**March**

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**Summary**

What if Alice had stayed behind in Wonderland?
Chapter 1

"Good evening, March."

He suppressed the impulse to turn toward the sound of her voice, telling himself there was no point. Taking another sip from the large brandy in his hand, he pictured it in his head, remembering the countless times they had been in this exact situation. She would be there, almost silhouetted by the harsh hall lights behind her, the glow from his fireplace barely reaching her thin frame, refusing to illuminate her delicate features. Dirty hands would be pulling on the hem of that blue dress—the one she still insisted on wearing, despite the fact that she outgrew it years ago—or perhaps rubbing against the stained and graying apron in a futile attempt to appear clean. It would be a miracle if she had bothered to tame the blonde tangle she called hair.

A small whimper came from the doorway, and he no longer had any choice in the matter. His movements were mechanical, a force of habit: he swiveled around in his chair, sat down his glass, and pulled the chain on the table lamp next to him. The light reached her face; as she worried her bottom lip her sunken eyes surveyed him expectantly, hoping for a reaction.

And he would have reacted. Had he not already been used to similar stunts his eyes might have widened in shock, his voice coming in gasps and nonsensical half-words. As it was, however, he gave no sign that he even noticed her hair—which once fell to her breasts in silken, golden sheets—had been hacked mercilessly short, barely touching her neck, and was now dyed a hideous brown. Though the word 'dyed' was entirely too generous—chunks of faded yellow were still visible here and there.

One look at her sapped him of all his energy. He was tired of her; tired of those dull eyes that watched him ceaselessly, tired of her ever more desperate attempts to gain his attention… Most of all, he was tired of the games they played. With a sigh, he shook his head and turned back toward the fire.

Silence filled the air, but he could almost hear her disappointment, her anger, before the soft whisper of her stockinged feet sliding across the carpet met his ears. He had never rejected her before, and, as she stood quietly by his chair, he wondered mildly how she would take it. What was her next move?

He was answered by a deep thud and the strong smell of brandy—she had knocked over his glass and was now glaring at him. He looked up at her, waiting the space of a heartbeat to speak.

"I was drinking that," he stated. It was simple. It was calm. It was going to infuriate her. And it did, he could read that plain as day on her beautiful face, but she was insistent on trying to coax him out of this mood. She sat in his lap, throwing her legs long on either side of him, and ground her body against his as she tugged at the already dangerously low neckline of her dress.

"Stop this," he said firmly, turning his face away. She snorted lightly in disapproval, but did not heed his words; one hand worked the buttons of his shirt while the other traveled lower, below his beltline. "Liddell."

Her body froze at that. "You bastard," she spat. "How dare you call me that?"

"Have a little self-respect, peaches."

"Respect!" She gave a bark of joyless laughter. "I should respect myself, the way you 'respect'
me by putting me on my knees night after night?"

"Don't you _dare_ pretend you weren't the one who started all that." His voice was low, smooth, dangerous. She chose to ignore him, laughing again.

"'Respect'… That's a good one," she said as she removed herself from his lap. "And to think, _he_ says you have no sense of humour."

His nose twitched, a mixture of irritation and disgust. "You should know better than to believe anything that mad bastard says. And what were you doing there in the first place, anyway?"

"None of your business." She crossed her arms over her chest and turned her back on him, like a petulant child, but made no move to leave the room.

"He offered you something."

"Information."

"And what did you offer him in return?"

She wheeled back around, arms dropping to her sides, hands balling into fists. "You think you have any right to talk to me in that condescending tone? _You're_ the one that made me this way!"

Heaving another sigh, he stood and spoke softly. "No. This place made you this way. I wish like hell you had left when you still had the chance."

"You should have made me."

"And I regret my inaction every day!"

He was sorry he had spoken the words as soon as they left his mouth. They seemed to echo around the room, around his head, sounding crueler and crueler each time. His remorse didn't make them any less true, but as he watched her face fall into a heartbreaking mask of sorrow he wished he could take them back, snatch them right out of the air so they could pretend he hadn't said anything.

She pouted, and his brain went on autopilot. His hands were no longer his hands. Though he could see himself pulling her closer, kissing her, laying her down on the brandy-stained rug, he could do nothing to stop. This was wrong, he knew it now more than ever when he saw that shine in her eyes, that unspoken confession of a love he could not—would not—return. But he couldn't stop himself from peeling that damned dress off of her any more than he could stop her from undressing him in turn.

