

THE HEART OF  
WONDERLAND



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THE HEART OF WONDERLAND

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# Chapter 1

“For the last time, Steven, would you please *slow down*?” Alison’s mother shook her head. “Honestly, you’d think we were being chased.”

Alison raised her head from the cold glass of the window where she had fallen asleep. Riding in the back seat with her father behind the wheel reminded her of family vacations they’d taken when she was younger. Before her father had become so stressed and erratic, and her mother had become so distant and worried. They claimed it was the result of her father’s fast-paced job as a talent agent and manager of some of New York’s hottest stars, but Alison knew better. Something had changed—her father had changed.

“Where are we?” Alison asked, still groggy. She had been looking forward to this trip for weeks. She had been dreaming of going to Italy since she’d begun taking art lessons several years ago.

“Nearly at the airport, sweetheart,” Alison’s father said from the driver’s seat.

“Sooner rather than later,” her mother added, “with the way your father is driving.”

Alison let her head flop back against her seat. She could

hardly believe they were finally on their way, especially after the sleepwalking incident. When her father had found her standing in front of the full-length mirror in his study in the middle of the night, she'd had a hard time convincing him to let her go to school after Christmas break, much less travel to another continent.

Luckily, Alison's mother had known how much this trip meant to her. She had convinced Alison's father that the incident was just related to excitement, rather than the return of the night terrors that had plagued her as a younger child.

Alison looked out the window to watch the crowds on the icy sidewalks hustle by. Though she had lived in New York City her entire life, she was still amazed each winter at the sure-footedness of the bustling hordes of people who gave New York its reputation as "the city that never sleeps."

She lifted her head suddenly at a flicker of movement in the window of a passing cab. For just a second, she'd thought she'd seen an impossibly wide, toothy grin hovering beneath a pair of eerie green cat eyes. But when she looked again, it was just a small boy with his face pressed against the glass.

"Did you see—" she started to ask, but her mother interrupted her.

"Look at that." Alison's mother laughed as she pointed out the window. "You never know what you'll see in this city."

Alison followed her mother's gesture to a knight in shining black armor who strode down the sidewalk toward them as they idled in traffic. A long red plume flowed from the top of his helmet and the crowd cut a wide berth around him as he stomped through the snow.

"It looks like he's coming right for us," Alison said.

Then the light changed, and Alison's father stepped hard on the gas. The car leaped forward. "Like hell he is," her father muttered.

“Steven, *what* has gotten into you?” her mother shouted as he swerved to avoid a gaggle of pedestrians.

He didn’t answer, just tightened his grip on the wheel. Alison clutched her seatbelt nervously as the car skidded on a patch of slush.

“Slow down!” her mother yelled.

Car horns honked at them as her father sped up instead. Alison watched him in the rear view mirror with a growing sense of terror. Who was this man behind the wheel? The father she knew would never drive recklessly on crowded downtown streets, especially not with her and her mother in the car.

“Have to get away from him,” her father muttered again. Who was he talking to?

“Dad, maybe you should pull over,” Alison suggested. “You don’t look so good.”

He looked over his shoulder at her. “I have to keep you safe, Ali. Can’t let them catch you.”

“What are you talking about?” She was really scared now. He wasn’t making any sense. “No one’s after us, Dad.”

“I have to keep you safe,” he repeated. “Can’t let them find you.”

The car went even faster, horns blaring around them. Alison’s father swerved in and out of traffic, and pedestrians and buildings flew past as though she was on a runaway train. A police siren *bloop*-ed into life behind them and became a steady wail as it chased them down.

“Steven, *stop!*” Alison’s mother cried. “We’re going to—”

But she didn’t have time to finish her warning before the car hit a patch of ice and skidded into a turn, tires squealing. Alison caught a glimpse of oncoming traffic and realized that it wasn’t the other drivers who were going the wrong way, but her father. The car’s front tires jumped the curb and then they were on the sidewalk, going too fast to stop.

She couldn't do anything but scream as the car slid toward the huge glass display window of FAO Schwarz. Glass and metal screamed as they crashed through the plate glass window of the legendary toy store and the front end of the car crumpled in toward them. Alison was jerked forward in her seat, and then her seatbelt pulled her hard in the other direction. Broken glass sprayed inward, coating her hair and clothing, stinging her face with what felt like a million tiny cuts. As the car continued its dizzying spiral, Alison was whipped to the side as if on a roller coaster ride. Her neck snapped sideways and her head slammed into the window next to her. She heard a loud, sickening *crack* as her head rebounded off the glass. Pinpoints of light burst into her field of vision, strobing before her eyes in time to the stabbing pain in her head.

