

REBECCA JAMES

Beautiful
Malice


ALLEN & UNWIN



I DIDN'T GO TO ALICE'S FUNERAL.

I was pregnant at the time, crazy and wild with grief. But it wasn't Alice I grieved for. No, I hated Alice by then and was glad that she was dead. It was Alice who had ruined my life, taken the best thing I'd ever had and smashed it into a million unfixable pieces. I wasn't crying for Alice but because of her.

But now, four years later and a lifetime happier; finally settled into a comfortable and routine life with my daughter Sarah (my sweet, oh-so-serious little Sarah), I sometimes wish that I had made it to Alice's funeral after all.

The thing is, I see Alice sometimes – at the supermarket, at the gates of Sarah's kindergarten, at the club where Sarah and I sometimes go for a cheap meal. I catch glimpses of Alice's glossy, corn-blonde hair, her model-like body, her eye-catching clothes, from the corner of my eye and I stop to stare, my heart pounding. It only takes me an instant to remember that she is dead and gone, that it can't possibly be her, but I have to force myself to get closer, to reassure myself that her ghost isn't haunting me. Close-up these women are sometimes similar, albeit never, never as beautiful as Alice. More frequently, though, on closer inspection they look nothing like her.

I turn away and get on with whatever I was doing before, but all the warmth will have drained from my face and lips, my

fingertips will tingle unpleasantly with adrenaline. My day is, invariably, ruined.

I should have gone to the funeral. I wouldn't have had to cry, or feign despair. I could have laughed bitterly and spat into the pit. Who would have cared? If only I'd seen them lower her casket into the ground, watched them throw the dirt into her grave, I would be more certain that she was really dead and buried.

I would know, deep down inside, that Alice was gone for good.



‘DO YOU WANT TO COME?’ ALICE PARRIE IS LOOKING DOWN, SMILING. It’s lunchtime and I’m sitting beneath a tree, alone, absorbed in a book.

‘Sorry.’ I shade my eyes and look up. ‘Come where?’

Alice hands me a piece of paper.

I take it and read. It’s a brightly coloured photocopy of an invitation to Alice’s eighteenth birthday party. *Come one and come all!! Bring your friends!!* it reads. *Free champagne! Free food!* Only someone as popular and as self-assured as Alice would issue such an invitation; anyone more ordinary would feel as if they were begging for guests. Why me? I wonder. I know of Alice, everyone knows of Alice, but I’ve never spoken to her before. She is one of those girls – beautiful, popular, impossible to miss.

I fold the invitation in half and nod. ‘I’ll try. It sounds like fun,’ I lie.

Alice looks at me for a few seconds. Then she sighs and plonks herself down next to me, so close that one of her knees rests heavily against mine.

‘You will not.’ She grins.

I feel my cheeks begin to colour. Even though my entire life can sometimes feel like a facade, a wall of secrets, I’m not good at lying. I look down at my lap. ‘Probably not.’

‘But I want you to come, Katherine,’ she says. ‘It’d really mean a lot to me.’

I’m surprised that Alice even knows my name but it’s even more surprising – in fact, quite unbelievable – that she wants me to come to her party. I’m practically unknown at Drummond High and have no close friends. I come and go quietly, alone, and get on with my studies. I try to avoid bringing attention to myself. I do well enough, but my grades aren’t exceptional. I play no sport, have joined no clubs. And though I know I can’t do this forever – live my entire life as a shadow – for now it suits. I’m hiding, I know that, I’m being a coward, but right now I need to be invisible, to be the kind of person who arouses no curiosity. That way they need never know who I really am, or what has happened.

I close my book and start to pack away my lunch things.

‘Wait.’ Alice puts her hand on my knee. I look at her as coldly as I can and she withdraws it. ‘I’m serious. I really do want you to come. And I think what you said to Dan last week was fantastic. I really wish I could think of things like that to say, but I never can. I’m just not quick enough. You know, I never would have thought about that woman’s feelings like that. Not until I heard you tell Dan off. I mean, you were great, what you said was just so right, and you really showed him up to be the idiot that he is.’