They moved together fervently, rabidly, filling the air with sighs and moans. He kept his mind carefully blank as he thrust into her, counting threads on the rug or strands of her hair to keep his thoughts from wandering. With a groan he peaked, and she joined him seconds later, pulling him down for another kiss.

She watched him as he stood and dressed—he could feel her eyes on him, but he didn't dare look at her until he was fully clothed and seated back in his chair. When his eyes did finally move to her face, she was smirking.

"You're sorry already," she said with a sigh. "I can tell. You're sorry for that, sorry for what you said, sorry that you meant it."

"Listen, peaches, I—"
"No, you listen," she said sharply, cutting him off. She took a moment to brush her hair out of her eyes before continuing, her voice softer now. "He's found me a way back. That's why I was there. He called with a time and a place and a promise of information."

"And you—"

"Fucked him, that's right," she replied, again not letting him finish. "Does that bother you?"

"I knew this little girl once," he began abruptly. "She fell into our lives right out of the sky. Beautiful, charming, funny… And dead smart. She had so much potential. She used spend all day dazzling us with her wit. Far too brilliant a mind lived in the body of that wide-eyed innocent who played in the roses. What ever happened to her? You look like her. You wear her clothes. But you're not her."

"You—"

"The first time you came to me here… Do you remember? You didn't say anything at first; you just kneeled down, staring up at me. And then you begged me. I could hardly believe the words coming out of your mouth. I should have realized then that girl I knew, the girl I would have given my life for, was dead, replaced by a maladjusted woman who thought she could get anything she wanted if she slid out of her dress. But I didn't. I bowed to your every whim, I gave you what you wanted."

"And you gave it to me good." She stood, still naked but unabashed. "You could have stopped me, you know. You could have said no, could have refused. But you just watched. I can understand a man being weak in such situations—you were taken by surprise, your guard was down. But the next time? Or the time after that?"

"What are you trying to do here?" he demanded. "Make me confess to something? Well here it is: I regret every moan, every sigh, every cry of ecstasy you voiced by my hand. I was stupid. I was weak. And I’d be a liar if I said I wasn't relieved that you're going."

Her face turned from anger to a carefully arranged façade of indifference. She silently pulled her dress back on, eyes focused on the carpet. "I loved you, March," she whispered, so quietly that at first he couldn't be sure she had spoken at all. But there was venom in those words, stinging him in a way he never thought possible. Moments later she was back in the hall, slamming the door behind her, leaving him in his solitude.

He wanted to go after her. He wanted to hold her close, stroke her hair. He wanted to admit that he loved her too, that he had been lying to her, to himself, the entire time; he wanted to convince her to stay. That's the way it's supposed to go, isn't it? he thought. The walls of his room were lined with books, and all of them had that same exact ending. But that wasn't life. At least, that wasn't his life. He had loved her, at one point. He knew he had, though he couldn't pin down in his memory the moment he fell in, or the moment he fell out. A feeling of emptiness welled inside him as he realized that his words would be the reason she left—she came to him looking for a reason to stay, and he all but spat in her face, kicking her out the door. That emptiness he felt, though, was not from the knowledge that he would never see her again—he never wanted to see that girl again. It was merely his heart longing for the person she once was, and knowing that even if, by some chance, she ever was that person again, she wouldn't be around for him to take notice. It was wishful thinking. She started on the road between who she was and who she became the
moment she decided not to return home. This place, he knew, was not fit for a growing child. It was more poisonous to her than anything, and he was the idiot who didn't see the signs: every crude, offhand remark; her reluctance to find clothing that fit properly; the jealousy she inspired that drove a wedge between him and his best friend.

He could have saved her…

And he could still save her.

A shred of the girl she was still lived somewhere inside that lustful creature. He had seen it, small flashes of it, in the way she moved, or the way she talked, or the way she fixed her hair. Mere seconds had passed since she stormed out—there was still time to go to her and apologize, wasn't there? He could explain himself fully, put her back on the right path. She could stay, she could be that girl again, and they could have a life together.

