

# UNBIRTHDAY

## A TWISTED TALE

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 · HYPERION  
Los Angeles • New York

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For information address Disney • Hyperion, 125 West End Avenue,  
New York, New York 10023.

Printed in the United States of America  
First Hardcover Edition, September 2020

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

FAC-021131-20199

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020002213

ISBN 978-1-4847-8131-9

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For my sister, Sabrina.

We are not Mathilda and Alice but have moments of each.

I forgive you for that time you tricked me into eating  
a fancy chocolate with a hairball inside.

Sort of.

*—L.B.*

# A gentle note, Dear Reader:

*As you are probably already aware, this book is a work of Nonsense.*

*That being said, it behooves us to remind you that the Mad Hatter is a fictional character and doesn't conform to the strict rules of our own world.*

*To wit: mercury is deadly poisonous.*

*Hatters really were said to have gone mad in the nineteenth century because of exposure to mercury in their hat-making processes: in effect, they suffered long-term mercury poisoning.*

*You cannot eat the fish from many rivers and lakes of America even today because of the deadly mercury that lies on their muddy bottoms eternally, the result of toxic industrial pollution.*

U N B I R T H D A Y

*In this book the Hatter drinks mercury.  
You, dear reader, cannot.  
It will kill you.*

*—L. Braswell*

# Alice as You Remember Her

# Chapter One

Morning sunlight waved a cheery hello on the papered walls of an equally cheery bedroom. It had rained overnight, a proper rain—hard with big droplets—and the day came fresh scrubbed and eager. The air that drifted through the open window was chill and sharp and had a bit of a kick to it. A flock of little sparrows who had been nest mates barely a week earlier chirruped excitedly back and forth in a way that would eventually result in either a sudden flight en masse, or feathery fisticuffs.

Even the hammer strikes of Mrs. Anderbee's solid heels against the floor downstairs sounded springier and more energetic than usual.

The girl lying so peacefully in her brass-frame bed,

thick golden hair spread around her head and neck like the resplendent halo of an angel, was coaxed from sleep to wake at once by the abundance of all these cheerful noises. Her eyes snapped open, the long lashes on her lids waving like wheat with the suddenness of the motion.

“Today,” Alice declared, “is a perfect day for adventure!”

She grinned and basked in the glory of her decision for a moment, then shot out of bed. Dinah, a cat both grumpy and unwilling to see the day for what it was, stretched once in place (where formerly her mistress’s warm feet had been), then closed one elderly eye to the day and was asleep again seconds later.

“Sorry, old girl!” Alice said, giving her a kiss. “But *tempus fugit*, you know; time waits for no one!”

Of course, this being the time and place that it was, adventurers couldn’t just run out the door in their chemises. It would be scandalous. And so Alice began the tedious process of donning all the layers necessary to going out into the world as a respectable young English lady. She had:

*Drawers* that went down to her knees.

A *crinoline* that looked like a cross between a bee skep and a cage. It was basically a series of steel hoops in diminishing circumference that circled her lower body from her calves to her waist. This held the skirts worn on top of it out from around her like a giant bell with her legs the clapper.

*Corset.*

She didn't tight-lace, despite the fashion and the pressure from friends. On this one thing Alice and her sister agreed: it was pure foolishness. Her waist was fine as it was, thank you very much, and she left the corset to its main job: keeping her back aligned and her womanly attributes smooth and in place.

*Petticoat.*

*Petticoat.*

*Actual dress.* A nice summer-weight gingham in blue and white.

*Jacket and hat.*

And finally, *camera bag*.

Alice hurried through all of this as fast as she could and then nearly skipped like a girl much younger than eighteen as she ran down the stairs . . . only remembering to try to keep her footsteps silent at the very last—and far too late—minute.

“*Alice!*” a strident female voice cried out. Mathilda, her sister. Of course.

Well, since she had been heard, she might as well have some breakfast.

“*Good morning, Mother, Father, Sister,*” she said grandly, sweeping into the dining room. Her family was gathered at one end of the long table like refined squirrels,

cracking soft-boiled eggs, spreading jam on toast, sipping tea and coffee, and generally looking completely at ease in the formal and bric-a-brac-filled room. Her mother turned a plump, still-pink cheek for a kiss and Alice obliged. Her father's face was mostly hidden behind the newspaper, but she managed to get in a quick peck, not quite on his muttonchop.

