



Chapter 1

TEN YEARS LATER

A horse-drawn carriage careened down the road at a full gallop. Outside the carriage windows, the outskirts of London flashed by. Inside the dark, cramped cab, Alice Kingsleigh fidgeted with her dress. She wished she could be out in the sunshine with a book and a kitten, instead of stuck here on her way to a dreary, boring party with a lot of dreary people.

The little girl haunted by her nightmares had grown into a beautiful woman. There was some-thing slightly unusual—and unearthly—about her beauty. Her large hazel eyes seemed to see things differently from other women her age.

Beside her on the carriage seat, Helen Kingsleigh fussed with Alice’s hair. Alice’s mother could never understand why Alice’s wild blond mane was so unmanageable. Long golden curls seemed to escape no matter what Helen did to pin them all back.

Alice twitched grumpily as her mother yanked on a particularly intractable lock of hair.

“Must we go?” Alice asked. “I doubt they’ll notice if we never arrive.” She yawned hugely. Her body ached with tiredness, and the last thing she wanted to do was make polite conversation for hours.

“They *will* notice,” her mother said firmly. She adjusted Alice’s

long blue skirt and reached to retie her waist sash. Her thin fingers poked probingly at Alice’s stomach. Her eyebrows arched in surprise. “Where’s your corset?” she asked, scandalized. What was the world coming to? Couldn’t the child even dress herself? Dreading the worst, she lifted Alice’s skirt above her ankles and gasped. “And no stockings!”

“I’m against them,” Alice said with another yawn.

“But you’re not properly dressed!” Helen pointed out. What would the Ascots think?

“Who’s to say what is proper?” Alice said, with that maddening streak of impossible logic she’d inherited from her father. “What if it was agreed that ‘proper’ was wearing a codfish on your head? Would you wear it?”

Helen closed her eyes. “Alice.”

“To me a corset is like a codfish,” Alice said.

“Please,” said her mother. “Not today.”

Alice sighed with frustration and turned to look out the window. “Father would have laughed,” she muttered. Instantly, she felt a pang of guilt and turned back to her mother’s hurt face. “I’m sorry. I’m tired. I didn’t sleep well last night.”

Her mother patted her hand forgivingly. “Did you have bad dreams again?”

“Only one,” Alice said. Caterpillars and March hares and smiling cats flitted through her mind. She shook her head. “It’s always the same, ever since I can remember. Do you think that’s normal? Don’t most people have different dreams?”





She gave her mother a searching look, but Helen was examining Alice's attire again with a thoughtful expression. She had never been as interested in Alice's dreams as Charles was.

"I don't know," Helen said vaguely. She removed a necklace from around her own neck and clasped it around Alice's with nimble fingers. "There! You're beautiful." She patted her daughter's pale cheek gently. "Now, can you manage a smile?"

The horses slowed to a trot as the carriage pulled up the long, sweeping drive in front of the Ascot mansion. Alice's head ached as she followed her mother out to the gardens, where the party was in full swing. Ladies in the newest style of summer dresses swooped about, twittering over the beautiful flowers like flocks of birds. In the near distance, small skiffs drifted lazily on a meandering river. A few guests were playing croquet on the wide great lawn, the colorful balls bright red, yellow, and blue against the neatly trimmed green of the grass.

Alice pressed her hands to her temples as a piece of her dream flashed before her eyes—equally silly-looking and stuffy guests, playing croquet with flamingos for mallets and hedgehogs for croquet balls. She would have laughed, but something about the scene in her mind filled her with dread. There was someone there . . . someone to fear.

She was distracted from the memory by her mother seizing her hand and hurrying her over to the Ascots. "Smile," Helen reminded her under her breath. Alice fixed an unnatural smile on her face as she curtsied to her elegant hosts.

Lord Ascot hadn't changed in ten years; he was still as ramrod stiff and unflappable as ever. His wife was not much better, although her composure seemed to be rattled today. Her face was red with annoyance as she looked Alice up and down. Alice was sure she noticed the missing corset and stockings. It made Alice want to poke out her tongue and then do a cartwheel, just to make sure Lady Ascot was as well and truly scandalized as she always looked.

"At last!" Lady Ascot burst out. "We thought you'd never arrive. Alice, Hamish is waiting to dance with you." She flapped her hands vigorously at Alice. "Go!"

Alice dutifully allowed herself to be shoved away and went looking for boring old Hamish, who also (very unfortunately) had changed very little in ten years.

Behind her, Lady Ascot lowered her voice as she turned to Helen. "You do realize it's well past four!" she scolded. "Now everything will have to be rushed through!"

"I am sorry," Helen said. She knew better than to explain the whole saga of trying to get Alice ready to go.

"Oh, never mind!" Lady Ascot said abruptly and bustled off, her sharp eyes fixed on a teetering tray of tea sandwiches.

Lord Ascot nodded down at Helen Kingsleigh. "Forgive my wife," he said in his stately baritone. "She's been planning this affair for the last twenty years."