I know immediately what Alice is referring to – the one and only time I’d let my guard down, momentarily forgotten myself. I don’t often confront people any more. In fact it’s something I try very hard to avoid in my day-to-day life. But the way Dan Johnson and his friends had behaved two weeks ago had disgusted me so much that I couldn’t help myself. We had a guest

speaker talking about career planning and university admissions. Admittedly, the speech was boring, we'd heard it all a billion times before and the woman talking was nervous and so she stuttered and hesitated and talked in confusing circles, only becoming worse as the crowd became noisier, more restless. Dan Johnson and his group of creepy friends had taken advantage of her. They were so cruel and deliberately disruptive that the woman ended up leaving in humiliated tears. When it was all over I stood behind Dan in the hallway and tapped him on the shoulder.

Dan turned around with a smug, self-satisfied look on his face, clearly anticipating some kind of approbation for his behaviour.

'Did it ever occur to you,' I started, my voice surprisingly strong, fuelled by anger, 'how much you've hurt that woman? This is her life, Daniel, her career, her professional reputation. Your pathetic cry for attention means a whole lot of humiliation for her. I feel sorry for you, Daniel, you must be very sad and small inside to need to bring someone down like that, someone you don't even know.'

'You were amazing,' Alice continues. 'And to be honest I was totally surprised. I mean, I think everyone was. No one speaks to Dan like that.' She shakes her head. 'No one.'

Well I do. I think to myself. At least the real me does.

'It was admirable. Courageous.'

And it's that word that does it: 'Courageous'. I so want to be courageous. I so want the coward in me to be obliterated and smashed and destroyed that I can no longer resist her.

I stand up and hook my bag over my shoulder. 'Okay,' I say, surprising myself. 'Okay, I'll come.'

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ALICE INSISTS THAT WE GET READY FOR THE PARTY TOGETHER. She picks me up in her car, a battered old Volkswagen, shortly after lunch on the day of the party and takes me to her place. She lives alone, she tells me as she speeds along, weaving in and out of lanes much faster than any P-plater is officially allowed, in a one-bedroom flat in the inner city. I'm surprised by this, astonished really. I'd imagined that someone like Alice would live in a comfortable house in the suburbs with her devoted parents. I'd imagined her being spoiled, looked after, coddled (just as I used to be) and the fact that she lives alone makes her suddenly seem more interesting, more complicated than I've given her credit for. It's clear that Alice and I have more in common than I'd imagined.

I want to ask her a million questions – Where are her parents? How does she afford a flat? Is she ever afraid? Is she lonely? – but I keep quiet. I have secrets of my own and have learned that asking questions only puts me at risk of being interrogated myself. It is safer not to be too curious about others, safer not to ask.

Her flat is in a square, very ordinary-looking brick block. The stairwell is dark and uninviting, but when we get to her apartment, breathless after jogging up four flights of stairs, she opens the door to a room full of colour and warmth.

The walls are a deep burnt orange and are decorated with large, brightly painted abstract canvasses. Two enormous, soft-looking couches are draped with burgundy fabric and covered with colourful, ethnic-looking cushions. Unlit candles cover every horizontal surface.

‘*Voilà!* My humble abode.’ Alice drags me inside and watches my face expectantly as I look around the room. ‘What do you think? I did it all myself, you know. You should have seen it when I moved in, so boring and plain. It’s amazing what a bit of colour can do to a room, though. A bit of creativity and some bright paint is all you really need.’

‘This is so cool,’ I say. And I can’t help but feel a little envious. Alice’s flat is so funky, so much younger, than the modern, minimalist apartment I live in.

‘Really? You really like it?’

‘Yes,’ I laugh. ‘I really do.’

‘I’m so glad. I want you to like it as much as I do because I plan for us to spend a lot of time together. And I can see us spending a lot of time right here, in this room, talking and talking and talking, sharing our precious secrets deep into the night.’

