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Opening extract from

Looking-Glass Girl

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Published by

Puffin Books

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I

'Emergency, which service?'

'We need an ambulance! Please, quickly!'

'I am transferring you now . . .'

'Hello, you are through to the ambulance service. How can I help you?'

'We need an ambulance, like, now! My friend has fallen and she's not moving and I think she might . . . look, we just need an ambulance, OK?'

'Where are you? Can you give me the address?'

'No! Oh, please, don't tell her, Yaz! I'm going to be in *so* much trouble!'

'We're all going to be in so much trouble. That doesn't matter right now. I have to tell her, Savvy – how else is the ambulance going to get here?'

'The address?'

'Hello? Sorry. We need an ambulance at 118 Laburnum Drive, Ardenley. You have to hurry! She's fallen and she's not moving . . .'

'She's not moving at all? Where did she fall from?'

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'She fell down the stairs. It was an accident!'

'Have you moved her?'

'No, we're scared to – she's lying all funny. She's not moving at all. And there's all this broken glass and blood . . .'

'An ambulance is on its way to you now.'

'How long will it take? I'm so scared . . .'

'I need you to stay on the line. We'll be with you as soon as we possibly can.'

'It was an accident!'

'What is your friend's name?'

'Alice. Alice Beech . . .'

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Alice

'Can you hear me, Alice? My name is Martin; I'm a paramedic. Hang on, Alice.'

Everything is dark; the kind of thick, soft darkness that wraps around you like a blanket of sleep. I can hear someone talking to me, but I don't understand what he's saying – it's like some kind of secret code. It makes no sense at all.

'I'm calling in to report a head trauma victim, female, age thirteen; we're blue lighting her.'

Head trauma victim?

A shrill siren wail starts to screech, scratching its fingernails against my skin, filling up my senses. It makes everything hurt, but I can't seem to find the words to tell them to shut it up.

And suddenly I find myself falling backwards, down the rabbit hole, dropping like a stone, my screams swallowed up by the soft blanket of darkness.

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Year Six

I wasn't always a victim. Not so long ago, I was just a normal girl; a happy girl. I didn't get top grades in class and I wasn't the most popular kid in the school, but I had amazing friends and a happy family. I worried about all the usual things; test results, playground tiffs, whether I'd ever find a hobby I could be good at – something where I'd shine . . . but those worries never stopped me having fun.

And then, in Year Six, I was picked to play the lead role in our class production of *Alice in Wonderland*. I was so anxious that first night I didn't think I could do it, but my best friend Elaine squeezed my hand and told me I'd be brilliant, and somehow I found the courage to step out on to the stage. It was only a school play in a draughty gym hall, but the audience whooped and whistled and stamped their feet, and I swished my sticky-out blue skirt and dropped into a curtsey, smiling so hard it made my face ache. I don't think I'd ever been so happy.

Elaine and Yazmina, my other best friend, only had small, non-speaking parts as two of the playing-card soldiers, but they were really pleased for me all the same.

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'You were brilliant,' Yaz said. 'I could never have remembered all those lines!'

'And you got to do all those rehearsals with Luke Miller,' Elaine sighed. 'Lucky you! He's so cute!'

I laughed, but I wasn't crushing on Luke Miller like Elaine was. I'd known him since Reception class and I saw him as a friend – annoying sometimes but good fun as well. It had been fun working on the play with him, but Luke was going to Ardenley Academy after the holidays, so I knew I wouldn't see him again. Elaine, Yaz and I were all going to St Elizabeth's, a strict, all-girls school that was supposed to get great results.

I actually wished the whole lot of us were going to Ardenley Academy instead; we'd been to look at St Elizabeth's, and I'd hated the gloomy, dark panelled wood, the polished floors, the framed photographs of hockey and netball teams from years gone by that lined the corridor walls. I couldn't imagine spending the next seven years of my life in a place like that, wearing a braid-trimmed blazer and a grey pleated skirt and knee length white socks. I mean, socks? Really? Not good. But Elaine and Yaz were both going there, so I buried my misgivings and signed up for it, and my parents were as proud as if I'd just passed half a dozen A levels with A* grades.

We finished Year Six on a high. Elaine, Yaz and

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I had mapped out our summer, planning sleepovers, picnics in the park, days out in town, backyard sunbathing sessions, but on the last day of term Miss Harper had turned all that upside down. She handed me a flyer about a drama club that was running a summer school, and that changed everything.

'It's two days a week throughout the holidays,' she told me. 'A mix of kids, aged 11–16, all with a talent for acting. I thought that you and Luke would be perfect for it!'

I was so thrilled at being chosen, I didn't even notice the flickers of disapproval on the faces of my friends. I didn't notice anything until two weeks later, when I was at Elaine's house for a sleepover. I'd been talking about an improvisation exercise I'd done that day with Luke when Yaz had interrupted me.

