

# Once Upon a Time . . .

**A**LICE SILVER HAD NEVER MET ANYONE WHO had killed before, but that changed on the day Dorothy Grimes walked past the window of Alice's favourite coffee shop.

Alice had been sitting at the smallest table, staring anxiously at her notebook. It was open on the table next to her coffee, which had gone cold, because she'd forgotten to drink it. She turned the notebook's pages, reading over her work.

Words swam before her eyes, the same words she had written weeks, months ago, and had read through many times since. She didn't even know if they made sense any more.

She was tired. Her head ached, her neck ached, even her eyes ached. Irritable, she flicked to the pages at the front. The writing here wasn't quite as dense: it was mainly lists and diagrams, and snippets she had stuck in, such as

photographs or pictures from magazines. One of these, a news article, had come loose over time and slipped out on to the table. Alice picked it up, scanning the headline she knew by heart.

## **BRITAIN'S YOUNGEST SERIAL KILLER LOCKED UP FOR LIFE**

The cutting was over two years old now, but Alice still remembered all the details. They had shocked her deeply – and everyone else in the country. The thought that someone her age – just sixteen – could murder five people in such horrible ways was not something that could be forgotten easily. In fact, the killings were what made this case an oddity. Most murderers use the same method to kill each time. This one was different. There had been one strangulation, one bludgeoning, a stabbing, a drowning, and a house fire that had been set deliberately.

She turned the cutting over. On the back was part of another story about a teenage girl who had won a prize for keeping a diary for a year. Alice remembered how she had been holding the cutting to the light, allowing the words on the other side of the thin paper to show through. How words from the two different articles had combined to form 'kill ʎɹɹɹɹɹ'.

*Kill diary.*

That was how she'd got the idea to combine both articles to make a truly memorable character for the story she was

working on: a killer who kept a written log of her murders, framing each one as a piece of fiction.

Alice shivered. Sometimes the best ideas came about by accident, and this was one of them. A few tweaks here and there, a new name, a few different murder methods. It was surprisingly easy to think it all up. Alice wondered, not for the first time, if she were a wicked person for imagining such terrible things, but she supposed that all storybook villains had to come from someone's imagination. After all, what was the point of a villain if they were not scary?

She put the cutting down and closed her eyes, massaging her temples. Words floated in the dark space behind her eyelids. Even when her eyes were shut, there was no escape. They surrounded her like a prison, but she knew the only way she would get free was with more words. The *right* ones. The trouble was she didn't know them. She'd written herself into a corner and she had no idea how to finish the story. And now she was starting to worry about what would happen if she didn't. Not just because all her hard work would be wasted, but what would happen to *her*.

Alice had spent the last few months telling herself that what had happened last time hadn't been real. That she'd imagined it, that it had been the lack of sleep, the stress. Whatever it was, it had started up again in the past few days. The shadows, like someone moving just at the edge of her vision. The footsteps behind her on an empty street. The whispering.

She was afraid.

She opened her eyes, letting out a slow breath. The coffee shop was within a bookshop, up on the first floor. She did most of her writing at home, but had thought that a change of scene might help the words to flow. It hadn't. If anything, being around so many other stories, all finished, was like a quiet form of torture. Instead of inspiring her, she imagined the other books were taunting her. She leaned closer to the window, looking out. A sharp winter draught crept in and prickled her face as she watched people moving about on the street below, unaware they were being observed.

And then she felt like every hair on her body were standing on end as she caught sight of a slight figure that was looking in the window of a shop opposite.

*It can't be, it can't be, it can't be . . .*

The words pounded in Alice's head, each one accompanied by a sickening thud of her racing heart. She stood up without even meaning to, knocking into the table. The untouched coffee slopped over the sides of the cup, speckling the notebook and the newspaper cutting. She pressed her hands to the glass, barely aware of the *drip, drip, drip* of liquid hitting the floor and splashing on to her boots.

She snatched her notebook up and lurched away from the window. The newspaper cutting floated to the floor, but she didn't register it or the strange looks she was getting from other customers.

'Not again,' she whispered, the words catching in her throat. 'Please, not again!' But she still had to know for sure. She stumbled out of the coffee shop and rushed for the

stairs, arriving outside the bookshop moments later. Her breath came in fast gasps, each one puffing in the frozen air.

The girl had gone. Alice turned this way and that, searching the street. Had she hallucinated the whole thing? Fallen asleep perhaps? She hadn't slept properly for a while now—

*There.* Alice just caught sight of the back of her, vanishing round a corner. She followed, a chill wind making her teeth chatter. Only then did she realise she'd left her coat behind, but if she went back now she'd lose her. She caught up and drew level, trying to get a proper look at the girl's face.

