

## The Alice '65 -- Chapter 4

Twenty minutes later, they turned off Sunset Boulevard to travel down a road lined by towering palm trees and thick dramatic shrubbery to an estate fronted by a vine-draped adobe wall that ran a hundred feet along the street and had a gated entrance at one end. As it opened, they passed two men watching them, one with a camera, one with a video recorder, both leaning against a motorbike.

Adam looked back at them as Patricia pulled through the gate. She noticed and smiled. "Her own private paparazzi."

"They just sit there?" He asked. "All day? Waiting for Miss Blanchard to appear? Seriously?"

Patricia laughed. "Honey, who do you think she is?"

They sped up a curved driveway protected by evergreen trees and lined with low ivy-draped barriers to approach a long, pleasant, two-story Spanish-style house done in white stucco walls and clay tile roof. They stopped before arched double-doors of deep mahogany, simple in their design but projecting strength and, to be honest, more than a little condescension.

As he got out of the car, Adam looked around to take it in...and give himself time to regain his footing on solid earth. The grounds were perfectly sculpted to feel warm and inviting while whispering leaves gave off an air of gentle isolation that he found quite appealing.

"It's like Epping Forest planted in the midst of London," he murmured. "Nothing around for miles and miles — merely everything."

Patricia led him inside to an open foyer that separated the house into two wings. The floor was terra-cotta, the ceiling arched high, and to his right were French doors of dark wood and beveled glass revealing a sitting room of modern elegance, all in earth tones. Huge framed mirrors flanked them, and on the wall above hung two paintings done in a Giorgio de Chirico style. To his left was a heavy oak door at the base of a staircase that ascended to an open walkway, which joined the two sides. Plants of every size, shape and color filled spaces not taken by heavy tables, haunting sepia-tone photographs, and nick-knacks of every possible style.

The foyer led under the walkway to more double-doors that opened into a space filled with comfortable couches, low tables, and thick carpets atop a colorful Spanish tile floor, all of it focused on a

## The Alice '65 -- Chapter 4

genial stone fireplace. A small bar was nestled between that and a tight stairway that wound up and around the chimney. Another dark door was on the other side of the bar, beneath the stairway's landing, and the wall across from it had built-in shelves containing all manner of books. Translucent curtains were drawn across a massive window that looked out over a back yard that was even more garden-like than the front, pool included, of course. Dozens of potted plants made the room feel very cozy.

"It's like a dream," Adam murmured as he took it all in.

Patricia headed straight to the bar, saying, "Coffee? Tea? Shot of vodka?"

Adam just smiled and said, "No, thank you," as he let himself be drawn to the wall of books. "I'm tired and rather hungry. Not a good combination."

"Didn't they feed you on the plane?"

"Yes, but I'm the English breakfast sort."

"I could whip you up something."

"No, thank you," Adam said, already lost in the library. "I'll grab supper at the airport. Is the book in here?"

Patricia mixed a Tequila Sunrise, albeit with gin, as she said, "No, it — uh, it's somewhere else. In a box."

Adam let his fingers drift over the books as he asked, "Box?"

"Yeah. For protection."

"A Solander Case. Yes, Vincent mentioned it." Then he hummed as he continued with, "Oh, aren't we some lovelies?"

Patricia stopped and looked at him. "You talk to books."

Adam glanced at her, his face open and happy as he said, "Hmm? Oh, right." He chuckled. "They're my life."

"I like reading, too." She held up a small tablet. "I'm on Molly Ivins. Hometown girl, so..."

Adam looked at her and gave a gentle nod. "My mother has one of those, as do my brothers and sister. I prefer the feel of an actual book." He saw the Barnes & Noble limited edition of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and pointed to her. "May I?" he asked.

Patricia shrugged. "Sure, honey."

He reached into the back to pull the book out a little then gripped the sides to draw her from the row of other volumes, so very gentle as he said, "Have you seen her?"

## The Alice '65 -- Chapter 4

“Seen who?” Patricia asked, watching him as she sipped her drink.

He slid the book from the slipcase to look inside, intense and tender, saying, “The *Alice* — um, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.”

“Oh, right,” Patricia said, “Casey's book. Flipped through it on the crapper. Sure don't look like much.”

“Crapper?” he asked, focused on the *Chopin*.

“Yeah, that thing where you take a dump.”

Adam jolted then scurried over to her, the *Chopin* still open in his hands, his voice cracking as he said, “She kept her by the toilet!?”

“Don't listen to my mother. She messes with people.”