Alison tried to raise her head, but the pain was too intense. She fumbled feebly for her seatbelt release, but couldn't make her hands obey her. "Mom?" she tried to say, but nothing came out.

Then the world went dark.

# Chapter 2

Alison's eyelids fluttered as she slowly made her way back to consciousness. She took a deep, cautious breath, anticipating a wave of pain, and was pleasantly surprised when none came. She opened her eyes wider and stared at the ceiling above her, then wrinkled her nose in confusion. Where sky or ceiling should have been, there was a smooth expanse of mirror, reflecting her own image back at her.

She rolled her head to the side, trying to figure out where she was. The last thing she could remember was driving in the car with her mother and father, and then...something had gone wrong. She frowned. Had her parents had an argument? She couldn't quite remember.

Then it came back to her. Her father's speed, her mother's cries to slow down. And then the terrifying drop in her stomach when the car had left the ground and gone crashing into the side of a building.

Alison rose shakily to her feet and looked around, trying to understand what was happening. Instead of finding herself on a downtown New York sidewalk or inside a hospital room, she was confronted on all sides by more mirror images of herself.

“Mom?” Her voice wavered. “Dad?”

She whirled around looking for a door, another person, anything that would explain what she was doing in this place.

*Am I dead?* She wondered suddenly. Is this what happened when you died? Maybe she was in hell or purgatory, or something.

It definitely didn't look like heaven.

Alison took a few tentative steps forward. Maybe if she reached one of the walls—mirrors—whatever—she could find a door. But the reflections made it impossible to determine how big the space was or how close she was to the edge.

“Please don't let me be dead,” Alison whispered. Not now, when her life was just starting. She had recently turned fourteen and was going to be attending her dream school in the fall, the LaGuardia School of Music & Art. The audition process had been intense and she'd hardly been able to believe it when the letter came saying she was in.

Out of the corner of her eye, Alison saw a flash of white and turned toward it.

“Hello? Is someone there?” Her voice sounded small and unsure.

There was no answer, but again she saw a flash of white in her peripheral vision. Desperate not to be alone in this strange place, Alison ran after it. As she got closer, she saw that she chased a small white rabbit. It stopped and looked back at her, twitching its nose, as if to say “follow me.”

Alison slowed her steps, trying not to scare it away. Although she'd been hoping to find an exit, or at least another human being, the rabbit's presence was heartening. Surely there wouldn't be a single white rabbit in the afterlife, would there? She had to be dreaming, she reassured herself.

As she inched closer, the rabbit hopped away. She tried again, and again the bunny evaded her.

“It's OK, little guy,” Alison whispered. “I won't hurt you.”

She reached out a hand to the fluffy creature in what she hoped was a non-threatening gesture. This time it allowed her to approach. She bent down slowly and the scent of jasmine filled the air as she drew closer. But just before her hand touched its quivering ear, it took off again.

“Darn it, hold still!” she muttered at the rabbit.

As if in defiant response to her order, the animal took off at a run.

“Get back here,” Alison gasped as she ran after it. This time, the rabbit didn’t slow its pace. In fact, it seemed to pick up speed as it went. Keeping her eyes trained on it, Alison didn’t realize they’d reached the edge of one mirrored wall until the rabbit stopped in mid-hop a few steps ahead of her.

Feet sliding against the slick surface of the mirrored floor, Alison didn’t have time to stop before the glass came rushing to meet her. *This is going to hurt*, she thought as she cringed and closed her eyes.

But after a few seconds she realized that she hadn’t been stopped short by the smack of her body against the wall. Instead, her momentum had continued to carry her forward and now she felt the strange sensation of air rushing past her.

“Oh no, what now?” Alison opened her eyes to find that she was floating in a dark, empty void. No—make that falling. And if the sudden, sick drop in her stomach was any indication, she was gaining speed.

She opened her eyes wider in the darkness, hoping to see further than her own hand in front of her face, but it was no use. Looking down, she saw a faint glow below her feet and hoped whatever was down there wouldn’t kill her when she landed on it.

As she spiralled further downward, buffeted by strange winds, she saw that the glow was light spilling from the keyhole of a door set into the darkness. Further down, there was another door, and then another.