He allowed visions of this to dance in his mind, like a slide show of the happiness they could share, but he couldn't block out that one damning thought: even if he could fix her, even if they could have that simple, blissful life, she would still be there, in his world. He could convince himself that she was salvageable, but there was no changing the fact that she didn't belong.

It was too cruel to finally, after so many months, understand that she could be saved, she could be the girl he loved once again, but that it would never be him to show her all she was worth, all she deserved. He cursed his stupidity, angry and demoralized by having taken so long to come to such an obvious conclusion, and, with nothing else to do, he poured another brandy out of sheer need to keep himself busy.

Minutes passed and he heard her stomping down the hall; seconds later the front door crashed shut as she left. If he stepped to the window, he could have had one last glance at her as she tramped away. It might have been the final straw, the image that convinced him to throw away his previous decision and go after her…

He made no move. He stayed rooted to the spot next to his drink cart, but raised the brandy in his hand toward the closed blinds.

"I wish you nothing but the best," he said, hoping that, somehow, she would know he had said the words, that instinct would tell her he really did care.

There was that wishful thinking again. With a shake of his head, he banished the thought from his mind. He gave a small laugh at his own foolishness, said, "Cheers, Alice," and drained the glass.
Chapter 2

Hours later, once the sky had darkened and the few remnants of life outside had crawled into bed, March was still sitting, still drinking, still thinking. He couldn't help reminiscing about his Alice, though it was torturous to do so.

He remembered he and Hatter were having a small garden party, back when they could not only stand to be around each other, but enjoyed it. They were near inseparable. No one had responded to their invitation because there was no one to invite, but they paid no mind. They laughed, they talked about tea and the world and anything they could think to talk about, until a young and beautiful girl interrupted them. Sharp, questioning eyes took in the two men, and their tea cups, and the small cake that sat on the table next to them.

He remembered his friend's smile, leaning down to ask the girl if it was her birthday. When she said no, Hatter declared that it was then her unbirthday, and immediately offered her a slice of the cake.

"But what's an unbirthday?" she asked, eyebrows high in wonder and excitement.

"It's a thing you celebrate on any day that isn't your birthday," replied March. The girl introduced herself as Alice, crawled up onto Hatter's lap, and promptly began devouring the slice of cake she had been given.

The three of them talked for a while, getting to know this strange, bright, energetic girl who claimed to come from "a place far away from here." The two men exchanged a look at this, shrugging and assuming she simply meant a place far away from their home.

As the day began to fade, they realized that somewhere, someone was missing their daughter. Alice rebelled at the suggestion that she should leave them, but quickly agreed after they promised that she could visit whenever she wanted. She stood, took their hands in her own, and led them through the land. Over hills, through valleys, until finally stopping in a quiet meadow. This was a place neither of them even knew existed. As they took in their surroundings, they couldn't help but notice there was a severe lack of houses anywhere near them.

But Alice was staring hard at a vine-covered wall that seemed to give off a faint glow. Realization dawned on them—"far away from here" meant something neither of them had thought of. It meant another world entirely.

This realization filled March with an inexplicable nervousness. He had never heard of visitors from another world. He had never even heard of other worlds, or considered their existence a possibility.

"That's where I came in," said Alice, pointing at the wall, confirming their suspicions. "Right through there." There was a note of hesitance in her voice

He looked at Hatter, who was staring down at Alice. But her eyes never left the wall.

"I do rather like it here," she whispered.

"Yes," Hatter agreed, nodding slightly. "Here is a place I'm fond of, as well."

She turned suddenly, fixed them with wide, sky blue eyes, and asked the damned question.

"What if I didn't go back?"
March was unsure what to say. This was certainly no place for a child so young. Who would look after her? As he opened his mouth to protest—to suggest that she think about this at home, that she not make any rash decisions—Hatter was pulling her into his arms, praising the idea, telling her she would be their daughter now.

"Hatter, I don't like this," March said, but a second later he felt weight on his leg. Alice was holding the limb tightly, staring up at him with the beginnings of tears welling in her eyes.

"Don't make me go," she softly pleaded, and that was that. He put his hand on her head, smiled, and gave in entirely. The three of them walked home in a silence broken only by Hatter's occasional, hysterical laughter.