Adam jumped and looked up to see Casey Blanchard leaning against a bannister, next to the chimney...and he froze. In the film his main quibble with her in the role had been that she was far too beautiful to play Mar-Lee. Creggan would never have treated her with contempt, as he did, but instead would have been doing everything he could to make her his mate...as he finally did get around to, in the movie. But when she drifted down the stairs — wearing a peasant blouse, cut-offs and sandals, chestnut hair whispering soft behind her, deliberate confidence and poise emanating from her, no makeup, clear skin and a form suitable for any portrait of Diana — Adam saw that minimizing her beauty would have been an impossible task, because the only thing that kept her from being perfect was a touch of sadness in her eyes.

Before he had a chance to fully appreciate who he was looking at, Patricia drew his focus back to her by caressing his chin and saying, “I only mess with boys and only if they're cute.”

“Sorry?” Adam asked, looking at her, lost.

Patricia just smiled and said, “Nothin'.”

“So you're her mother?” Adam whispered.

“Didn't I mention that?” Patricia whispered back. “I'm also her entourage and guard dog. So be warned.” Then she chomped at him.

Adam heard Casey sigh her own warning of, “Mom.”

He hesitated, blushed, then returned his gaze to Casey to say, “Miss...Miss Blanchard, it's so nice to meet you. I'm...I'm Adam Verlain.”

Casey gave him a cool look of appraisal, noticed his hand was extended, and politely touched it as she said, “It's Casey. Vincent told us about you.”

## The Alice '65 -- Chapter 4

Patricia snarled a chuckle as she said, “No, he told me, and I told you, and you told me to tell him to tell us when Adam was comin’, which he did and I did, and we misspelled his name.”

“I called it from the e-mail, Mom,” Casey replied as she walked around Adam, inspecting him.

He turned to keep her in view, closing the *Chopin* as he said, “Um, I..I’ve seen *Ilithium Four*. You — you were quite good in it. Captured the idea of Mar-Lee — ”

“You’re sweet,” said Casey. “Don’t move.”

He hesitated then stood still as Casey continued to circle him. “It, um, it was a curious choice to make as a film,” he said, “considering the depth and richness of the language and life it depicted and — ”

“It made a billion bucks,” she said, then added, “You’re not exactly what I expected.”

“Sorry?” He blinked, then grimaced. “Ah, yes-yes-yes, the clothes. They’re not mine nor do I enjoy wearing them, but it’s a long story, and — ”

“It’s okay,” Casey said, turning to her mother. “Orisi.”

Patricia touched her earpiece and said, “Call the madman.”

Adam glanced between them. “Sorry? I..I don’t understand.”

“You gotta change,” Casey said. “Can’t have you look like this.”

“Oh, of course. I just need to give my clothes a wash — ”

“No. For tonight.”

He blinked. “Tonight?”

“If you’d come in a suit, I might’ve let you wear that. But you didn’t, so...”

He backed away from her, fumbling as he returned the *Chopin* to her case then put her back on the shelf. “Wait-wait-wait, there’s been a mistake. My name is Adam Verlain and I’m, uh, I’m here to collect a book and return to London and — ”

“I know,” Casey said, “but it’s in a safe deposit box — ”

“That’s the box I meant,” Patricia chirped. “They’re Solanders, in England.” Then she said into the phone, “Orisi. Patricia. Call me, honey.”

“No-no-no-no-no-no,” Adam said, “this is not right — ”

Casey focused on him, saying, “Adam, your plane got in too

## The Alice '65 -- Chapter 4

late to get the book and no way was I getting it out till you were here, and since tonight's the premier I figured — ”

“No, there...there's been a mistake,” he said. His head was beginning to pound and his stomach was NOT happy. “My...my return flight leaves at nine-oh-five, tonight, and I have to check in three hours before. I have an itinerary and we've arranged with customs to handle the import, at Heathrow, and — ”

Casey cut him off by gliding up to him and putting a finger to his lips, soft and easy, then she said, “Mom.”

Patricia nodded and tapped her earpiece and said, “Call Vincent.”

“Vincent?” Adam said. “But I — he said I wasn't to stay over. I could go straight back. I wasn't even to leave the terminal.”

Casey eyed Adam, wary. “Why would he say that?”

Adam rubbed his forehead and fought a fear that his insides were about to do a Dumpling all over Casey's carpets. He was supposed to have remained in the safe arms of airport security with his valuable cargo till he returned to London and was back in the comfort of his routine, all by supper, tomorrow. But now he was being told he was expected to remain in a city he didn't know doing God only knew what? It was all so wrong.

He barely noticed Patricia watching him, a smile on her lips that screamed she was about to raid the cookie jar. She slipped over to Adam, all but purring, “Casey, why *not* keep him like this?”

