Title: It worked for Alice

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At times, memory crashes over me like the curl of a gigantic wave, knocking me down and rolling me over and over, leaving me helpless to break the surface, my heart clenched like a fist around everything I've lost and everything I still have to lose.

I'm lucky. I know I am. We're here. Max and I saved ourselves and so much more. Others have nothing. I should be grateful. I *am*. It's only that my life remains in Florida. I keep looking back. If I'm not a pillar of salt, it isn't for lack of trying.

Quick, devouring fire might have been better, but for us it was the inexorable slide of filthy water welling up between the tiles as I struggled to empty our home and salvage whatever I could. For us, it was sleeping in this friend's spare room and squatting in that friend's in-law apartment. These days, I live with ghosts: stopped clocks and stripped table legs and a yearning for everything I couldn't save. Fire might have been cleaner.

Max kept me sane through it all, even the scalding ordeal of sheltering in a trailer the size of a shoebox, parked beside the corpse of what had been our home. I thought cats hated change, but he handled five moves in nine months with dignity, except for the time he tried to leap through the black glass door on a hanging cupboard in the trailer. I left the door open after that and made no complaint about cat hair on my undies. I'd've hidden with him if I could have.

So now we're here, and it's fine. We're good. I'm blessed to have friends who have given me space to sort myself out. It's a lovely house. There's even a screened porch, which Max loves. How astonishing to be back in Virginia, which feels almost like home. I'm adjusting, with Max's support. I found a church, where I'm starting to recognize faces. It's ... good.

Well, not now. At present, I'm gaping at a perfect ring of toadstools in the backyard, and the rational part of me is scoffing, "Don't be stupid - there's no truth to the stories. It's a fairy tale, you idiot!" Meanwhile, the irrational, desperate part is screaming, "Do it! Take the chance! How could it possibly be any worse?"

I blame it on Max. I neglected to latch the screen door, forgetting he has monkey paws. I didn't realize he was gone until I saw him from the kitchen window, delicately pacing over the ridge that drops down to the creek.

I rapped on the glass. He turned and favored me with a quintessential cat stare - "I'll get back to you" - and he was gone. That cat is my main source of joy and sanity. I can't lose him. I didn't even stop to pull on shoes before stumbling down the porch stairs and mincing my way across the yard, to find the fairy ring spread across my path like an invitation to the ball, like the doorway to Narnia.

"Go on, you know you want to."

The silky voice in my ear makes me flinch, but some shred of self-preservation keeps me from shying into the circle. I turn in place and stare.

He's perched on one of the toadstools. It takes me a moment to realize I'm looking up at him. a real Wonderland moment. His skin is smooth and nut-brown. Mossy hair springs from his scalp. When he grins, his face splits around a mouthful of thorny teeth.

I'm gobsmacked to behold a story archetype pop up in front of me. "Where did you come from?" I gasp.

"Underground, of course. Come and have a look."

I shake my head, bemused. Grass stalks tower over me, sharp and supple. I could break an ankle tripping over the beetle scuttling across my feet. It's impossible.

"It's exactly what you're looking for," he urges.

He might be right, but I don't like his looks. "Should you even be here? You're an ... Old World thing, aren't you?"

"Old, new, it hardly matters. Fools are everywhere."

"I'm a fool, then?"

He gives me a sardonic look, and I shrug. Yeah, okay. I'm a mess, no sense denying it.

"Think of it as an adventure. What's keeping you here? A lot of dead stuff."

"Well. Max."

"Your friends will take him."

"But they already have four cats. Besides, I ... I'm working on a story. I have a deadline." I hate the way my voice trails off.

"It won't be worth reading." He waves a dismissive hand. My eyes catch on his claws. "And you'll never finish that book you're pretending to write, either."

His words slide between my ribs. I can't breathe. He sees it, presses his advantage, his voice suave and seductive. "Just one more burden. Wouldn't it be a blessing to dump it all? The horrible weight of obligation? The need to seem strong and brave and grateful?"

To my horror, I find myself nodding. *Yes. To drop off the map. To run away. Max will be fine. I was never going to finish the book anyway.*

I feel myself weakening, but I can't let go of Max or my novel, my characters. I attempt to reject the offer.

"What are you, my inner critic? I've always imagined you as my first boss."

For a moment, he looks exactly like my former boss, tall, bearded and sneering. He shifts back. "Isn't this your idea of how I should look?"

"If it were, you'd look like David Bowie, not a Gringotts goblin."

That startles a laugh out of him. "Pop culture has a lot to answer for," he snorts. "So, you're a *writer*," he adds, the word oozing disdain.

"Yes."

"All the more reason. Think what you'll experience! You'll have enough material for a dozen books."

He's suddenly right there, crowding me, and I recoil instinctively. His grin widens. I'm too close to the fairy ring. All it would take is a push.

All it would take is a push, but he isn't pushing. I realize he's waiting for me to take the irrevocable step. He can't force it on me. I must choose it. I must wish to escape, to have everything stop for a day or a year or a century. The worry, the obligation, the pain, simply gone.

It's what I want, isn't it? Then why am I resisting? Maybe because I've always hated a hard sell. And because I know, whatever shape he wears, he's not peddling fairy tale adventures.

"Sorry," I tell him. "I do have my bad days, but mostly I find I can muddle through on my own. With Max's help."

As if I summoned him, Max appears at my shoulder, a massive grey tabby monolith. He hisses at the creature, who vanishes before I can say, "You have no power over me."

"Well, that was unexpected." I lean against my protector. "Any ideas on how I get back to my proper size?"

He blinks at me, then looks at the toadstool. Of course. I reach out to break a chunk from each side.

After all, it worked for Alice.