

Alice  
in time

A black silhouette of a woman walking to the right, carrying a shoulder bag. The silhouette is positioned to the right of the word 'Alice' and partially overlaps the word 'in time'.

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## Chapter Three

Dad calls a taxi to take us home because he's been drinking and can't drive us back himself. The hall light is on, but when I open the door I know Mum's not there because the house feels empty. There's a note stuck on the fridge door.

*Dear Alice,*

*Sorry, had to go back into work. I shouldn't be too long but if I'm not back by 7.30 please make sure Rory gets to bed.*

*Love Mum*

I look at the clock above the cooker and it's eight-thirty. This happens all the time. She's always 'having to nip into work'.

While I've been reading the note, Rory has turned all the lights on downstairs and the television and now he's racing his truck up and down the hallway. He hasn't quite got the hang of the controls yet and it keeps bumping into the skirting board, leaving great big dents. This doesn't worry me particularly,

because basically our house is a dump. The hall floor is wooden, but not the sort of wooden floor you see in magazines, which have been laid and are all flat and polished and smart. Ours is just the floorboards which are all dusty and spattered with paint. Mum pulled the lino up years ago and said, 'Look at those lovely floorboards. They'll come up a treat when they've been sanded and waxed.' Only they never have been.

We used to live in a lovely house. By 'we' I mean Mum and Dad and me. Then when Rory was born, Mum threw Dad out and we had to sell the house and me and Mum and Rory had to move. We couldn't afford to buy another house so Mum rented this one – which is truly horrible. I don't know what she was thinking when she chose to live here. It belongs to an old lady, Miss Maybrooke – a friend of Mum's, who was moving into a nursing home down the road. Mum said we had to have it because the rent was so cheap. Well, of course it is – the place is a tip.

Mum said we'd just have to make the best of it and when she'd done it up, it would be fine. The only problem is she never has done it up because, she says, she hasn't got the time or the money. As a result, most of the things in the house are really old-fashioned and might look all right if you're about ninety years old with very bad eyesight. The front room has got a gas fire in it which smells even when it's not on. The walls are covered in really hideous wallpaper, all green and brown. Mum says it looks Victorian and might actually be original. She says this in a sort of awed voice, as if that should mean we can't paint over it or something. So what if it's Victorian. It doesn't make it nice.

Miss Maybrooke left some of her furniture behind and Mum says we have to keep it because it's not ours to dispose of and there's nowhere else for it to go. It's all big and heavy and made out of dark wood. When I was younger, it used to scare me, the way it sort of loomed over me. Now it just irritates me because it makes the rooms feel cramped and dark.

The only room that isn't completely hideous is the kitchen. Mum did get a bit of money when they sold the old house and she used it to fit a new kitchen. It can look nice when Mum bothers to clean it up. At the moment, all the breakfast things are piled in the sink and there's a puddle of milk on the table (where Rory sits, of course).

Unfortunately, there wasn't enough money left over to do the bathroom as well. Mum says that Miss Maybrooke was very proud of the bathroom because she had had a new one fitted. But that was way back in the 1970s when, according to Mum, an 'avocado' suite was all the rage. So now we have to put up with a sludge-green bath, sink and loo.

Sometimes I feel like I'm living in a museum, but mostly I feel as though I'm living in someone else's house, so I never really feel at home.

I'm dying to be alone with my new phone, so I take it up to my bedroom. First of all I have to get out of this dress. The relief when I've got it off and put my pyjamas on is bliss. I get the phone out of the box and look at it. To be honest, I'm a bit scared of it. We don't have a lot of high-tech things in this house. We haven't even got a microwave, let alone a computer, or a PlayStation. We've got a television but it's not a flat-screen one or anything fancy and we can't get Sky on it.

I decide to work out as much as I can about the phone by fiddling around with it, because the instruction book looks even scarier than the phone. I manage to get into the phone book and work out how to list people's numbers. I start off with our home number, which I list under *Mum*, then I put in Dad's number at the flat and wish that I'd asked him and Trish for their mobile numbers. If Imogen would get a phone then we could text each other all the time – it would be great. She says there's no point in her having one because there's absolutely no one she wants to talk to. Perhaps she'll change her mind now I've got one.

I can't believe I've only got two numbers to enter so I put in Mrs Archer's number. She lives down the road and picks Rory up from school when Mum's working. I usually have to collect him from her on my way home. After that I really can't think of any more numbers I might need and I suddenly feel a bit depressed, sort of like *having* the phone isn't half as exciting as *wanting* it.