When she saw it, a small cry escaped her lips, but it was whipped away by the wind.

It *was* her.

She had changed her appearance since leaving the hospital. The dull brown hair that had hung in limp rats' tails was gone and so was the dowdy hospital gown that made her look young and helpless. To anyone else she would have been almost unrecognisable ... but not to Alice. She stumbled, bumping into someone nearby, but was too full of shock and horror to react to the cross words that were spat at her. She had read about a person's blood running cold in many books, but now she actually felt it: the warmth draining from her toes and an icy chill working its way through her entire body like a wave.

*What is she doing here? Alice thought. Does she know? Is she looking for me already?*

And, almost as though Alice drew her like a magnet, the girl turned and stared at her. There was curiosity in her expression, but nothing to suggest she recognised Alice. Nothing to say she was aware of their connection although, as Alice stopped walking and became frozen to the spot, something stirred behind the girl's eyes. Malevolence and a different kind of awareness.

*She can see I'm afraid of her, Alice thought. And she likes it.*

Slowly, Dorothy Grimes strode up to her, a small smile curving her lips. It became wider as Alice backed away, not even realising she was doing so until she came up against a wall.

Dorothy finally stopped, too close to Alice. So close Alice could feel her breath on her face. The sensation of it turned her stomach.

'Have we met?' Dorothy asked. Her voice was soft, but there was nothing gentle about it. It was soft the same way a pillow could be as it smothered you.

'N-not . . . in person.' The words came out as little more than a croak.

'But you know who I am, don't you?'

'Yes,' Alice whispered. 'I know who you are.'

'And you know what I've done.'

A wave of dizziness threatened to overwhelm Alice then. She swayed lightly, managing to steady herself, trying to blink away the awful images that had come to mind. Images of Dorothy striking a match, of squeezing someone's throat,

and of scratching crusted blood that wasn't her own off her cheeks. Yes, Alice knew exactly what Dorothy was capable of.

'Did you read about me in the news?' Dorothy asked. She lowered her voice. 'All the naughty things I've done?'

Alice shook her head weakly. 'Not exactly.'

'Then how do you know me?' Dorothy asked.

'I know everything about you,' Alice whispered.

Dorothy rolled her eyes. 'Oh, not you as well. Do you know how many doctors I've had to listen to, spouting that sort of rubbish? We know all about you, Dorothy,' she mimicked. 'You must have experienced some kind of trauma, Dorothy. We want you to keep a dream diary, Dorothy, Dorothy, *Dorothy*.' She was getting worked up now, getting that glaze over her eyes. 'Repeating my name over and over to make me think they're my friends.'

'I know,' Alice said.

'Oh, you *know*, do you?' Dorothy said, her eyes gleaming.

'I told you. I know everything about you.' Alice sagged against the wall, her knees trembling. She wanted to run now, but felt like she was stuck in one of those dreams where, if she tried to, she'd be going in slow motion. 'How . . . how did you get here?'

Dorothy laughed. 'Well, if you don't know that, you don't know everything about me, do you?' she mocked. 'I followed someone. Someone who took something of mine and I want it back.'

'Ramblebrook,' Alice muttered.

The smile left Dorothy's face. 'How could you possibly know *that*?' She leaned further in to Alice's face. 'You'd better start talking.'

So, in a few brief words, Alice told her.

Afterwards, Dorothy stared at her for a few seconds before erupting into giggles.

'Oh, that's good,' she said finally, clapping her hands together. 'Bravo! Even I couldn't have come up with *that* and my plots are pretty . . . *twisted*, shall we say?' She shook her head, still chuckling. 'You actually believe that, don't you?'

'No . . . I *know* it.'

Dorothy gave a low whistle. 'And people say *I'm* dotty.' She looked impressed, envious even. 'Girl, you are *mad*. You are one *craaaaaazy* cuckoo!' She clucked sympathetically. 'I don't have to worry about you talking to anyone about me. You sound far too bonkers for anyone to believe you.'

She pushed her face even closer to Alice's and, with that, something inside Alice snapped like a spell being broken. She lashed out with her notebook, catching Dorothy on the side of the face.

'Get away from me – stay away! Just . . . *just go back to where you came from!*' Her voice erupted from her, shrill and desperate. She hit out again, missing this time, for Dorothy ducked out of the way, and the notebook flew out of Alice's fingers, landing with a whack on the pavement.