The doors began to appear with greater frequency and Alison could hardly keep track of them all. Big doors, small doors, doors of every different shape and color. She wondered what was behind each of them, and what would happen if she never stopped falling.

Trying to stop her descent, she reached out desperately for a passing doorknob, but just as her hand closed around it, it melted away. She tried again, over and over, flailing and tumbling, but each door she touched evaded her, dissolving under her hand.

“Stop!” Alison screamed. “I want to wake up!” Wind howled in her ears and whipped away her frustrated tears as quickly as they fell. “This is only a dream,” she yelled, closing her eyes as she tried to convince herself. “Only a dream!”

With those words, her hand suddenly—finally—made contact and the howling stopped abruptly. She looked down and saw that she grasped a tarnished bronze doorknob and her feet rested on a worn welcome mat. A key rested in the door’s ancient lock. Alison wiped her palm nervously against the leg of her jeans, then reached out with a shaking hand to turn the key. When she did, the doorknob twisted and the door opened, pulling her with it. She stumbled forward a few steps, registering hard ground under her feet with relief.

Alison looked around, taking in her new surroundings. She stood in a small, circular room with a checkerboard pattern on the floor. The only furniture in the room was a small, wooden table that stood on claw feet. On top of the table rested a delicate, blown-glass bottle. It’s bright, sapphire blue color drew Alison’s eyes toward it and she moved closer to get a better look. Attached to the neck of the bottle with ribbon was a tiny, rolled scroll. Alison detached the paper and unfurled it to read the message scrawled inside.

DRINK ME, it invited her.

“Yeah, sure,” she said aloud, “that sounds like a great idea.” She looked around the room again. No doors, no windows. “Doesn’t look like I have much choice, though, does it?” she asked herself.

She picked up the bottle, weighing it in her palm, and almost dropped it. The glass was icy cold and much heavier than it looked. She raised it to eye level to inspect the liquid inside. She shook the bottle from side to side and watched it slosh back and forth.

Alison pulled out the glass stopper and the air was filled with the scent of jasmine again. “Well, at least it’s not swamp water.”

She raised the bottle to her lips and was about to tilt it back when she changed her mind and lowered it again. This had to be a dream, but...what if it wasn’t? What would happen to her when she drank the strange liquid?

She searched her mind, trying to remember what had happened to the “real” Alice in Wonderland. Her father loved the story, even more than she had as a child, and he’d read it to her so many times she’d almost committed it to memory. It was obvious that the fairy tale was what her dream was based on.

Some things made Alice shrink, she remembered, while others made her grow. But which would the bottle of liquid do to her? Again, Alison eyed the bottle in her hand, and again realized she had no choice.

She put the bottle to her lips, tilted her head back, and swallowed. The liquid inside was so cold, it numbed her taste buds and burned as it made its way down her throat.

She coughed and sputtered as she lowered the bottle and waited nervously to see what would happen.



# Chapter 3

Alison's throat felt tight and she attributed it to the freezing temperature of the liquid she'd just swallowed, but the pressure didn't ease and after a moment she began to panic. She tried to swallow around the lump in her throat but couldn't. Her chest felt as though someone was standing on it, preventing her lungs from filling with air. She struggled to draw breath and managed a few gasps, but each one was more difficult than the last. She began to grow light-headed and the room dimmed around her. Black spots danced in front of her eyes.

"Poor kid," she heard a woman's voice say sadly.

"She's going to have a lot to deal with when she wakes up," agreed another.

Alison strained to call out to the voices. "I'm here," she tried to tell them, but nothing came out. She clawed at her throat, trying to force herself to breathe, to speak, but all that came out were strangled rasps. The room grew dimmer still and the voices seemed to recede, though now they were joined by the sound of a shrill, head-splitting alarm.

Alison's legs collapsed beneath her and she crumpled to the floor in a heap, hitting her head as she fell. She groaned at

the pain and when she managed to open her eyes again, she realized with a jolt that somehow the world had shifted once more.

A needle attached to a tube protruded from the back of her hand and there was something clipped to her index finger. She had a plastic cuff wrapped tightly around her arm, squeezing so hard her hand was numb. She lay in a narrow bed with machines beeping all around her. She tried to speak again and found that her throat was still constricted. Strong arms reached for her, holding her down when all she wanted was to get up and away from this place.

“Alison, can you hear me?” asked a woman dressed in scrubs. “You’re in a hospital. You’ve been hurt badly. Do you understand?”