Hatter immediately clung to the idea of being a father figure, doting on the girl, giving her everything she wanted, while March couldn't see himself playing that role very well. He loved Alice dearly, but he preferred taking her on little adventures, showing her the world she had chosen—the good, and the bad. He showed her beautiful, sprawling landscapes—rich, green grass and singing waterfalls and snow-capped mountains—as often as he showed her the poor, broken and starving as the struggle to live out another day. But he never spoke to her of politics. He felt it wasn't his right to fill her head with his own opinions on the state of things, that she would decide for herself what she thought as she grew older.

Every year without fail, he would take her back to that little meadow, and they would sit for lunch in front of that wall; the one that glowed so brightly the day she led them there, but in recent years had begun to flicker, its light fading with age. Or, as was March's theory, with her absence from the world it led to.

Each year he would ask if she was still sure she wanted to stay. He wasn't entirely sure why he did so, just as he wasn't entirely sure which answer he would prefer, but her answer was always the same. A resounding yes.

"Yes, I want to stay. Why would I want to leave this place, March? Why would I want to leave you?"

As the years passed, Hatter discarded the role of father and neatly slipped into that of just 'friend,' and they continued spending their days as they always had, laughing and talking and enjoying each other's presence, or else quietly lost in their own thoughts. But always together.

The day of her eighteenth birthday, Alice announced that she preferred a small, private affair over a large party, and it was provided for her. She spent the day wandering the spacious house they inhabited, exploring empty rooms they'd never had a use for—rooms which were home only to old portraits of Hatter, of March, of Alice, and of the three of them—until she was called down for dinner and cake. She was quiet as they ate, speaking only when necessary, or when accepting her gifts. March and Hatter had lavished her with boxes containing new dresses, new shoes, new ribbons for her hair. She thanked them graciously after opening each, but when the last present was opened, she quickly excused herself to bed.

When March went to check on her an hour later, he found her wide awake, staring at the ceiling. She moved to the far side of the bed and gestured for him to sit down, taking his hand in hers.

"I saw portraits of you," she said. Her voice sounded hollow. "The date says they're from decades ago, but you haven't changed. How are you still the same, March? Why do I age, but no one else ever does?"

What followed was a long night of crying, of comforting, of explaining that people in this world
only aged so far. That, since Alice wasn't from here, she would never stop. Alice said nothing, only listened to March's efforts to console her before finally crying herself to sleep.

The next day, she appeared at breakfast wearing the same blue dress she wore as a seven-year-old child crashing their garden party. March didn't even know they still kept that thing around. He became worried about his dear Alice, worried about what this meant, but he held his tongue while Hatter 'ooh'ed and 'ahh'ed, surprised it could still fit her.

There was a moment of silence as Alice stood there, beaming happily in a dress that could barely be called such, before she turned and bounced out of the room. March looked over at Hatter, who returned the gaze with a dangerous look in his eye.

"Game on," he said, then turned his attention back to breakfast. March, feeling slightly ill, retired to the study…

He snapped back to reality long enough to pour himself another drink and survey the room around him. Nothing had changed since he sat down to think, but the room felt colder now. He didn't want to keep remembering, to dwell on what came next. But the memories were like a chill creeping up his spine before taking hold of his mind, and no amount of screaming could banish them.

There was no room for misinterpretation in Hatter's words, and March was forced to come to terms with reality. Much as he tried not to notice, to ignore it, to reason it away, Hatter had been rapidly deteriorating in recent years, and March could no longer pretend he didn't see the way his friend looked at Alice. Why hadn't March confronted him about it? The simple answer was that he hoped whatever thoughts were growing inside Hatter's mind would die out. But now he realized what a fool he had been for believing that to be possible.

All at once he became very afraid for Alice. There was no telling what Hatter, already unpredictable by nature, would do now. But as he turned to rush out of the study and find Alice, he saw her opening the door, stepping inside, and shutting it behind her. She crossed the floor to where March stood, pulled him into a tight embrace, and, never breaking eye contact, slowly slid down to her knees.

He allowed himself to remember the way his mind blanked at her words, but not the words themselves. Eyes screwed shut, he mentally fast forwarded the scene until he came to a point after the damage had been done. Alice lounged on the carpet, sighing with contention, but March was already on his feet, dressing himself and leaving the room.