Helen smiled back. She was used to Lady Ascot. "If only Charles were here," she said sadly.

Lord Ascot gave a little bow. "My condolences, madam. I think of





your husband often. He was truly a man of wisdom. I hope you don't think I have taken advantage of your misfortune," Lord Ascot went on, looking serious.

"Of course not," Helen said, shaking her head. "I'm pleased that you've purchased the company."

There was much more she could say—how much she missed Charles, how often she thought of him, all of the wonderful things he was in addition to wise—but to express oneself in such a manner was not proper, so she kept her answers short and civilized.

The tall aristocrat allowed himself a small smile. "I was a fool for not investing in his mad venture when I had the chance."

Now Helen's smile was quite real. "Charles thought so, too," she teased.

Elsewhere in the garden, Alice had been drawn into a line dance with the Ascots' son, Hamish. They bowed and stepped and crossed and bowed along with the other young people at the party until Alice felt quite ready to scream with boredom.

"Hamish," she said lightly, "do you ever tire of the quadrille?"

Hamish was refined and immaculately dressed, like his parents. He radiated aristocratic arrogance and a sense of entitlement. His hands felt flabby and damp against hers, and he looked down his long nose at her as if he did not understand the question.

"On the contrary," he replied. "I find it invigo-rating."

His strutting and preening made him look exactly like the peacocks in Holland Park in Kensington. Alice couldn't help laughing. Her golden hair flew out behind her as they spun around.

Hamish's eyebrows knitted together. "Do I amuse you?"

"No," Alice said, her eyes sparkling mischievously. "I had a sudden vision of all the ladies in top hats and the men wearing bonnets."

Hamish didn't even crack a smile. "It would be best to keep your visions to yourself. When in doubt, remain silent."

Alice had been hearing this advice her entire life, from everyone except her father. Now that he was gone, she felt as if there were no one else like her in the whole world. Her smile faded, and they kept dancing, although Alice had a hard time keeping her mind on the music. Her eyes drifted to the sky where a flock of geese sailed by overhead.

Distracted, she bumped into the dancers in front of them, who whirled around with outraged expressions.

"Pardon us!" Hamish jumped in officiously before Alice could apologize. "Miss Kingsleigh is distracted today." He ushered Alice away from the dancing green with a frown on his face. Alice glanced up at the sky again, but the geese were gone.

"Where is your head?" Hamish snapped at her.

"I was wondering what it would be like to fly,"

Alice said dreamily. Her father used to lift her over his head and whirl her, shrieking with delight, around the room. She imagined it would be something like that.

"Why would you waste your time thinking about such an impossible thing?" Hamish asked.

Alice laughed, a sound like silver bells in the sunlight. "Why





wouldn't I?" she answered him. "My father said he sometimes believed in six impossible things before breakfast." She smiled, remembering one morning when she was seven years old. She'd found her father buttering his toast and demanded to know what the six impossible things were that he'd believed in before breakfast that morning.

"Well," her father had said seriously, setting his toast down and folding his hands. "First I believed that there are three little girls living on the moon."

Alice giggled. "That's silly! How would they get there?"

"That was the second thing," her father said. "I believed they flew there on special flying penny-farthing bicycles. It makes sense, when you think about it."

"No!" Alice cried. "Bicycles can't fly!"

"I see you need more practice believing in impossible things," her father said, returning his attention to his morning cup of tea. "I can't possibly tell you the other four if you're going to disbelieve every one. It would undo all my good work this morning."

"Oh, no, please, please," Alice had begged, leaning against his knee and gazing up at him with wide eyes. "Please tell me the rest! I promise I'll believe in them!"

"All right," he'd said, lifting her onto his knee. "If you promise. The third impossible thing I believed is that the moon must be made of scones and clotted cream, or else what would the little girls eat for tea?"

Alice opened her mouth, saw the warning look on his face, and

closed it quickly with a snap.

"But then I had to believe that there must be long bridges on the moon, stretching over the seas of clotted cream, so that the girls would have somewhere to ride their bicycles. Otherwise they would sink into the cream and never be seen again!"

"Of course!" Alice said. She counted on her fingers. "That's four. What was the fifth thing?"

"Fifth," said Charles, "I believed that there was a white rabbit with a monocle who led the girls to the moon and back every night."

Alice gasped. "Just like in my dream! Is it the same rabbit?"

"Most likely," her father said gravely. "He's quite busy, this rabbit. He's got a lot to do, and I hear he's frequently late for his appointments."

"He is." Alice breathed, round-eyed with awe.

"And the last impossible thing I believed before breakfast," he said, "was that I have the smartest, prettiest, bravest, most well-behaved daughter in all of London."

"That's not impossible!" Alice protested, giggling again.

"Oh, it was by far the most difficult of the six," Charles assured her. "I had to try terribly hard to believe it. It took me ages and ages. My tea had gone quite cold."

