always around when I need him.’

‘Ali’s father is on the UK HERT team,’ explained Mr Kepler, ‘a new facility at the bottom of a coal mine under Cardiff.’

‘In a lead box?’ The principal seemed to find this rather peculiar.

‘Don’t even go there,’ said Ali.

‘I’m sorry, go where?’

‘There’s nothing weird about Dad’s work.’

‘I never said there was, Alice.’

‘You were joining dots. Weird work and poor parenting. And it’s not a lead box, it’s a Faraday Cage. He’s measuring cosmic radiation. It’s weak, so you have to screen out everything else. The equipment has to be shielded inside a Faraday Cage, named after the bloke who first built one, way back.’

‘Good to know,’ the principal looked down at her notes, ‘and presumably that explains why your father isn’t getting our calls?’

‘Bingo.’ Ali sighed. Her dad was going to be pissed off. She’d promised she’d make it work this time. Three schools in four years. Letting him down was all the punishment she needed. Ali reached up to a silver pendant hanging round her neck, a nervous gesture she did in moments of stress. The pendant had belonged to her mother, a Saint Christopher inscribed with a boy’s name, Jack. Her Dad wouldn’t tell her who Jack was. Maybe he didn’t know. A boy from her childhood? An old flame?

‘I’m sorry, it won’t happen again. I’ll apologise to that dipshit.’

‘Good. But not today. Today you leave the college grounds.’

‘He was assaulting me!’

‘Verbally. You punched him.’

‘But before all this, he was stabbing his stupid finger in my back. And that’s not just assault, that’s inappropriate contact.’

Ali glowered at the woman. 'So, I stand up for myself and hit some bully because I won't let people shit on me, and you side with him! That's great girl power right there. Go figure!'

'You're not helping.'

'You want me to roll over? Not going to happen. I want to press charges. Assault. So call the police.'

'They were called, by his parents, he's the one doing all the bleeding.' The principal sat back in her chair. 'You will be given a complaints form, and I encourage you to make whatever complaints you see fit. The boy is a spoilt brat with spoilt parents to match. But in the meantime, you must leave the premises and undertake your suspension back with your family.'

'Bit tough, that. Right?' Ali stared at the thick file on the desk. It was all in there, the story of what happened to her mother. It had made headlines, how she had died on a UNESCO mission negotiating the release of child hostages. Thanks, Mum. What about *this* child?

Ali focused on her breathing. She retreated and let the world drift into fog. She could see Beef's grinning face, her fist connecting in slow-mo, she could feel the bruise on her knuckles – a good bruise, a bruise she could see and touch.

'And then, if that fails, the next step is expulsion.'

'Expulsion?!' That brought her back.

'Yes Alice, the two-week suspension is a chance for serious reflection, a family intervention where ...'

'I don't have family. Just my dad. That's it. Me and Dad against the world.' Ali almost laughed; did she really say that out loud? Embarrassing.

'Not according to your enrolment papers. After your father, your next of kin are an aunt and uncle on your mother's side.'

'Never met them.'

'Perhaps, but they are your sponsors, Alice – good people by all accounts, who've been funding your education. We couldn't reach your father so we called them. They've agreed to host you for the two weeks of the suspension.'

'I don't believe this shit!'

'That language isn't helping your cause, Alice. They will host you and they will monitor your attitude. Their view will go a long way to informing the board's final decision.'

'Serious? I go and stay for two weeks with some oldies I've never met, and they get to decide if I get expelled?'

'Good. You are listening. Any questions?'

'About a billion.'

'We'll keep calling your father.' The principal closed the thick folder of papers, 'Mr Kepler has kindly offered to drive you. He can fill you in on the details as you go.'

Ali followed her teacher from the office.

'This is bullshit!'

'Just grab your things, Alice, we'll meet in the carpark.'

Ali headed down the corridor. Her locker was in a different wing on the far side of a garden courtyard. She marched outside, still seething with indignation, and there was Beef, yelling at a man in a dark suit. The man spotted Ali and ushered Beef away, manhandling him across the yard. Beef's father?

'See you in court!' Beef turned and gave her the finger.

'Or hospital,' Ali yelled back as the man hustled the boy through a door and out of sight. Something fell from the lapel of the man's dark suit. Ali crossed and picked it up.

It was a flower. A white rose.