She threw herself towards it at the same time as a cackling Dorothy did. Panic gripped her as Dorothy



reached it first, her eyes fixed on the open pages. With a gasp, Alice wrenched it away.

Without another word, she ran, swerving to avoid tripping over a black cat before fleeing into a side street. Her breath came in ragged sobs that burned her throat, but she didn't stop. She felt as though Dorothy Grimes's eyes were still on her, but when she looked back she saw no one except a scattering of strangers staring at her.

Alice ran, and ran, and didn't stop until she reached her house, slamming the front door behind her and locking it. She caught sight of herself in the hallway mirror and stared. Her hair was a tangled mess, stuck to her cheeks with snot and tears. Her face was a deathly grey. But it was her eyes that were the worst. They were wild, haunted-looking. *Mad*-looking. And no wonder, with what she had just seen.

'It's not possible, it's *not* ...' she wailed to the empty house. Her voice jarred in the silence, like a puzzle piece that wouldn't fit.

She sank to the floor and huddled with her back to the door. Dorothy Grimes was mad; Alice knew that better than anyone. But then what did that say about *her*?

Could Dorothy have been right?

Was Alice even crazier than she was?

# 1

## The Storyteller

EVERY DAY, HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE SIT DOWN AND begin to write a story. Some of these stories are published and translated, and sold in bookshops all over the world. Others never make it past the first chapter – or even the first sentence – before they are given up on. And some stories are muddled, and half-written, and struggled with until eventually the writer stuffs their creation under the bed or into a drawer. There it lies, forgotten for months or years . . . or perhaps for ever. Even if it could have been the most magical adventure that anyone would ever read.

But what happens when a tale with *real* magic, that was supposed to be finished, never was?

This is a story about one of those stories. It begins a long time ago when I was just eleven years old, back when I was known as Midge. Back when my biggest worry was whether I'd be picked for the football team and when one

of my favourite things was to hear the latest story written by my older sister, Alice.

Alice had a thing about stories. Not just an amazing talent to make them up and write them down, but also a strange and firm belief that every story started should be finished. She said an unfinished story was a terrible thing: an unfulfilled dream and unlived lives for all the characters within it. So, every story she began, she finished, no matter how rubbish it might have been or how silly the ending. They all had to have one – an ending.

Until the day one of them didn't.

My sister disappeared on a Friday in February, the day school finished for half-term. It was ordinary in most ways, except that it happened to be the day before the Summoning. On the walk home from school, I was on the lookout for Likenesses: little dolls fashioned from straw or cloth, each made to resemble someone. I'd already noticed a few in the morning, but during the day more had appeared in windows and on doorsteps of the houses we passed.

I stopped to stare at a Likeness propped next to a flowerpot in a nearby garden. It always struck me how strange it was that, each year, everyone in the town made these dolls and put them on display.

'No weirder than dressing up as ghosts and vampires and everything for Hallowe'en on one night of the year,' was Alice's view.

'But that happens in loads of places,' I said. 'The Summoning is just here in Fiddler's Hollow.'

‘Lots of towns have strange old traditions,’ Alice had replied. ‘But they’re usually things like cheese festivals or maypole dancing, not something creepy like ours.’

I had to admit the Summoning *was* a bit creepy. On this one night of every year, someone, either living or dead, could be ‘Summoned’ by the creation of their Likeness. It was said that if the person who made it wanted it badly enough, and the Likeness was good enough, it would work and the maker could then ask the Summoned a question. Just one. After that, they could never Summon that person again.

Of course, no one ever seemed to know anyone who had successfully Summoned another person, although there were plenty of tales of it happening to somebody’s uncle’s third cousin’s son.

In the evening, there was always a huge bonfire in the market square when all the Likenesses were burned. Lots of people came just for this part, even if they hadn’t made a doll, because there were stalls selling toasted marshmallows and roasted nuts, hot chocolate and warm, spiced apple juice.

It was a game of mine, every year, to try to recognise who the dolls were meant to be. Some, like the ones made by the lady who worked in the knitting shop, were excellent – but I still couldn’t tell who they were. Others, like Tommy Parker’s from my class, looked barely human – but his was recognisable by the numbered shirt and football strip of his favourite player. Then there were the mad: a grey felt dog

called Fenchurch who'd been missing for more than a year; the bad: Jack the Ripper made by Mr Sherwood, the history teacher, who spent his spare time working on theories to try and unmask the killer's identity.

I reached the white painted gate of a cottage set back from the road. Propped up next to a flowerpot was a small figure of straw. This was one of the sad: the same little figure made every year by the old man who lived in the cottage.