*That* made him notice her. He backed away like a skittish kitten.

Patricia continued with, “He's got a nice form, and this'd be an interestin' style choice. Just spike his hair a bit and get rid of these.”

She snapped the suspenders off his shoulders. The jeans dropped halfway down his hips to reveal the elastic band of Manny's FTLs. Adam jolted back from her then tripped over the couch to slam to the floor and clip his head on the hearth. His world shattered focus as he bounced onto his side, and for a moment he wondered if he was going to pass out.

From a thousand miles away he heard Casey scream. “Oh-my-god! Adam!”

Blood trailed across his face and splattered onto the Spanish tile, next to his glasses, and the only thought that came to him was, “I

## The Alice '65 -- Chapter 4

hope this doesn't stain."

Then Casey was kneeling beside him. She pressed her fingers against the cut in his head and wailed, "You're bleeding! Mom, get a towel. Get some ice."

A clean wet rag appeared in Casey's hand and she held that against the cut. He could hear Patricia's voice echoing, "Adam, I am so sorry. I wasn't thinkin', and I'm used to guys knowin' I'm just playin' with them and — and are you thinkin'? You didn't crack your brain open, did you?"

He was unable to formulate an intelligent response to such a ludicrous question. His eyes were still shivering and unsure when Patricia knelt behind him, shoved Casey's hand aside and pressed a towel packed with ice over the cut, hard and fast. He yelped in pain and pushed her away.

"Sorry," he muttered as he took the ice and gently held it to the cut. "I — I'll be all right. Just...just give me a moment."

He started to get up but Casey held him down. "Stay put. We'll call EMS and — "

"No. No, please, I — I'm fine. I'll be fine. Thanks. Just — I just want to sit up."

Casey guided him into a sitting position as Patricia waved her hand up in front of his face, asking, "Are you sure your brain's not scrambled? Can you tell me how many fingers?"

He sighed and held up three of his.

She kept on with, "Okay...so how 'bout somethin' for the pain? Like Tylenol? Oxy? Bourbon? All three?"

He leaned back and said, "Please, I've been hurt worse in rugby."

Casey almost laughed, in surprise. "*You* play rugby?"

"Just pub league." Then he added in a near chuckle, "But the scrums can be rough. Once finished a match with a broken finger."

"Oh, now was that bright?" Patricia asked in a momma-tone.

"That's what me Mum said when she reset it."

"Your mother fixed your broken finger?" Casey asked.

Adam nodded. "She was a Sister before she got married. A nurse. It was let her or hours in A&E waiting for a physician. I wouldn't have minded; I had a book to read. But Mum hates to sit." He wiggled his left index finger and forced a smile. "Turned out all right."

## The Alice '65 -- Chapter 4

Patricia gripped his finger and wiggled it, to his shock, and nodded as if in agreement. Then she jolted and focused on her earpiece. “Oh, Vincent, hi. It's Patricia. Uh, there's a situation and, uh, Casey wants to talk to you.”

Casey rolled her eyes. “Not now.”

Patricia shoved the actual phone into her hand, growling, “It took three tries to get him to answer, and they're eight hours ahead!”

Casey sighed and rose to her feet, saying, “Hi, Vincent. Sorry to call so late.”

At the same time, her mother turned to Adam and guided him onto the couch, murmuring, “Here we go, honey. You sure you don't want to see a doctor? I mean, it's just a scrape and head wounds always bleed like crazy over nothin', so I don't think you'll need stitches or an MRI, but you sure you wouldn't like a couple puffs on a bong?”

“No,” he said, even more wary of her. “Thank you. The ice is sufficient.”

Casey began to pace. “Vincent, listen — wait, I can't hear you. Second.” She turned the phone's audio up as high as she could and the noise of what sounded like a bar drifted from it.

“What's the trouble?” Vincent was barely heard asking. “Did you and Adam miss each other?”

“No, he's here but he says he's leaving tonight.”

“Hang on, hang on, I'm stepping outside.” The din of the pub lessened, to be replaced by city traffic. “Better?”

“Tons,” said Casey. “Why've you got him leaving tonight? I told you he'd arrive too late to get the book out of the box.”

Vincent actually sputtered, “Casey, I-I-I recall very strongly urging you to get the book from the bank, early, and bring it with you to the airport under guard and-and-and hand it straight over to him, where it would be safest and-and — ”

She cut him off with, “That's not what I agreed to.”

“Casey, please, I've known this young man all his life, and I made assurances to him — ”

All she said was, “Vincent,” but her voice nearly screamed, *Do you want the book, or not?*

There was silence...then he gave a long heavy sigh. “All right,” he said. “All right. I'll arrange accommodations — ”

Casey laughed. “Baby, c'mon, I got five bedrooms in this crib;

## The Alice '65 -- Chapter 4

he can stay with me.”