A man with a stethoscope around his neck added, “There’s a tube in your throat helping you breathe. It’s important that you don’t pull it out. It’s ok, we’re going to take care of you.”

Alison struggled against the hands holding her and somehow managed to wrench one arm free. She reached up to her mouth to confirm the truth of the man’s words and was horrified to discover her face confined in a mask with a length of plastic tubing attached. She tried to scream, but nothing came out.

A nurse grabbed her arms again and held her still while a doctor loomed over her. Alison’s heart raced as he reached toward her. She understood that he was about to remove the tube, but she was almost as frightened of having it removed as she was of leaving it in. What if she couldn’t breathe without it? What if he made a mistake and hurt her even worse than she already was?

Then the doctor’s latex-gloved hand was steadying her jaw while the other gripped the tube and began to slide it steadily out of her throat. It scraped and burned her oesophagus, and she gagged and coughed.

“I know your throat hurts,” a nurse told her, brushing a strand of long platinum hair back from Alison’s damp forehead, “but it will be better soon. Don’t try to talk right away—give yourself a chance to catch your breath.”

Alison ignored the nurse’s order. “Where am I?” she rasped as soon as the doctor pulled away. The sight of the long, plastic coil in his hand made her stomach churn. She shuddered at the thought that it had been shoved down her throat, maybe all the way down to her lungs.

Alison’s aunt stepped forward from a corner where she had been watching Alison struggle to wake up and breathe on her own.

“You’re in the hospital, honey. There was an accident on the way to the airport. Your father...” She took a deep breath and wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. “Your father lost control of the car and you hit your head on a window. You have a bad concussion, but you’ll be ok now.”

“Aunt Caroline?” Alison could barely force the words out, but she had to know what had happened. “What are you doing here? Where are Mom and Dad?”

Caroline exchanged a significant look with the doctor.

“We’ll give you two a few minutes to catch up on things,” he said. He and the nurses filed out of the room.

The one who had held her hand glanced back at her sympathetically. “I’ll just be out at the desk,” she assured Alison, pausing at the door. “The call bell is attached to the bed rail on your right.” She gave Alison a small, sad smile and closed the door gently behind her.

Caroline sat gingerly on the edge of Alison’s bed and took a deep breath. “There’s no easy way to say this...” she started.

Alison’s breath caught in her damaged throat, anticipating what her aunt was about to say.

“No!” she interrupted. “You’re wrong—they have to be

fine. Where are they? Tell me!” She threw back the covers and swung her legs over the edge of the bed, but when she tried to stand, the room swam and she was forced to sink back against her pillows.

Alarms went off and bells clanged around her as her pulse skyrocketed from the exertion. The door flew open as two nurses rushed into the room. Their eyes scanned the room, looking for signs of danger or distress.

“It’s ok,” Caroline said, standing. “She’s just had some distressing news.”

The older of the two nurses glanced at Alison again to confirm that all was well—at least physically. “You’ve suffered a serious injury and it’s dangerous to overexert yourself,” she scolded mildly. “There’s been serious swelling and bruising of your brain. If your blood pressure becomes too high, there’s a risk of further injury.”

Caroline bit her lip and looked back at Alison. “I’ll try to see that she stays calm.”

“May I speak with you in the hallway, please?” the nurse asked quietly. Aunt Caroline nodded and followed, but left the door ajar. The younger nurse shifted uncomfortably.

“Very worried about her...” the other nurse’s voice wafted in from the hallway. “Needs to stay calm....may have to sedate her...”

Alison tried to raise herself up on her elbows, but a wave of exhaustion overwhelmed her. Her head throbbed as she tried to concentrate on the conversation happening outside her room.

Caroline returned to Alison’s bedside and stroked her face. “I know you’re hurt and confused, and I’m so sorry this is happening, but we have to keep you calm right now. Your parents didn’t survive the accident, but I know they would want you to do everything you can to get better.”

Alison shook her head weakly. There had been some

mistake, she knew it. She and her parents were going to Italy together, so they couldn't be dead.

"You're wrong," she whispered as a tear rolled down her cheek. "It's not true."

Caroline's eyes welled up with tears of her own. "I'm so sorry," she repeated. "But you're not alone. I'm here for you, no matter what. I promise."

Alison closed her eyes. She knew Aunt Caroline meant well, but nothing could take away the shock and disbelief. Behind her eyelids, colors danced in time to the throbbing in her head, and she thought of the strange dream she'd had before waking up. Frightening though it had been, she would give anything to go back there again.