As he searched the house for Hatter, he convinced himself that the incident at breakfast had been a fluke. Better yet, it was a joke, just one of Hatter's mad, unfunny jokes. And he had to confide in someone, beg someone for help, because what could he do now? He had failed her. Failed her in that room, failed her the day he let her stay, failed her every year he silently urged her to go instead of just pushing her through that damned wall back into her own world. So where the hell could either of them possibly go from here?

He found Hatter outside in the garden, staring off into the distance, admiring the evening sky. He started at March's appearance, but bid his friend to sit with him.

"You look so serious, Marchie. What's eating you, hmmm?"

March explained what had happened with as little detail as possible, and with every word he watched Hatter's face grow darker. When he finished, Hatter was scowling, something March had never seen him do before.
"So that's it then, I suppose." March waited for him to elaborate, to explain his sour mood or the look on his face, but Hatter just stood and walked away, disappearing into the house. Having had enough of today, March followed suit, locking himself up in his room until the morning, hoping it would all blow over by then.

But it didn't blow over. He awoke the next morning to find that Hatter had slipped away in the night, not leaving so much as the faintest trace that he had ever occupied the house at all. Alice, on the other hand, was happily eating a bowl of cereal at the table. She smiled when he entered, but said nothing about their encounter, or Hatter's absence, and March told himself that maybe this was all for the better.

The days carried on without Hatter much as they had before, but March soon began to understand that Hatter wasn't the only one deteriorating. In just the first week, he had lost count of the times Alice had forgotten what she was saying mid-sentence, or the times she completely forgot where she was. Many nights he could hear her lying in bed, babbling nonsense to herself. It was his guess that she and Hatter had managed to keep each other somewhat sane while sharing their insanity. Now that Hatter was gone, she had no one to relate with her broken mind.

March, at a loss for what to do, quietly took to locking himself in the study. Guilt racked his body whenever she would knock on his door, or beg him to come out, but he didn't know what to do. He didn't know how to help her. And eventually she stopped calling out for him.

When he thought it might be safe to show his face, he began spending a few minutes a day in the rest of the house. Alice would always find him, and she always had some plan to win his attention, be it a different hairstyle, or garish makeup applied haphazardly across her face. He stopped leaving the study unless he absolutely had to, but Alice soon learned to trick the door open. Night after night she would stand in the doorway, saying his name, waiting for him to finally look at her.

And when he did…

The house still seemed to be shaking in the aftermath of the slammed door. It was a long minute before March realized it wasn't the house that was shaking, but his hands. Silent tears streamed down his face; he pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes in an attempt to stop them.

He prayed that Alice would find the way home to be easy and without resistance. As he lowered his hands, finding his vision almost completely blurred, he silently begged whatever gods were listening to guide her back to where she belong, and find her the help she needed.

"Because she deserves to be saved," he mumbled to himself, then reached over and turned off the light.
Chapter 3

Alice closed her eyes, made a silent, secret wish, and blew out the candles.

Applause erupted around her, filling every inch of the spacious dining room. The air around her vibrated with it, and it filled her with unease. She never could get used to such loud, sudden noises, nor could she fathom why—year after year—a small puff of her breath would inspire such excitement in the people around her. There were many things Alice didn't understand that others seemed to accept without question.

No one in attendance could deny what a lovely party it was. The band was excellent, the food even better, and, of course, Alice herself was a joy. As always. Even after so many years, they all found her manner charming; they delighted in her intelligence, in the way someone with such old, wise eyes could still seem as if an innocent young girl. And if they were ever too simplistic in their conversation, even to the point of patronizing, Alice pretended not to notice. She knew how they saw her. She couldn't hold it against them.

The remainder of the night was spent dancing, and drinking, and playing strange little games that Alice didn't understand but enjoyed all the same. When the last guest had been sat in a taxi and sent home, she locked the front door and turned toward a beaming Victor.

"Why Mr. Lawrence," she said slyly, "what on earth has you in such a cheery mood?"

Victor chuckled. "If you looked in the mirror, Mrs. Lawrence, I'm sure you'll understand."

Automatically, mechanically, she turned to face herself in the hallway mirror. The same wide, searching, clear blue eyes. The same blonde hair, now extending past her shoulders for the first time in years. The same tired, confused girl she was forced to confront every morning.