“I seriously doubt Adam will agree to that. He's not exactly your normal sort, as I'm certain you've seen by now.”

“Then you talk to him. Here.” She offered the phone to Adam, saying, “It's Vincent.”

He looked at her and accepted the phone...but looked like he thought it was about to bite him. Streaks of blood now smeared his face. Casey went to the bar to get another cloth.

“Sir?” Adam asked. “What's she talking about?”

“Just a...a slight change of plan, Adam,” Vincent chirped in too joyous a tone, city traffic echoing around him. “Miss Blanchard wants you to stay the night, you lucky dog.”

“But I can't. You know I can't.”

“Adam, you sound far too much like Hakim, right now. *Travel plans must be followed to the letter* and all that nonsense.”

“But I...I have no money or any idea how to — ”

“Oh, for God's sake, it's not as if you're in the middle of Bangladesh — ”

“Vincent! I didn't even bring a change of clothing.”

Patricia patted his knee, making him jolt as she said, “Honey, that's what madmen're for.” Then she rose and headed upstairs.

Adam huffed, his breathing quick and sharp. He shifted into German to say, “*What? No-no, this is — my itinerary — you — Vincent, you said I wouldn't have to — that I'd be returning, at once, and — I would get the book and — and go, and I never wanted to come and —*”

“Oh, for God's sake, Adam,” Vincent all but howled, “drop the bloody German! This isn't a sodding skit from *Monty Python!*”

Adam had to gulp in air to end the explosion of words. Casey eyed him, wary, as she handed him a clean wet towel.

“Now,” Vincent continued, “do you like your job?”

Adam's voice shook as he murmured, “You...you know I do.”

“Yes. Which is why I hired you over a more qualified candidate. I knew you would be good at it, and you've proven me right. However, you have also put yourself on the wrong side of Sir Robert, and he is suggesting we need to rethink a few positions. Yours included, thanks to your actions. But if you handle this properly it...it will look quite favorable for you.”



## The Alice '65 -- Chapter 4

It took Adam a moment to say, "I see." Then his voice dropped to a growl as he added, "But I told you —"

"I understand! You know I do. I knew your father quite well and I am very sorry to ask you for this. But understand me — Sir Robert wants us to have that book and Miss Blanchard cannot give it to you until tomorrow. So stay, you must. You're there, it's just the one night, and I truly do believe your concerns are ill founded and paranoiac. And, to be perfectly honest, I don't bloody care if you have to snog bloody Miss Blanchard in the bloody middle of bloody Beverly Hills while a hundred bloody cameras are rolling in order to get it! Do it! Bring us that bloody book! Do you understand me!?"

Patricia was coming downstairs with a first aid kit and heard everything. Her expression grew tight and filled with warning as Adam leaned back on the couch, ice still to his head, now at a full and complete loss for words.

"It's on your shoulders, lad," Vincent continued. "And, again, keep in mind — it's just the one night. Do you hear me? Adam? Adam?!"

Adam finally whispered, "Yes, sir."

"There's a good lad," Vincent said. "Set yourself up on tomorrow's flight and have the bloody airline bill the change fee back to us. I'll rearrange everything, this end. I'm ringing off, now, and ordering myself another pint. Or ten. Cheers to all." He ended the call.

Adam handed the phone to Casey, numb, whispering, "He said, *Goodbye*. To you both."

"So I heard," Patricia growled. "And I cannot believe he suggested you snog her in any way, form or fashion!"

Adam gave her a confused glance. "Sorry? What was that?"

"You know damn well what I mean, so —"

Casey sighed. "Mom...I think you're thinking of *shag*."

Adam jolted at realizing what Patricia was thinking and said, "Oh, no, um, snogging just means kissing. Nothing more."

Patricia's glare went wary. "You sure 'bout that?"

"Should one really argue British slang with an Englishman?"

She smiled and patted Adam's knee, saying, "Crap, I always did get those two words confused."

"When've you ever used them?" Casey snapped as she sat beside Adam. Then in as comforting a voice as she could manage said,

## The Alice '65 -- Chapter 4

“Adam, looks like there was a foul-up in communication, so let me give you some back-story. Okay?” His eyes still on Patricia, he gave a slight nod. Casey continued with, “Vincent and I've been FedExing documents back and forth for a few months, now — ”

“Not to mention e-mails and phone calls and textin', oh my,” Patricia chirped as she dug at the blood on his face with another wet cloth. He yelped, in pain, sat up, took the cloth from her, gulped a deep breath, and began cleaning himself.