It was a boy, with fair hair and glasses. Every year it wore the same clothes, and the same little pair of old-fashioned spectacles, but every year its features were a little wonkier, as the old man's eyesight grew worse.

No one really talked to the man, so people didn't know who the boy was. Some said that it was his son who had been taken away by the man's wife and never seen again; others said that the boy had died, and once I'd heard a horrid story that it was a little boy unknown to the man whom he had knocked down and killed in his car by accident. So many stories and none of them happy ... except one.

Alice said she thought the story went like this: the man was a time traveller and wanted to use the Likeness to speak to himself as a little boy, asking him questions about things that he had long forgotten about. To Alice, everything was a story and hers was the one I wanted to believe.

I moved on past, pulling leaves from the hedge, trying to decide whether to make a Likeness or not. Alice usually did, but she was the creative one, not me.

By the time I reached Cuckoo Lane, the street where we lived, the sky was dark and a thin slice of moon dangled above the little shop on the corner. Our house was number 35, a short way down. It was an old house, which looked tiny from the front, but was surprisingly large inside, stretching back much longer than it was wide. When I went in, the house was warm and the smell of something delicious was wafting from the kitchen.

I hung my keys on the hook in the hallway and went through to the sitting room, where a fire had been lit in the grate. A basket of logs and a bucket of coal sat on the hearth, and our cat, Twitch, was sprawled out asleep in front of it, her black coat gleaming in the firelight. I held my cold fingers up to the heat. I could hear a little tune being hummed in the kitchen. I followed it and found Alice leaning over the cooker, stirring a large pot.

‘What’s for tea?’ I asked, my tummy rumbling as I sniffed deeply. The humming stopped and Alice turned to me with a smile.

‘It’s stew.’ She covered the pot and put two plates in the oven to warm. ‘Stop sniffing it; you’ll steal all the flavour.’

I grinned. Alice was always saying silly things like that, mostly to amuse me – and herself – but also, I think, because she couldn’t help it. She saw magic in everything: a trail of drips from a teacup were elf footprints; garden statues were people and animals that had been enchanted and turned to stone. Storytelling was in her blood; blood that we shared, though Alice’s was a little different. She

didn't have the same father as me. Hers had left her and our mum when Alice was just three years old. She had seen him only a handful of times in the thirteen years that had passed since then.

I watched as she set the table, noticing a plaster on Alice's finger. 'What happened?' I asked, nodding to it.

'Hmm? Oh. My finger decided it wanted to be a carrot and got in the way of the knife.'

'You're so daft,' I said, giggling. Then I stopped as I saw that she had only laid the table for two.

'I thought Mum was here for tea tonight?' My voice came out all whiney.

Alice laid cutlery on the table and began to slice some bread.

'She was supposed to be, but she called to say she had to work late.'

'Again?'

'Someone's off sick and Mum has that book fair coming up. She's snowed under.'

'She's always snowed under,' I said sulkily.

I sank into my usual seat. I'd been looking forward to this evening. Mum had been working much later recently. She was the manager of a rights team for a big publisher, which meant that she sold books to lots of different countries. It was over a week since we'd last eaten a meal with her. In fact, it had been more than a week since I'd had a chance to say much to her at all, during mornings of uniforms being ironed and bowls of cereal being gulped down in the rush

to get ready for school. We hardly saw my dad, either. He worked away on an oil rig and sometimes he was gone for months. Since Alice had left school in May, she'd taken over a lot of the cooking and household chores. She wasn't just my sister, she was like a second mother.

'It won't be for ever,' Alice said. 'Things will calm down after this book fair.'

She ladled stew and dumplings on to our plates and I wolfed mine down, but Alice only picked at hers. By the time the subject changed to the Summoning and the Likenesses I'd seen on the way home, Alice had put her spoon down and abandoned her stew. She listened, her eyes clouding at the mention of the old man and his little-boy doll, and I wondered if she'd ever write down the story of him using the Likeness to speak to himself as a child. She often based characters on people from real life, if there was something about them that interested her.

'Are you making one this year?' I asked.

'A Likeness?' said Alice. She gave a vague shake of her head. 'I've got other things to be getting on with.'

I was half relieved, half disappointed. Relieved because if Alice wasn't making one then I wouldn't feel I had to, either. And disappointed because Alice always chose interesting people, like her favourite authors – or even characters from their books. One year, her teacher had made a project of it, and Alice been told off in front of the whole class for making a Likeness of someone who wasn't a real person. Alice had replied, 'They're real to me.'



I loved her for that.