She patted her sister on the shoulder dismissively, as if brushing off some dandruff.

"Married yet?" her father asked from behind the paper.

"No, Papa."

"In the stocks yet?"

"No, Papa."

"Hmm. Good." He shook his paper to facilitate the turning and folding of a page and then continued reading about things happenings in foreign places, his favorite type of story.

"Are you *sure* it's good, Papa?" Mathilda asked. She was severe, beautiful in a slightly off-putting way, dark eyes and lashes and hair where her younger sister's were light. Her somber dress was as drab as Alice's blue-and-white one was gay and summery. But if they had ever really made an effort to go out together—and if Mathilda ever made an effort with her appearance beyond brushing her hair—they could have owned all of the town of Kexford.

Not that Alice wanted to own Kexford. But it would have been an absolute gas for one party at least.

“She’s eighteen, you know,” Mathilda prodded, spreading jam on her toast most seriously.

“And I believe you’re twenty-six,” her mother observed.

“I have prospects!”

“Yes, yes you do,” her mother said quickly and soothingly.

“I’ll keep my baby girl Alice for as long as I possibly can,” her father said from behind his paper. “Don’t go interfering with that.”

“My dear friend Mr. Headstrewth has a friend—Richard Coney,” Mathilda said, turning to Alice and ignoring her parents. “I believe I have told you about him a number of times. I think you may even have met him once? Very bright young man. Handsome. With a great future before him—he’s already working on Gilbert Ramsbottom’s election campaign. I have invited him—”

“Oh, he sounds *lovely*, yes, thoroughly interesting, fantastic, do keep me informed of his doings, absolutely! Good morning, and goodbye!”

Alice winked at her mother, who tried very hard not to smile.

Then she grinned and spun away, and it wasn’t until Mathilda turned back to her breakfast with a huff that

she noticed her carefully buttered and jammed toast was missing.

Walking down the sunny road, Alice thoroughly enjoyed her purloined breakfast, so expertly buttered and jammed. After wiping her lips and cheeks with the back of her hand like a cat she raised her face to the sun, enjoying its warmth as it hit her skin. For only a moment, of course, before it did any real damage. She adjusted her hat and—

“Oh dear.”

She had forgotten her gloves.

“Oh, my fur and whiskers,” she sighed. “Not respectable at *all* today.”

A momentary feeling overcame her. It wasn’t *sadness* exactly. But it wasn’t just nostalgia, either. There was a golden drop of happiness in the feeling, whatever it was, as warming and delightful as sunlight. A memory of old dreams that had worn thin like the comfiest pillowcase one couldn’t bear to throw out.

*Wonderland.*

The details had dimmed long ago but the feelings remained: adventure, magic, fascinating creatures. True, not all her imagined adventures in Wonderland had been fun or safe. And not all the people had been particularly nice or polite. Some of the flowers in Wonderland were downright violent.

And the Queen of Hearts! She had wanted Alice *dead!* “Off with her head!” The phrase still sent shivers down Alice’s spine.

But . . .

She hadn’t had another dream like that one since.

“Stuff and nonsense,” Alice declared, shaking her head. “It’s a gorgeous day! Let’s go find the magic right here!”

*Right here* was, of course, Kexford, a shining little town of university professors, ancient halls, glorious green parks, and glittering canals. There were gleaming white walkways, ancient stone buildings, and gardens so tiny and bright they practically sparkled like jewels. Everything was ordered and perfect and old in these hallowed grounds—even down to the properly wrecked, robed students hurrying to class after late-night partying or discussing Petrarch.

(Alice’s house was just north of the university area, a fine large place with gardens and a lawn; not too long a walk to where the action was downtown, but not close enough to hear “*Gaudemus Igitur*” being belted out at three o’clock in the morning.)

After waking from that magical dream ages ago, little Alice had devoted all her free time to searching the town for anything that reminded her of Wonderland. No place was safe from her explorations: every bell tower she could

sneak into, every alleyway she could slip down when her parents' backs were turned. Top to bottom, high and low, nary a stone unturned.