Casey stayed focused on Adam. “We finally got everything settled, but the flight you came in on arrived too late for us to get to the bank and pick up the book...and I do not want it in the house, overnight. I've had a couple of attempted break-ins and — well, I guess Vincent didn't really understand.”

“But he said to bring her straight from the bank, with guards,” Adam murmured. “So why not — ?”

“And call all kinds of attention to it?” Casey shot back. “You saw those guys camped by my gate, right?” Adam nodded. “The whole world'd know what's going on before your plane landed. You really want that instead of something nice and low-key?”

He gave her the slightest shake of his head.

“Exactly. So...I'm going to the premier of my new movie, tonight. *Eva Notorious?*” She gave him a look as if to ask, *Have you heard of it?* His blank expression told her everything, so she nodded and continued. “Well...I can't go alone. Doesn't look good. But last week I broke up with a — a dog — and can't go with him because he keeps barking like I don't mean it, and that would give him the wrong idea. He's an actor I worked with and is kind of dim about relationships.”

“Dim,” snorted Patricia. “He just doesn't understand how anyone could not wanna be with the super-perfect-super-manly Sci-Fi King of the King Fu crap.”

“Mother!” Patricia looked at her in all innocence. Casey turned back to Adam. “Thing is, we both worked on this movie, so he'll be there, tonight. If I don't have a date or come with someone he knows is just a friend, he'll keep hounding me to get back together. But if he sees me come with another guy...I think he'll get the hint and find someone else's yard to dump his load.”

Adam finished cleaning his face so Patricia took the bloody

## The Alice '65 -- Chapter 4

cloth from him. “Thanks,” he said then turned to Casey. “Um, so you want me to attend this premier with you? Me? As *your* date?”

“Yeah.”

“This was arranged with Vincent?”

Casey hesitated then said, “That was...was just a screw-up. In communication. This was something I came up with and, like I said, I just thought since you'd have to stay the night, anyway, you'd like to go. We'll get you a nice suit and you get to walk the carpet. See the movie before anybody else. What's even better is, you're not a Hollywood person. I...I think that would finally hammer the message home to him.”

“This all sounds rather odd,” Adam said as Patricia dabbed alcohol on the cut. He jerked away from her. “Ow, that stings.”

“Means it's workin’,” she smiled.

“Mom, please.” Casey turned back to him. “Adam, you said you saw *Ilithium Four*.”

“Twice. It put the child next to me to sleep — on my lap. But it did keep him from vomiting on me a third time.”

A sharp laugh burst from Casey. “Nice to know the movie was good for something.”

“Not really. He's still potty-training. This is my second change — in his father's clothes! Under normal circumstances I'd not be caught dead in this ensemble.”

“Honey, what's wrong with lookin' like Popeye?” asked Patricia. “He's strong to the finish.”

Casey shushed her with a wave of her hand. “Adam, you remember the actor who played Creggan? As an adult?”

Adam rolled his eyes. “I wish I could forget — him?” He looked at Casey, in horror. “Is *he* your former — ?” She gave him a shrug. “Oh, God, he was awful! The complete opposite of Creggan in the book! Swagger and stupid quips and-and-and-and idiotic faux sensitivity and — bloody hell!”

“Casey, this one's got good taste,” said Patricia as she applied a fat lavender bandage to his scrape.

Casey ran a soothing hand across the back of his shoulders as she said, “Adam, you'd be so perfect for tonight. You're somebody who's smart and different and the complete opposite of him. So c'mon, let me show you my town with people everybody wants to know and

## The Alice '65 -- Chapter 4

prove to my ex he means doggie-doo-doo to me. I can promise you it'll be a night you'll never forget.”

He gave her a long wary look before he finally whispered, “Well, first I should reschedule my flight.”

“Mom'll do that. I'll even throw in a first class ticket home, for your pain. You get champagne, caviar, classy crackers.”

“No promises about the vomit,” Patricia just had to add.

He glanced between them, still very unsure. “And you'll give me the book, tomorrow? And we go straight to the airport?”

Casey nodded, her eyes gleaming with triumph. “I'll even have an armed security guard from the bank drive us. In plainclothes, of course.”

He finally shrugged an uncertain okay.

That's when Patricia's cell phone rang. She touched her earpiece, with a wicked grin and said, “Talk about timin', honey, here comes the madman.” Then she leaned in close to Adam and whispered, “Be afraid — be very afraid.”

His eyes grew huge and he looked like he was about to run.

And if glares could kill, Casey could have been guilty of mommy-murder five times over.