

Stolen Moments

By Catherine Hokin

Alice Morgan liked to steal. “You’re such a little Magpie!”

Her mother had been highly amused by the treasure trove of shiny trinkets she’d found burrowed into the tummy of five year old Alice’s teddy bear. A jumble of old coins and broken necklaces mostly and, yes, her eternity ring which she thought she’d lost for good, but nothing really important. All children did it and Alice would grow out of it so no need for a scene.

But Alice didn’t grow out of it and her mother’s laugh lost its sparkle when other parents muttered about ornaments that vanished and the party invitations began to dry up.

“You do understand that this is wrong, don’t you dear?”

Mrs Drake, the well-meaning head-teacher at Alice’s Primary School always smiled when she posed the question but, as the pile of hair slides and toys that Alice acquired and other children cried over, grew larger, the smile gradually grew more strained. It only reached her eyes again when Alice’s parents agreed with the gently unmovable suggestion that, yes, a new start would be best for everyone.

“I know you know it’s wrong so why do you do it?”

A more direct question from the harassed form tutor as she waved her hand across another heap of purses, watches and rings tipped out from Alice’s bag. But Alice merely smiled and eyed her teacher’s pretty brooch and the tutor had too many other challenging pupils to deal with to push the matter.

“If you’re going to do this, maybe you should at least

try to hide the evidence or do you actually want to go to prison? You're sixteen, Alice, we can't protect you anymore and the world outside certainly won't. But the choice, my dear, is yours."

Head-teachers at secondary schools are far more direct and far less interested in solving the problems of pupils who choose to follow their own paths. It was that very lack of concern that finally caught Alice's attention. Consequences were, to be honest, usually of little consequence to her but a lack of control over her comings and goings? That was worth a thought or two. So she looked at the mobiles and iPods gathered from her locker and concluded he was right: the choice was indeed hers and there must be more interesting options open.

"You can't have him!"

Karen's mascara-streaked face made her look like a clown, the cliché of a clown. "He's my husband and you can't have him!"

Alice shrugged, "That's fine; I don't want him."

She watched with interest as Karen's face seemed to collapse in on itself, barely listening as the older woman bleated out the usual litany.

"But he wants you...You made him fall in love with you and now you don't want him... You stole him from me... why would you do that if it meant nothing?"

Better people than you have asked that question, thought Alice but she simply smiled and moved on.

Boyfriends, married men (she'd married one of those in a registry office with witnesses pulled in from the street and left within a month); all so very easy to acquire and just as easy to leave. Everything she'd ever wanted: she simply took it until she didn't want it anymore, whenever that might be. There was always something else to be had, something new. Alice never planned anything: that would have caused too many

complications. She just waited to see what would fall into her lap. It always seemed to work out.

Her latest acquisition had been no different.

Alice had been in London for a week, slipping away from her latest boredom to another place where no-one knew her. She'd taken a short let on a flat in an anonymous block through an agent, paying in advance from the bonus her last boss had paid her to leave her post, and not heard never mind seen her neighbours. Now she was starting to think about getting a job, nothing too demanding just enough to pay the rent while she waited to see what might happen next.

The café had attracted her because it was so quiet, the staff too busy with their mobiles to care much about her. She had settled herself with the local paper and they had left her to it, taking her order without bothering to make eye-contact. The one waitress who hadn't slipped out back for a cigarette had barely looked up from the delights of her screen when the door opened again.

The woman who entered was exhausted: the dark circles under her eyes gave her the look of an abstracted panda and the lank hair drooping round her pale face spoke of too many broken nights. But the child, Alice couldn't take her eyes off her. She was such a darling, about 6 months old, all chubby face and giggles topped off with a hat that looked like a strawberry. Alice grinned and the mother, grateful for any human contact, smiled back.

"Don't be fooled by the angelic appearance, she cries like a banshee half the night." The woman was weighed down by shopping, struggling to balance the load with the heavy pram.

"Here, let me help." Alice pushed back a chair to make room for the buggy and took some of the bags, stowing them under the neighbouring table. The waitress looked up for a second and glanced away

again as quickly; this wasn't the type of customer to tip.

"Thank you." The woman sat down heavily; she was bigger than Alice had realised, still slow with baby weight. "It's always such a challenge to get out and get anything done, even the simplest things..." She looked at Alice without really seeing her, responding to the tiny kindness she'd been shown. "I don't suppose you could watch Chloe for a moment could you? I shouldn't ask and it sounds silly I know but just to be able to pop to the Ladies without juggling everything would be the highlight of my day!"

"Of course." Alice nodded towards the back of the café, "it's just over there. She'll be fine, don't worry."

And it really was that simple. As the door closed behind the mother, the waitress slipped away from the counter behind the dividing curtain. It was the easiest thing in the world to pluck the baby from the pram, slip the changing bag over her shoulder and leave. Two minutes later Alice was on the underground, the baby perfectly content against her shoulder; thirty minutes later she was walking down the deserted street to her flat.

The baby had napped happily on Alice's bed while she packed, soothed by one of the bottles her careful mother had stowed in with the spare nappies and change of clothes. Chloe (a pretty enough name but not one Alice could live with) hadn't even stirred when Alice had popped out to the local High Street to buy a car seat and a travel cot from the bored teenager in a branch of Mothercare that had seen far better days.

The car packed up and Chloe (Emma?) strapped in, Alice had driven north; Manchester was somewhere she hadn't been yet. The first couple of nights were spent in a Travelodge while she practised a story no letting agent was interested in hearing. Emma (Laura?) was soothed by a dummy but became fractious at night; no one in the hotel seemed to care. Alice had seen the

story of the abduction breaking on the news but neither the distraught mother nor the defensive waitress had been able to give a clear description of the woman and the baby looked like any baby: lose the strawberry hat and the little red coat and who could tell one from the other? Alice had switched the television off, it held little real interest.

Two days in a confined hotel room where she couldn't escape Laura's (Kerry's?) gaze was enough. This time Alice rented a little house with a garden. It was winter now but she could imagine sitting outside when the summer came with the baby crawling on the grass. Such a lovely thought and she would have made it happen, she really wanted it to happen; it was nice to want something. But the baby was so much harder to manage than she expected: it never slept and it pushed against Alice with such a frown sometimes it was as though it knew.

Staying and playing mommy was really too difficult and Alice didn't like difficult, she never had. It was such a relief when she closed the door behind her and got back into the car. She'd tried, she really had; time to move on.

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