(Mostly low: rabbit holes and mushrooms, tiny caterpillars and large spiderwebs, dumbwaiters and surprisingly small doors in other people's houses she really ought not to have explored and opened.)

Her wooden treasure box had contained rather more than the usual number of strange trinkets children tend to collect: tiny brass keys, tiny glass bottles, leftover halves of unusual biscuits, a left white glove, a right off-white glove, scraps of paper with the words EAT ME and DRINK ME laboriously written over and over again as she tried to match her flourishes to memory.

Alice hadn't been a morose girl—far from it—but she wondered sometimes if the reasons she never again dreamed of Wonderland were just a little bit her fault.

*“Of all the silly nonsense—  
this is the stupidest tea party  
I’ve ever been to in all my life!”*

*“Well, I’ve had enough nonsense.  
I’m going home—straight home.”*

*“Oh no, please. No more nonsense.”*

*No more nonsense.* There, she had said it herself. And her subconscious had obliged and kept her nightly excursions to a world with little nonsense in it at all.

So Alice had tried her hand at drawing the few things she remembered clearly from her dream (the Cheshire Cat, the White Rabbit, a pretty little golden key) or the curious things she saw while she was out exploring (a student with surprisingly pointed ears, an interesting clump of moss, part of a stone wall with vines that looked like they could be pushed aside to reveal a hidden entrance to somewhere fantastic).

“Hmm,” her father had said, looking over her sketches.

“We don’t have much artistic ability in my side of the family, either,” her mother had commented.

“She *does* notice many . . . obscure things. Even if she can’t . . . reproduce them.”

“Yes, she spends quite a bit of her spare time *noticing* things. Perhaps she needs some sort of focus for that—er, besides drawing, I mean?”

And that was where Aunt Vivian had come in.

*She* couldn’t draw, either, but she could sculpt a fair piece, hosted literary salons, was occasionally involved in rather scandalous doings, and wore trousers like a coal-hauling pit lass. Her house was running over with fringed lamps, art made by her friends, incense burners, and velvet.

She was not married. In fact, she was just about everything a family could hope for in a black sheep.

And she helped her brother and his wife (and their daughter) by fulfilling that role perfectly: she bought her niece a camera.

One of the latest models, a Phoebus box camera. It was a beautiful little thing and extremely portable, requiring neither a tripod nor bellows. It fit very nicely into a medium-sized case and could be brought out to quickly capture whatever took Alice's fancy—provided the light was bright enough.

(Aunt Vivian already had a darkroom sufficient for developing its glass plates; she was famous for the costumed tableaus she took at her salons with a much more traditional and giant-sized portrait camera.)

Alice was delighted. There was something inherently Wonderlandy about the whole process: light and shadow and mirrors and glass and lenses and images appearing magically.

A side effect of the new hobby was spending a lot more time with her aunt, which relieved her parents (who were concerned about her wandering the streets of Kexford by herself) and worried her sister (who believed Aunt Vivian was a terrible influence; not so much *modern* as *profligate*). Mathilda need not have been overconcerned, however; Alice

loved her aunt, but she was now eighteen and had her own agenda—which had nothing to do with artists or vermouth or poppies or trousers.

Alice of course used the camera to document anything the remotest bit mysterious. She spent her days on what she called “photo walks”: looking for objects and people that hinted at a hidden, fey, or wild side, which she would try to coax out with her camera. Once she found a potential subject she worked long and hard composing the shot, sometimes with additional mirrors or a lantern if it was in a dimly lit alley. She developed these images in her aunt’s darkroom and then laid them out around her own room, studying them and trying to conjure a world out of what she saw there. Sparkling dew on spiderwebs, gloomy attics, a pile of bright refuse that might have hidden a monster or poem. The elfin qualities of a child, her eyes innocent and old at the same time.

She never told her parents (or her sister) about her visits to the less storybook parts of Kexford. But it was where things weren’t kept quite as neat or perfect or orderly that she felt magic and nonsense had a chance to bloom.

And that was where she was headed on this glorious day.