It might be different if there was someone who could show me how it worked properly. The camera on it is great though, and I look around for something I can take a picture of.

I hate my room – like the rest of the house, it doesn't really feel like mine. Even though I stick posters and postcards all over the walls it still manages to look like I'm camping out in someone's guest bedroom. It's a complete tip. There are clothes all over the floor and most of the drawers are hanging open. Mum's always nagging me to clean it up, but I can't see the point. It's horrible anyway, whether I tidy it up or not.

The best thing in here is the strings of lights I bought once

when I went to Ikea with Mum. They're hung all round my bed head (you guessed it, it's big and dark and Victorian), and all round the fireplace. This is a big old fireplace. It's got tiles down the side, which I quite like because they've got a blue and gold leaf pattern all over them. Other than that it's useless and I have to stuff newspaper up it to stop the draughts and so that birds don't fall down the chimney and end up in my room.

In the end, I point the camera at myself, but because I'm concentrating so hard on how it works I forget to smile and the flash goes off and the picture of me comes out looking like a ghost. A frightened, depressed ghost. I'm just fiddling around looking for the delete option when I hear a crash from downstairs. Damn, I forgot about Rory. It's quarter to ten and he should have been in bed hours ago. Mum will probably be home any minute and I'll be in serious trouble.

When I get downstairs it's ominously quiet. I push the door of the sitting room open and peer inside. I can tell immediately what has happened, despite the fact it looks as though a small bomb has gone off. Rory has taken the throw off the sofa and tried to construct a tent with it between the sofa and the table. In order to stop it from slipping off the polished surface of the table, he has piled anything he could find on top of the table. Several heaps of books and DVDs plus a couple of chairs and a lamp, are now lying on the floor with the throw crumpled up beneath them. There is a suspicious-looking, Rory-sized lump beneath all of this.

'Rory, get out of there immediately.' I am aware of how like my mother I sound and hate myself for it.

The lump doesn't move.

'Rory, NOW.'

Still nothing. For one glorious moment I entertain the fantasy that Rory is dead. I gloss over the fact that I will be blamed and that my mother will be in trouble for leaving a fourteen-year-old in charge of a seven-year-old, and fast forward to the funeral, where I look stunning in black and have to be supported by one of the young, handsome coffin-bearers as a few artfully arranged tears roll down my pale but flawless cheeks without smudging my waterproof mascara at all.

This may seem a bit harsh, but let me explain. If it wasn't for Rory my life would not have fallen apart. Mum would still be the old Mum that she was before he was born and she might not have thrown Dad out.

You see, after Rory was born, Mum suffered from really bad post-natal depression. It was so bad that some days she never even got out of bed. Gran was still alive then, and she did her best to look after us, but she had enough on her plate with Mum, so I had to help out a lot by looking after Rory. Gran used to joke that my little brother was well named and that it should have been spelt Roary instead.

All Rory ever seemed to do was scream and it was usually my job to make him stop. I'd go into his room and see him in his cot, his ugly, red face even redder and uglier than normal, all scrunched up in a scream, and somehow I'd have to stop him. Picking him up and rocking him was no good because it just made him scream all the louder. I discovered that if I picked up his toys and made them walk along the edge of the cot and gave them funny voices then he stopped crying. I'd start by making

the voice quiet so that if he wanted to hear it he'd have to stop making a noise.

As he got older and had one of those cots with bars and could sit up and look out, I discovered that if I took all my toys into his room and played with them on the floor in front of his cot that usually kept him quiet for hours. I'd take all my Barbie dolls in there and play out stories with them. It was a bit like being at the theatre for him. He had the best front-row seat and I got to play everyone from the princess to the prince and the evil witch. Of course he didn't really know what was going on, so I could make anything up as long as I made them have funny voices and made them move around a lot.

This worked quite well until Rory was about two. By then Mum was getting better and not relying on me so much. But then Gran died and Mum got bad again for about a year. If she was in bed having a nap, it was up to me to keep Rory quiet.

The problem was, the old game of him watching me play didn't work any more. Now he wanted to play as well, but his idea of fun was to stuff my Barbie dolls into his slobbery mouth, rip their limbs from their bodies and stick their feet up his nose. Those were the darkest days but I managed to convince myself that, as I was nearly ten, I was getting too old for them anyway.