I’ve heard that charming, powerful people have the knack of making you feel as though you’re the only person in the world and now I know exactly what that means. I’m not quite sure what she does, or how she does it – another person would have come across as overly eager, obsequious even – but when Alice gives me her attention like that, I feel golden, warm with the certainty that I’m fully understood.

For a brief, insane moment, I imagine telling her my secret. I picture it all clearly. Me and Alice in this room; both a little tipsy,

both giggly and happy and ever so slightly self-conscious with the feeling you have when you've made a new friend, a special friend; I put my hand on her knee so that she is still and quiet, so that she knows I'm about to say something important, and then I tell her. I tell her quickly, without pausing, without meeting her eyes. And when I've finished she is warm and forgiving and understanding, as I hoped she'd be. She embraces me. Everything is all right and I am lighter for having told. I am free.

But this is all just a dream. A crazy fantasy. I tell her nothing.

I'm wearing my usual costume of jeans and boots and shirt and I've brought some make-up with me to apply before we go to the party, but Alice insists that I wear a dress. Her wardrobe is bursting with them, in all sorts of colours and lengths and styles. There must at least a hundred, and some still have tags. I wonder where she gets the money, how she affords so many clothes, and I'm tempted, once again, to ask.

'I have a bit of a clothing habit.' She grins.

'Really?' I joke. 'I would never have known.'

Alice reaches into the wardrobe and starts pulling out dresses. She tosses them on the bed. 'Here. Choose one. I haven't even worn most of these.' She holds up a blue one. 'You like?'

The dress is pretty but I've already spotted the one I'd really like to wear. It's red and patterned in paisley, a wrap-around dress with a tie-waist, made from some kind of stretch material. It looks like something my mother might have worn in the 1970s and would go nicely with the long boots I'm wearing.

Alice is watching me. She laughs and picks up the red dress. 'This one?'

I nod.

'It's gorgeous, isn't it?' She presses it against herself and looks in the mirror. 'Expensive too. It's a Pakbelle and Kanon. You have good taste.'

'It's beautiful. Why don't you wear it? It's still got the tag on it, you've never even worn it. You were probably saving it.'

'Nup. I'm wearing something else. Something special.' Alice holds it up in front of me. 'Try it on.'

The dress fits perfectly, and as I suspected, goes well with my boots. The red flatters my dark skin and hair, and I smile at Alice happily in the reflection of the mirror. I'm excited now, glad that I agreed to come.

Alice goes to the kitchen and takes a bottle from her fridge. It's champagne. It's pink.

'Yum,' she says, kissing the bottle. 'My one true love. And hey, as of yesterday, I'm actually legal.'

She opens the bottle, aiming the cork at the ceiling, and, without asking if I want any, pours us both a glass. She takes hers into the bathroom to shower and dress, and when she's gone I lift my glass and take a tiny sip. I haven't had alcohol since the night my family was destroyed. Not a drop. But then, I haven't enjoyed myself with a friend since then, either, and so I tip the glass up to my mouth again and let myself enjoy the feel of the bubbles against my lips, on my tongue. I let another small mouthful slide down my throat and imagine that I can feel the effect immediately, the alcohol rushing through my veins, making my lips tingle, my head light. The champagne is

sweet and easy to drink, like a cordial, and I have to force myself not to swallow it all too quickly.

I savour each mouthful, enjoying the way my body relaxes more and more as I drink. When the glass is empty I am happier, lighter, more carefree – *a normal seventeen-year-old* – and I plonk myself down on Alice’s colourful sofa and giggle at nothing at all. And I’m still just sitting there, smiling, enjoying the comfortable heaviness of my body in the chair, when Alice returns to the room.

‘Wow. Alice. You look . . .’ I shrug, unable to find an adequate word. ‘You look stunning!’

She lifts her arms and spins on her toes. ‘Why thank you, Miss Katherine,’ she says.