'Alice?' she'd said. 'No offence, but we're sick of hearing about your stupid drama club the whole time. And about Luke and what great mates you are these days. It's all you ever talk about, and it's getting boring.'

Elaine had frowned. 'I know you don't mean it,' she said. 'But it's like you're rubbing our noses in it.'

I'd blinked. Had I been talking too much about drama club? About Luke? Did it sound like showing off? Maybe.

'Sorry,' I'd said. 'I suppose I do get carried away,

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sometimes. It's just that it's so much fun, and I know you'd absolutely love it, and . . .'

Yaz and Elaine had exchanged an exasperated glance, and my words had trailed away to nothing.

'It was just a fluke that they gave you that part,' Yaz had said. 'I bet Miss Harper just thought of you because your name was Alice, and decided to give you a chance.'

'Anyone can act,' Elaine had agreed. 'If we went to special lessons, we'd be good, too. But who wants all that stuff, anyway? Dressing up and playing games of "let's pretend". I really didn't think Luke would go for that sort of thing. It's so babyish!'

After that, I'd been careful not to mention the drama summer school, or Luke. I'd kept my mouth closed and tried hard to be interested when they'd talked about boys and make-up and music, but it had knocked my confidence. Yaz and Elaine had never told me I was boring or babyish before; I'd thought they were happy I'd finally found something I was good at.

Instead of finding something cool to talk about when we were together, I became silent, anxious about saying the wrong thing. Yaz and Elaine had begun mentioning days out in town without me, a trip to the ice rink, a train ride to the seaside. I'd tried not to mind. I was going to drama club without

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them for two days a week, so I could hardly complain if they did things without me, but for the first time ever I'd begun to feel like they were deliberately leaving me out.

The summer turned sour. Sometimes, when I rang Yaz or Elaine, they didn't reply; if I tried their landlines, I'd be told they were out: at the cinema, or down at the park, or just 'out'. Often, they forgot to ring me back. Maybe we'd been drifting apart, just a little, over the last year. Yaz and Elaine had sometimes rolled their eyes when I'd failed to summon up much interest in boy bands and crushes and turquoise nail varnish, but I hadn't thought those differences were fatal. I'd assumed we could find our way through them, like we always had before when one of us hadn't shared the others' passion for ballet or ponies or Harry Potter. I'd thought it would all blow over, but when Yaz had a sleepover the last weekend of the holidays and didn't invite me, it didn't feel that way.

We were supposed to start at St Elizabeth's together, the three of us against the world. Instead I pulled on my new uniform, complete with socks and braided blazer, and walked to school alone because they hadn't answered my texts. Without my friends, I was lost in a sea of uniformed strangers; adrift, lost.

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I wanted to cry and yell and run away home, but you don't do those things when you're eleven. You tilt your chin and bite your lip and pretend you don't care.

St Elizabeth's did its best to keep groups of friends together, and I was put in the same form room as Yaz and Elaine. My face lit up when I saw them that first day, and they smiled too, and for a moment I thought everything could still be OK for us.

'Hey, Alice,' Yaz said. 'How are you? We haven't seen you for weeks! How was your summer? How was that amazing drama summer school of yours?'

'It was great,' I said.

'I bet you made some cool new friends,' Elaine said.

I thought of how I'd got to know Luke better, how he was turning out to be a real friend and not just some boy from primary school; maybe even something more. I didn't think Yaz and Elaine would want to hear about that, though.

'Well, I've made a few friends,' I bluffed. 'They're all different ages, though, and I'm not sure any of them are at St Elizabeth's . . .'

'That's good, though,' Yaz told me. 'Meeting new people. Because we just haven't been on the same wavelength for a while now, have we?'

I bit my lip. 'Are you saying we're not friends any

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more?' I dared to ask.

'Of course we're friends,' Elaine said. 'Obviously, we are! But that doesn't mean we have to be in each other's pockets all the time, does it? We should make new mates, see other people. We're growing up, moving in different directions. Maybe we just need some space?'

Space? I'd heard that line before, back when Elaine's mum left her dad. 'She just needs some space,' Elaine had said. 'They'll probably get back together. Maybe. Most marriages need that, just to stay healthy. Your parents should probably do it too; they might just be staying together for you and Nathan.'

'I don't think so,' I said, and Elaine's face had twisted up, making her look bitter and angry. I knew how sad she was feeling inside, so I didn't go on about Mum and Dad being happy; I didn't want to make her feel worse than she already did.

Elaine's parents never did get back together. Elaine's mum found herself someone new; a boyfriend called Kevin with no job and an attitude problem. He made Elaine's life a misery, and when Yaz and I went round for sleepovers he was so rude and grumpy Elaine had to stop asking us at all.

And now she wanted some space herself – from me.

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'We're still friends,' Yaz clarified. 'But things are different, now, Alice. Let's enjoy secondary school. New starts, new challenges, new friends. Best of luck!'

They walked away and left me alone.

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