Then last year Mum got a job at the old people's home, or nursing home I should say, where Miss Maybrooke is. It's only at the end of our road, which Mum thought would be great because she wouldn't need to drive there and she'd be on hand if we needed her. Unfortunately, all it means is that when they're short-staffed, which seems to me to be all the time,

they call on my mum because she lives so close and she says she can't say no, because the boss gets funny with her if she does, and cuts her hours down. I can't help thinking that Mum is a mug to play into his hands in this way and she should tell him where to get off. Anyhow, it means that she's never here any more and it's down to me to look after Rory again.

So I hope you can see that my fantasy wasn't that harsh after all and that if Rory wasn't here my life would be drastically improved. That's why I conceived the Plan I was talking about earlier, where I go and live with Dad and Trish and can lead a civilised and peaceful existence. Which reminds me, I forgot to mention it to Dad at the wedding. I've been trying to find the right moment for ages now. I will definitely do it next time I see him.

I make a half-hearted attempt at picking up some of the things that are all over the floor. Rory's school bag has burst open and his tatty books are littered about. As I pick up his literacy book, it falls open and catches my eye because at the top of the page it says *My Big Sister*. His homework was to write an essay on me! I can't resist reading it.

*My big sister is big and scary.*

The cheek! I'll give him scary! I read on.

*She shouts a lot and she doesn't like me much. I wish I had a little sister then I could shout at her. I like it when she reads me stories but she never does. She is mean and she smells pooey.*

That's the thanks I get, after all I do for him! I see with some satisfaction that the teacher wasn't too impressed either. She's circled the word 'pooey' and written, *This is not a nice word, Rory.*

Rory has got bored with playing dead and comes out from under the chaos. I stuff the book back into his school bag.

'Quick,' I tell him, 'get into bed before Mum gets back.'

'Never,' he says defiantly.

'You'll be in trouble.'

'You mean you'll be in trouble,' he says, giving me a sly grin so I feel like hitting him. Unfortunately he's got me on that one. Mum will be cross with me for not getting him into bed and he knows it, which makes my job all the more difficult.

'You said you'd read me a story,' he whines. 'I'll go if you read me a story.'

'Don't be bloody ridiculous, it's far too late,' I say. There is nothing I hate more than reading Rory a story. And I'm certainly not going to read him one after what he wrote about me.

'But you promised!' He's folded his arms now and stuck out his bottom lip. The next stage is a full-blown tantrum.

'I never promised,' I yell back at him.

'You did, too.'

'Didn't.'

'Did.'

This could go on for hours, and sometimes does, because I want to see who is the first to crack, even though it's usually me; Rory can go on all day. I decide I've had enough already so I grab him by the arm and drag him into the hall and of course he starts screaming so I don't hear the key in the lock as Mum lets herself in.

'For God's sake, Alice. Why isn't he in bed? It's ten o'clock! He's not even in his pyjamas.'

Great. Here we go.

'Is it really too much to ask? I've just done a twelve-hour shift and I have to come home to this.'

I let go of Rory's arm and he runs, blubbering, to Mum who gives him a big hug.

'She hurt me,' he wails and Mum gives me that awful disappointed look.

'You're lucky I didn't kill you,' I yell.

'She promised she'd read me a story and now she won't. *And* she swore at me.'

'Enough,' says Mum. She looks at Rory. 'You go upstairs and get into your pyjamas and clean your teeth and then Alice will come up and read you a story.'

'Mum!' I yell, as Rory gives me a triumphant smile and scurries upstairs. 'That is *so* unfair.'

'Don't start,' says Mum, firmly. 'If you made a promise, you must keep it.'

'But I didn't.' My voice is getting more shrill, but I can't help it. She hasn't even asked about the wedding.

'Stop arguing and just do as you're told for once.'

'Why is it always me that has to do as I'm told? Why can't Rory do as he's told?' I scream back. I can't remember the last time I had a normal conversation with my mother where one or the other of us wasn't shouting. Then I remember that I'm not even meant to be speaking to her.

Just then Rory, now in his pyjamas, comes shooting down the stairs.

'Mum, look what Dad gave me.' He retrieves the monster truck from behind the umbrella stand and shoves it at Mum.