Change next three paras to present tense? (Yes – have changed to present tense because I agree that changing to past here is awkward but it means I’ve had to delete next para because it was a comment Katherine could only have made with hindsight – she doesn’t know Alice well enough yet – but I don’t think it matters. Saying how beautiful Alice is should be enough!) – Alice is beautiful; strikingly beautiful. She is tall, with generous breasts and long, shapely legs and her face is a picture of perfection: her eyes a deep and glorious blue, her skin golden and luminous.

I’m not exactly ugly, but beside Alice I feel completely unremarkable.

While we’re waiting for our taxi Alice takes our empty glasses to the kitchen and refills them with champagne. As I stand up to get my glass, my head spins a little. It’s not an unpleasant feeling – in fact I feel easy and loose and relaxed. And this feeling, this light-headed happiness, this sense that the world is a benign and

friendly place is suddenly very familiar and I realise just how much this feeling scares me. It's the trick alcohol plays with your mind – convincing you to let your guard down, to trust the world to look after you – but I know that this feeling of safety is only a dangerous illusion. Alcohol encourages you take risks that you wouldn't normally, alcohol means you make stupid choices. And more than anyone, I know how devastating the consequences of a single bad choice can be. I live with them every day.

I accept the glass but I only pretend to sip on it, barely letting the liquid wet my lips, and when the taxi arrives I tip the rest of it down the sink.

Alice has hired the ballroom at the top of the Lion Hotel. It is huge and grand, with enormous timber windows and magnificent views of the city. There are white balloons, white tablecloths, a band. There are caterers polishing champagne glasses, and platters of expensive-looking finger food. And because it's a private party nobody asks us for ID when Alice gets us both a glass of champagne.

'This is fantastic.' I look at Alice curiously. 'Did your mum and dad do all this for you?'

'No.' Alice snorts dismissively. 'They wouldn't know how to host a barbecue, let alone something like this.'

'Do they live in Sydney?' I ask.

'Who?' She frowns.

'Your parents.'

'No. No they don't, thank God. They live up north.'

I wonder how Alice can afford to live in Sydney, how she pays her rent. I had assumed that her parents supported her, but it now seems unlikely.

‘Anyway,’ I say. ‘It’s very nice of you to put on a big party like this for your friends. I don’t think I could ever be so generous. I’d rather spend the money on myself. A world trip or something cool like that.’

‘Generous? You reckon?’ Alice shrugs. ‘Not really. I love parties. Particularly when they’re all about me. I couldn’t think of anything better. And, anyway, I’m not interested in going overseas.’

‘You’re not?’

‘I don’t know anyone there, nobody knows me. What would be the point?’

‘Oh.’ I laugh. I wonder if she’s joking. ‘I can think of a few good things about it. Swimming in the Mediterranean, seeing the Eiffel Tower, the Great Wall of China, the Statue of Liberty . . . and not knowing anyone. Imagine how liberating that must be.’ I notice that Alice is looking at me sceptically, ‘Are you seriously not interested?’

‘Nah. I like it here. I like my friends. I love my life. Why would I want to leave?’

‘Because—’ I am going to tell her of my intense curiosity about the rest of the world, the fascination I have with different languages and ways of living, with the history of the human race, but we are interrupted by the arrival of her first guests.

‘Alice, Alice!’ they cry and she is suddenly surrounded by people, some I recognise from school, older people I’ve never seen before. Some are dressed very formally, in long dresses and suits and ties, others are dressed casually, in jeans and T-shirts, but they all have one thing in common: they all want a piece of Alice, a moment of her time; they want to be the focus of her

attention, make her laugh. They all, without exception, want her to like them.

And Alice spreads herself around, makes all her guests feel welcome and comfortable, but for some reason it's me that she chooses to spend most of the evening with. She keeps her arm linked through mine, drags me from group to group and involves me in every conversation. We dance together and gossip about what different people are wearing, who they are flirting with, who seems to be attracted to whom. I have a wonderful time. It's more fun than I've had in years. And while I'm there I don't think of my sister once, nor of my devastated parents. I dance and laugh and flirt. I forget, temporarily, about the night I realised the awful truth about myself. I forget all about the night I discovered the shameful, grubby coward at the core of my soul.