Later, we ate rice pudding in front of the fire. Shortly before nine o'clock, Alice went outside to get more coal, and I shivered as fingers of icy air crawled in through the back door and found their way to my neck. Alice stirred up the embers with the poker and heaped on more coal, then settled in the armchair.

I put down my maths homework and yawned. Alice wasn't as strict about bedtime as Mum, mainly because half the time she didn't realise what hour it was herself.

I stretched out on the rug next to Twitch and watched my sister. She sat with a notebook open on her knees, legs curled underneath her and her long fingers wrapped round her favourite pen. Her hand was still and she was staring into the fire, though I guessed she wasn't really seeing the flames. I knew better than to ask what she was thinking about. Being interrupted while daydreaming was one of the few things that made my normally mild-mannered sister lose her temper. Daydreaming, she said, was how she made up her stories – and interruptions meant lost ideas.

Judging by the way she was nibbling her top lip, this story wasn't going well. Once or twice, she began to write, but then ripped out the pages and threw them into the fire. Then, suddenly, she lifted her pen and began to scribble quickly, lines and lines, without pause. As she did so, she began humming the strange little melody again, the one I'd heard when she was making dinner. Now and again, she crossed words out, but continued until she must have filled

an entire page. Finally, she stopped, looking over her words with a slight smile. So I was surprised when she tore out the page and screwed it into a ball. Then, like the ones before it, she aimed it at the fire. It hit the back, just below the chimney opening, but somehow bounced out and landed somewhere on the hearth. Alice leaned forward to pick it up, but a sound distracted her.

She glanced up. The nine o'clock news had just started on the TV. She snapped her notebook shut. 'I hadn't realised it was that late. Go and have a bath. You should be in bed by now.' She got up, propping the fireguard in place, and went into the kitchen to put the kettle on. Her mood had changed – she seemed worried again.

Instead of going upstairs, I followed Alice to the kitchen, hovering in the doorway. The coldness of the kitchen tiles seeped through my socks. Alice was barefoot, but it didn't seem to bother her, or perhaps she just didn't notice. She had a tea bag in her hand, but made no attempt to put it in a cup, seemingly lost in thought.

'Everything OK?' I asked. 'You hardly ate any dinner.'

'I wasn't very hungry,' said Alice. 'Food never tastes as good when you've cooked it yourself.'

'What were you writing about?' I asked, shifting from one foot to the other to stop my toes from cramping.

'Just this story,' Alice said softly.

'Can you read it to me?'

She shook her head. 'It's not ready yet. It wouldn't make much sense to anyone but me.'

‘What’s it about?’

‘It’s a secret.’ Alice finally put the tea bag into a cup. ‘It’s been in my head for months. But now I’m . . . well, stuck. I can’t figure out where it goes next, or how it ends.’ She sighed, her next words a mutter. ‘Maybe it’s not even supposed to.’

‘Then you’ll have to give it one of your silly endings,’ I said. ‘Every story has to have an ending, right?’

‘Right.’ She smiled faintly. ‘But a silly one wouldn’t be right for this. This story’s different . . .’

I eyed the notebook poking out of her pocket. ‘What else are you working on? Any detective stories?’

‘Only this story,’ she said. ‘There’s nothing else.’

‘Not even a little one?’

‘Not a bean.’

‘Beans aren’t to be sniffed at, you know,’ I said. ‘Just look at what happened with Jack and the beanstalk.’

‘True,’ Alice said. ‘But I’m all out of beans – magic ones, baked ones, or otherwise.’ She lifted her hand to her forehead and massaged it. ‘This story . . . it’s taking everything. All of me.’

Something about the look in her eyes then was different. She’d struggled with stories before, but tonight she really meant it. There was only one other time when I’d seen her like this.

Last summer. No one except her knew what that story had been about, and she swore no one ever would. She’d destroyed the entire thing without finishing it. But, before

she had done that, she'd told me something that had scared me a great deal, because I'd seen that Alice herself was terrified.

The kettle came to the boil. She poured the steaming water into her cup, staring into it.

'If only it were as easy to brew a story.'

'You'll figure it out,' I said. 'You always do.'

'Not always.'

Our eyes met in an uneasy silence. I guessed then that she, too, was thinking of last summer. Of the unfinished story . . . and of the things she had told me.

Alice went back into the living room. I followed and we sat side by side in front of the fire, saying nothing. She took a few sips of her tea before setting it on the hearth and gazing into the fire. I could tell she was thinking, brooding about storylines and characters. She didn't pick up her cup again and I didn't remind her. I'd known all along that it would go cold before she remembered to drink it.

The same way I also knew that, whatever this story was about, it was going to lead to trouble.