"Father, you're teasing me!" Alice said. She poked the satiny waistcoat over his stomach.

"But the good news is that I believed it at last," her father said, hugging her close. "I believed it so well that it came true, and here you are!"





"Very well," seven-year-old Alice had said, snuggling into his chest. "You may eat your breakfast now."

Nearly twenty-year-old Alice laughed again, remembering her father's stories. She didn't notice the pained expression on Hamish's face. He wished she could be like other Victorian girls: quiet, restrained, predictable. None of this peculiar talk about impossible things and breakfast. He glanced around and saw his mother hovering at the nearby tea table. Lady Ascot waved impatiently, fixing him with a "hurry up" glare.

Ahem. Hamish cleared his throat and turned to look down his nose at Alice again. "Alice, meet me under the gazebo in precisely ten minutes," he said.

Alice gave his retreating back a curious look. She didn't much like being ordered around. Precisely ten minutes! And how was she supposed to achieve that precisely, without a pocket watch of any sort? A real gentleman would have given her his, but then he wouldn't have been able to glare at it impatiently when she was late.

Amused by her own wayward train of thought, Alice stepped toward the refreshments table, but found her way blocked by a pair of giggling girls in gaudy pink and green dresses. The Chattaway sisters were notorious gossips, and from the looks on their faces, they were simply bursting to reveal something they shouldn't.

"We have a secret to tell you," Faith said eagerly.

"If you're telling me, then it's not much of a secret," Alice pointed out. She was not particularly fond of gossip herself.

Fiona clutched Faith's arm. "Perhaps we shouldn't."

"We decided we should!" Faith cried, looking betrayed.

"If we tell her, she won't be surprised," Fiona observed. Alice's interest was piqued. The secret involved her? Perhaps she did want to know after all. She enjoyed surprises even less than gossip.

Faith turned to Alice.

"Will you be surprised?" she demanded, clearly wanting the answer to be "yes."

"Not if you tell me," Alice said. "But now you've brought it up; you have to."

"No, we don't," Faith said. She drew herself up huffily.

"In fact, we won't!" Fiona agreed, looking equally indignant.

Alice sighed. Why did the Chattaways have to be so maddening at all the wrong times? Luckily, she had a trick up her sleeve. She folded her arms. "I wonder if your mother knows that you two swim naked in the Havershims' pond."

The sisters gasped simultaneously.

"You wouldn't!" cried Faith.

"Oh, but I would," said Alice. "There's your mother right now." She took a step toward Lady Chattaway, one of the women cooing over the flowers, and Fiona seized her elbow in a panic.

"Hamish is going to ask for your hand!" she blurted out.

Alice stopped dead. She blinked at Fiona and Faith, too astonished to speak. The two girls beamed and giggled, but their smiles fell as a hand landed on each of their shoulders. Alice's older sister Margaret stood behind them, looking very displeased.

"You've ruined the surprise!" she scolded them. With a push,





she sent them off toward the river and pulled Alice aside. “I could strangle them!” she whispered, tucking her hand through Alice’s arm. “Everyone went to so much effort to keep the secret.”

In a daze, Alice glanced around at the other partygoers. Now she spotted how people kept looking at her, then away again quickly. Now she noticed how their whispers stopped suddenly as she passed. Now she saw the half-hidden smiles of glee on most of the women’s faces, the knowing looks on the men. She felt a flutter of panic in her chest.

“Does everyone know?” she asked.

“It’s why they’ve all come,” Margaret said brightly. “This is your engagement party! Hamish will ask you under the gazebo.” Margaret looked as if she couldn’t imagine anything more thrilling. “When you say yes—”

Alice interrupted her. “But I don’t know if I want to marry him.”

Margaret’s face was disbelieving. “Who then? You won’t do better than a lord.” They both looked over at Hamish, who was standing on the outskirts of the party muttering to himself, rehearsing his proposal, Alice realized. As they watched, he blew his nose vigorously, studied the contents of his handkerchief, then folded it and put it back in his pocket. Alice shuddered.

“You’ll soon be twenty, Alice,” Margaret said in a no-nonsense voice. She patted Alice’s pale cheek. “That pretty face won’t last forever. You don’t want to end up like Aunt Imogene.” She nodded at their middle-aged aunt, who was cramming small sweet cakes into her mouth. Imogene’s cheeks were covered in a thick layer of rouge and her yellowing white dress was in a style much too young for her.

Margaret turned Alice around to face her. “And you don’t want to be a burden on Mother, do you?”

Alice looked down. “No,” she said quietly.

“So you will marry Hamish,” Margaret said, satisfied. “You will be as happy as I am with Lowell, and your life will be perfect. It’s already decided.”

Alice felt as if she were suffocating. The weight of everyone watching her, knowing she had no choice, pressed down on her. Would this have happened if Father were still alive? Surely he would never have made her marry Hamish . . . but he was gone, and there was nothing Alice could do about that. She had to marry Hamish.

It’s already decided.

She was trapped.