'Very nice,' she says, but I can see her lips pursing and I know exactly what she's thinking, even though she'd never say it to Rory. She's calculating what it will cost to buy new batteries when these run out, and thinking how thoughtless Dad is to buy him such a present.

'He bought Alice a mobile phone,' pipes up Rory. Mum's mouth goes so thin at this news that her lips practically disappear. She glares at me.

'What?' I say as nonchalantly as possible.

'Is that true?' she asks.

She looks really upset. I know exactly what she's thinking. She's thinking, if Dad can afford to give me such an expensive present, how come he can't afford to pay her more maintenance and why does he keep missing payments? Of course she'll never say this out loud because she never badmouths Dad in front of us. Not that that makes any difference when I can tell what she's thinking. She should give Dad a break. After all, he spent the money on us, which is more than she ever does. Hence our long-running argument about the mobile phone.

'Yes, he did,' I reply. 'And it's just as well, because I could really have used it this morning.' Damn, too late I realise what I've said. I wasn't going to tell Mum about going to the wrong place and missing the wedding.

Mum is busy taking her coat off and getting her slippers on and I think I might have got away with it but of course I'd forgotten about Rory and his big mouth.

'We got lost and then we got wet and had to run and then we had to hide from some bad people and we never saw the wedding. We just went to the pub instead.'

Thanks, Rory. Now Mum's going to think that Dad is totally incompetent and if I'm not careful she might not let him look after us at weekends. Not that we've been to see him much lately. He's had so much work on.

'It wasn't a big deal,' I say airily. 'The taxi driver didn't know that the registry office had been moved to the town hall, that's all. If I'd had a phone I could have rung Dad, and he could have come and got us.' I've definitely scored a point there, I think.

'No he couldn't, silly. He was getting married,' Rory points out.

'Whatever.' I shrug and go into the kitchen.

I still can't believe we missed Dad's wedding. He finally finds a lovely woman that he wants to spend the rest of his life with and we miss the big moment. Suddenly I feel like crying. I flop down into a chair and rest my head on the table and think about what an awful day it's been. My peace is soon shattered when Mum and Rory come into the kitchen.

'I'm hungry,' wails Rory, 'I want something to eat.'

'What did you have for tea?' she asks us. There's a silence while I think. We haven't had anything to eat since lunchtime, which seems an awfully long time ago now.

'We didn't have anything,' pipes up Rory.

Mum gives me The Look.

'It's not my fault. We've only just got home.'

'No we haven't. We've been home ages. I built a den but Alice ruined it and buried me under a pile of books and stuff. I could hardly breathe. I thought I was going to die.' Rory is always exaggerating and tries to make me look bad whenever he can.

'That is such a lie.' I take a swipe at him across the table because I know that Mum always believes him over me.

'Stop it, you two,' says Mum. 'I'm too tired for this. I'm going to make us some scrambled egg on toast and then we'll all go to bed.'

While she shuffles around the kitchen, Rory tells her all about the day and I can tell by the way she is bashing the eggs to death in the jug that she doesn't really want to hear about Dad's wedding. Well, it's her fault for throwing him out. In fact, the thought of that makes me so cross I decide to chip in.

'They had the reception in a really lovely pub,' I tell her.

'Oh,' says Mum, 'which one was that?'

'I can't remember what it was called,' I say.

'I can,' says Rory, 'it was called the King's Head. I remember because Terry told me that there used to be a picture outside of a king who had his head chopped off. But Terry said people complained because it was too gory. There was blood and stuff coming out of it —' He would have carried on if Mum hadn't interrupted.

'The King's Head! What, the one in the middle of town?'

I don't say anything, because I don't want Dad to look bad, but it's too late.

'He actually had a wedding reception in there?'

'Yes,' said Rory. 'It was great. We watched the racing and I played on the fruit machine.'

Mum's lips are pursed up again, but she just sighs and gives me that look again. As if it was my fault! I've had enough. I get up so quickly that my chair falls over. I don't care, I leave it where it is and shout, 'It was a lovely wedding and Dad looked

so handsome and Trish was really happy and everyone had a brilliant time,' then I flounce out of the kitchen and run up to my bedroom.

When I'm alone I start crying, I don't know why. I pick up the pink dress that I left in a heap on the floor but instead of putting it in the laundry basket I stuff it into the wastepaper bin – but only after I've blown my nose on it. Then I crawl into bed and pull the duvet right up over my head and try to imagine that I'm somewhere else and *someone* else.