Her husband appeared behind her, snaking his arms around her waist. "Thirty suits you, I think," he whispered. "Much better than twenty-nine did."

She allowed herself one more moment of contemplation before whirling around, kissing his cheek, and leading him into the kitchen. "I have a surprise for you," she told him, forcing a carefree smile. From the refrigerator she extracted a single piece of saran-wrapped cake and offered it to him.

"Happy unbirthday."

Victor shook his head, but accepted the cake. "Wherever did you pick up such a silly tradition?"

"From a couple of old friends," she said, shrugging, though for the life of her, she couldn't remember which old friends. This smile she didn't have to force, though it was bitter, for reasons even she didn't know. Thankfully, Victor didn't notice. As he sat and ate his slice of cake, forcing a few bites on Alice, they recalled the events of the night: who had worn what crime against fabric, which scandals had been discussed—or pointedly not discussed—and, ultimately, what a great success it all had been.

"But don't think I didn't see," Victor finished with.

Alice startled, then cursed herself for doing so. His tone was not critical—in reality, it was light, playful, kind—but her mind immediately inferred it as an accusation.

"See what, dear?" If her voice bore the slightest of trembles, Victor gave no sign that he heard it.
"You," he said, pointing the fork at her chest with a grin, "always trying to shift the attention to someone else. Our friends came to see you, to celebrate your birthday, and you act as if it's any old affair." His eyes rolled dramatically. "What ever will I do with you?"

Shifting uncomfortable, she said only, "I don't much enjoy being the center of attention."

Victor patted her arm. "Don't get that look, my love. I know you don't enjoy it. I was only poking fun."

Alice gave the smallest of smiles, and together they finished the cake in silence. Yawning, Victor announced that he was retiring to bed, kissed his wife on the cheek, and left her alone with her thoughts.

Her damned thoughts.

She counted back the years, as she often did on this night, every year. Twenty-nine: bought a new house. Twenty-eight: married Victor. Twenty-seven: vacationed in Paris. Twenty-six through twenty-four: travelled to Venice, Rome, Tokyo, New York City, and Morocco. Twenty-three: met Victor. Twenty-two through nineteen: learned to cope, to survive, to reintegrate in this strange and alien world.

And eighteen? Try though she might, the only thing she remembered from eighteen was a man’s face, anger, carpet burns, and a deep, biting sense of unhappiness that was somehow linked to the smell of brandy.

Her faded memories were a constant source of annoyance to her; the only thing she found more annoying, in fact, was the complete and utter lack of any memories from her life before eighteen. It was as if those years—which, she thought, must have once been a lush, green meadow—had overgrown, devoured by a thick, impenetrable swamp. She couldn't shake the impression that she was forgetting something very important, something that would help her understand why, no matter how far she travelled, she could never get the feeling that she actually belonged.

Standing up, she shook her head to banish such thoughts. How silly of her to feel that way! She was certain that many people shared the sentiment, and told herself that it was only in her nature and nothing more. Born to roam and explore, isn't that what they all told her when she announced plans for another trip?

Out of habit, she moved back to the foyer, double checking the lock once more before she retired for the night. A sudden impulse to see the sky struck her, so she pulled back the window curtains but never had the chance to look upwards. To her horror, she saw a suited man standing on her lawn, not five feet from the window. She opened her mouth to scream for Victor—usually a heavy sleeper, but certainly not asleep yet; or certainly not so deep in slumber that her cries would not move him to her side in seconds. But in that moment she recognized the man’s face. The man from her memories, the sole face she could fish out from the otherwise dark waters of her life.

The man inclined his head ever so slightly, his eyes never leaving hers. Alice dropped to her knees as her mind was seized with sudden visions. The weeds were pulled up, the waters cleared. A path formed. And she remembered. For better or worse, she remembered everything about him, and her life, and the girls—both young and older—she used to be. It dawned on her that she had seen him before, in this world—the waiter in Rome, the cab driver in Tokyo, and even here in London as a simple passer-by—though this was the first time she recognized him for who he was. She couldn't suppress the small sob that escaped from her mouth.

In the time it took to scramble to her feet, unlock the door and wrench it open, he had gone,
leaving her alone, once again, with only her thoughts. The only thing he left behind was the faint scent of brandy, an all-consuming emptiness, and a girl who couldn't decide if it was worth it to remember.

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