Down the road and south . . . and then east, away from the pretty campuses and annoying students. She chose her route to pass Mrs. Yao’s tea shop. Really it was too beautiful

a day for a cup of oolong and gossip, and she was still full from her stolen bread and jam for a sweet bun. But she turned down the tiny twisty street anyway and contented herself with a smile and wave to the woman behind the window. Mrs. Yao smiled and waved back. She served her customers out of brightly mismatched cups and plates from England, China, and even Russia—which was magical, and felt a bit like Wonderland.

Just past the tea shop, under a rainspout, was a tiny, delicate fern that had not been there the week before. Alice's questing eyes immediately spotted its out-of-place bright greenness, its patterned and gracefully uncurling frond. *Definitely* magical. She gauged the light then pursed her lips sadly. The narrow street was dismally dark, she had no lantern or mirror, and only a few more film plates left. None to waste on potentially terrible shots.

"Apologies, young master fern," she said, giving it a little curtsy. "Maybe next time, when you've grown a bit."

*Or opened up like a telescope*, really.

Following the twisty street around, farther into a tangle of old buildings, she stooped through a low archway and finally emerged at her real destination. At one time the little open area had been officially called Wellington Square but was now known as simply *the Square*. As in *the Square*

where many of the local children met up and played, often the sons and daughters (or orphans) of immigrants who weren't necessarily welcome in the nicer parks. Alice took their portraits and listened to stories of their homelands and travels to England—some of which, especially with the younger sitters, were mixed up with fairy tales from their mother countries.

Today several of the children had a ball and were playing with it in a corner, scuffing up the dirt. In another corner three girls were playing a counting game, effortlessly switching back and forth between English and Russian and Yiddish. Alice took out her camera and began composing possible images in her head.

"Oh, look, it's the famous English girl come to take photographs of the poor but pretty foreign children."

Alice spun around, affronted by both the words and tone. A young man not much older than herself leaned lazily on a worn statue of a cannon and gave her an indecipherable smile. His clothes were very different from the rest of the crowd here: they were adult, for one thing, pressed and clean and grey and professional. His jacket was spotless, his waistcoat well fitting. He didn't have a watch, but his purple cravat looked expensive and silken. His hat was carefully brushed. Under it was red hair so dark it was nearly black,

trimmed very neatly around his ears and neck. His eyes were a light hazel that was nearly orange. His cheeks glowed a healthy shade of rose.

“Tell me,” he continued, reaching down to pet a stray cat that quickly disappeared around the corner, “do your patrons enjoy weeping crocodile tears over portraits of the other half, and how they live?”

“I beg your pardon,” Alice replied coldly, straightening her spine—until it cracked. “These photographs are for my personal use, and the occasional private viewing with my aunt to a select and discreet crowd. I am not some sort of terrible charity vampire preying on the sorrowful state of others.”

“Oh? And how much do you know about their *sorrowful state*? How much do you know about them at all?” he pressed.

Alice regarded him coolly for a moment.

“That girl over there, in the jacket with the large bone button. Her name is Adina. She is from a shtetl too far from St. Petersburg to be safe from the pogroms. Her mother is dead; her father and her aunt Silvy are her only family in the world.” She gestured at another child. “That’s Sasha. He is probably five years old and prefers cheese to sweets. His mother sews piecework and his father collects rags for the paper companies and his sister is dying of tuberculosis, although he doesn’t really understand that yet.

“I never speak to them patronizingly and I never bribe them to pose with coins or candy. If I bring anything it is enough for all of them and it is just because it pleases me to give. I treat even the littlest one with the same kindness and respect I expect out of *everyone*.” She said the last bit pointedly, glaring at the stranger.

“All right, all right.” The young man laughed easily. “I apologize. I accused you without knowing whereof I spoke. I was a cad and a scoundrel.”

He gave a bow, and it wasn’t ironic at all.

“You are forgiven,” Alice said, polite but still distant. “May I know whom I have the—*pleasure*—of addressing?”

“Katz,” he said, taking his hat off. “Abraham Joseph Katz, Esquire. Barrister at Alexandros and Ivy. But you can call me Katz. At your service.”

“I’m—” she began to introduce herself.

“Oh, everyone knows Alice and her camera around here,” the man said, waving his hand. “The one and only Alice. But seriously, you have to understand, these children—even those of us who have grown up here—have not had the greatest experience with your fellow countrymen. Either it’s spit and sneers, or cold charity and exploitation. There’s rarely a middle ground.”

“Us? You sound—you look—” Alice faltered, wondering if she was being rude. “British.”

“I was born here. My parents were not,” he said with a shrug. “They worked hard and I studied hard. Now I help out when I can with a little pro bono work. Sometimes someone with legal power needs to step in and save a child from the poorhouse or a parent from jail. Or worse. Sometimes a *patron*—say, with a camera—takes a child they fancy away entirely. For display, or ostensibly for charity, or for . . . things best not spoken of.”

“That’s dreadful,” Alice said with feeling. “I am deeply, deeply sorry for all of it. All the same you can’t blame me for the actions of a few of my terrible countrymen. That would be just like me treating you all poorly because of one bad apple that came in from Russia.”

“A perfectly fair point,” he agreed immediately. “In that case, I offer my stunning visage in case you ever decide you want to come back and take a portrait of *me*. I am an adult and a child of immigrants—and can legally agree to fair usage of my likeness, should it come to that.”

There was nothing untoward in his tone. He did not wink at her or enunciate any word suggestively. He smiled and it was innocent; he did not even tilt his head dramatically as if posing. Alice felt neither flirted with nor threatened.

It was a little strange.

“Your English is better than that of many of my

‘country-men,’” she said slowly while she tried to work out what that meant. “My neighbors, at least.”

What on earth was she talking about? Was that rude? He had grown up here—he’d just said that! Of course he could speak English perfectly well!

“Ah, well: barrister, remember? I know Latin as well as Russian and English. *Quo usque tandem* and all that. I should probably learn French, however, so I can at least pronounce the wines.”

Alice felt the world spin a bit like she was tumbling down a rabbit hole. What a strange man to meet in such a strange way! Normally she either avoided the young men pushed on her by her sister, or quickly forgot the ones she somehow met herself. Most were dull and unlikely to be found in this forgotten square. They all made unamusing and lewd jokes and references to Roman scholars they thought she wouldn’t get.

She never had a desire to take a picture of any of them.

Unlike Mr. Katz.

“I didn’t bring enough film today,” she lied. But she *did* have lots of film already exposed at Aunt Vivian’s waiting to process. Really, that’s what she should have been doing instead of spending the day adventuring. “I was just realizing that when you approached me.”

“Oh, I was joking about the picture. It’s just that I have nothing besides my handsome good looks to offer you, to make up for my insults. I should keep a packet of sweets on me at all times. Remember that—always keep a candy around for emergencies. Someday it may save your life.

“Or, if you have any rats around your house, I could get them for you. I have a friend who is an expert at it.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Alice said quickly. “I’m fairly certain our gardens are rat-free.”

“I don’t know. Rats are pretty sneaky. Sometimes they even make it into elected positions. Sometimes if you let them get out of control they even become mayor.”

Alice couldn’t repress a smile at that, and it almost became a snicker. He was very obviously referring to Ramsbottom, the candidate her sister and the boring Mr. Headstrewth so fervently supported. There was only one other person running, and for the life of her Alice couldn’t remember his name (he was quite forgettable since he had no party affiliation and didn’t write letters to the *Kexford Weekly* about building workhouses for the poor, kicking out foreigners, and giving the police bigger clubs).

“Well, I should be off, then,” Alice said, putting her camera firmly back in her satchel and closing it up.

“Come back soon,” Katz pleaded. “You’re the most interesting person I’ve talked to in ages.”

Not *you're a bright light in a dark corner of the world*, not a *fair face in a gloomy neighborhood*, not a *muse* or a *nymph* or an *angel with a rosy smile to bestow on her willing supplicants*. None of that nonsense verbiage men usually offered her. He asked her to return, very simply, because he wanted to talk to her.

Alice curtsied, because it was always good to curtsey while you were thinking of a reply, then hurried off, unable to think of one.