

**Waiting for Alice**

*by: Mima Tipper*

The knocking comes from far away, nudging you to a blind edge. Step off. Do it. You fall into dark—tumbling, cart-wheeling, head over heels over head—and the blackness is thick and velvet. You want it to swallow you. Swallow you so there is no sound. No light, no shape, no smell. Nothing. That would be better, no... *easier*.

The knocking again. Coming closer, pulling; pulling at the darkness until it shreds.

Your eyes open to shadows, all blue and gray, giving way to yellow walls, a wooden door, a small table with a lamp on it. Your room. Everything in you collapses, tired, like you haven't just been asleep.

And the knocking goes on and on. Sharp knuckles tap-tapping on your bedroom door.

"Ali-girl?"

You remember when you used to answer, "What Jeanie-Mom?" How that stupid name made both of you laugh. Now it's just another bit of empty in your head.

"Alice?"

*Stop. Why won't she stop?*

She rattles the door handle. "Sweetie? Stacey's on the phone."

The air is heavy with her waiting. It reaches you through the door, thick as the dream dark, pushing and pulling. You don't answer, instead tugging the quilt up around your ears and tucking Mr. Kitty under your chin.

"I think she's asleep, Stacey." Jeanie-Mom's disbelieving chuckle is whispering dust.

"Yes, I know. She's been doing that a lot lately. Freshman year must be *exhausting*. Let me get her up."

More laughter, louder now, mixed with scabbling sounds. Jeanie-Mom looks for the bent paper clip she's been using to unlock your door, but—ha—you've chucked it. She moves off down the hall, still talking to Stacey. "Sounds like you two have a serious plan for tonight."

The plan. The dance. Stacey has it all fixed. You'll get ready at her house, and then her mom will drive you both to the dance.

You're supposed to be at Stacey's right now—were supposed to be there an hour ago. But you're not. After school, you told her you had stuff to do. She stared at you for a second. Then she gave you that *rolling-eyes-whatever* look and said she'd see you in a little while. "Yeah," you said. "Right."

It's not right, and you didn't need to do any stuff. Nope, before you crawled under your quilt, you sat in bed doodling in a sketchbook with a turquoise marker. Stacey gave them to you at the end of summer vacation. "So we'll remember everything," she said, showing you her own sketchbook, the cover already swirled with hot pink marker. "Everything about freshman year."

Freshman year? A blur. Except for that first day.

Stacey asked you to wait for her out in front of the high school. And you did. Waited on the steps, sun burning down, and a thousand faces swarming by. Waited while the blue metal doors pushed open, shushed closed, pushed open, shushed closed. Waited while bodies, bodies, bodies went in, sucked away from hot and bright into cool and dark. Waited for your best friend Stacey. Then—

"Ali?" It was Stacey, but not any Stacey *you* knew. Now her long, dark hair curled over doll-sized clothes, and her bare legs were already striding by on thick, cork-soled platform

## Tipper/WaitingforAlice

sandals. Surprise jumped in your head, growing and growing into something bothery and hot and staring.

Stacey kept talking. “Wake up, Ali. Anybody home? Let’s go.” She was with a boy you didn’t recognize, walking with him, squeezing his arm.

“Jeez, Stace,” he said, taking every bit of her in. “Quit freakin’ balls.”

Stacey laughed up at him, then looked back at you, big glossy pouty-pout mouth over her shoulder. “Ali!” She was a magnet, pulling and pulling. “Come on! We are *so* late.”

Late. The way Stacey said it that day beats in your head as you pick up the sketchbook now, look at the doodles. Eyes—big and small and more. You scribble turquoise ink over them, and when they’re covered, you let out a breath as if you’d been holding it.

Jeanie-Mom is back. You know this because a metallic sound pokes at the door handle. The marker and sketchbook get shoved under the mattress just as the button clicks. Jeanie-Mom-Houdini’s unlocked the door.

“Sweetie?” She pokes in, puts a hand on your shoulder, strokes. “That was Stacey.”

Maybe now’s the time to talk to her about Stacey. Ask her if she’s ever had that fast-slow feeling. The one where everything—clouds, trees, people, cars—moves super fast, but you can’t seem to move at all. Except for the eye. That mushroom-eye that sprouted after you saw Stacey that first day of school, and—*blink*—now watches every stupid thing you do.

You roll on your back, the words ready, and there’s Jeanie-Mom, giving you that batting-lashes-too-happy look.

“You guys are going to the dance, right? Because...” She’s off about how glad she is that you and Stacey have plans. Woo-hoo! Your first high school dance.

“Okay, already,” you say, wishing she would quit talking, quit touching you. “I got it. Stacey called. Can you go now?”

“Sure.” Her forehead wrinkles. She wants to ask you what’s wrong. The question flashes off her, sun on a mirror. She shakes the frown, the question, off. “You just get ready. Plenty of time.”

Her bright determined smile hurts your eyes as she closes the door.

You’d decided to skip Stacey, skip the dance. But Jeanie-Mom’s face; full of happy and hopeful. It’s like she’s counting on you. You get up, because now you’re going. To Stacey’s. To the dance. The whole deal.

You’ve been in Stacey’s room thousands of times, but tonight it feels like a little girl’s fantasy gone bad. A strawberry shampoo tang fills the air, and clothes and shoes litter the bed, the floor. You pick your way to Stacey’s dressing table and sit on the pink and white cupcake of a stool.

Stacey comes over carrying a short purple dress. “This would look amazing on you,” she says, dumping it in your lap.

You finger the dress, soft and stretchy, and the words come out before you know you’re going to say them. “I don’t know, Stace. This dress isn’t really —”

“Isn’t really *what*?” Her eyes stab as they look you up and down, then go liquid, coaxing. “Come *on*. You weren’t going to go in just jeans?”

You hold the dress up like you’re taking a closer look. Anything to block out the shadow of confusion on Stacey’s face. You can’t block out the eyeball—*blink*—it sees how unbelievably weird you are. Why won’t it go away? Leave you alone so that you can go back to the place where there wasn’t all this *thinking*.

Stacey prances to the bed, weeding through clothes like a demented gardener. “I have *no* idea what I’m going to wear,” she says with a fake moan. “Help.”

## Tipper/WaitingforAlice

The purple dress drops out of your hands. You join Stacey, running your fingers over the zoo of clothes on the bed. You and Stacey used to jump on this bed, screaming songs into hairbrush microphones while music blasted from the radio. Small eyes and lips made big with red, red lipstick and dark mascara. Blush stamped onto your cheeks in hot pink circles. Grown-up party dresses sliding off your shoulders, and long hair, made from pillowcases, flying up and down, up and down. Jumping and singing and jumping.

"I'm thinking...this," says Stacey, holding up a short jean skirt in one hand, "And this." She fishes out a tiny tube of red, crinkly fabric.

These are not questions. You raise your eyebrows and nod in case she looks your way. She doesn't, just yanks up her tank top. Her movements are quick, almost violent. You can't help but watch her strip. Her body is everywhere at once, arms stretching, back arching, leaning this way, that way, over. Then she stands next to you wearing the kind of underwear that years ago had both of you sneaking into her mom's room for a peek. Stacey would paw through the bureau drawer, holding up the laciest bras, the wispiest panties. Just the sight of them would send both of you into giggles so furious you'd be rolling on the floor.

Now, in nothing but a black bra and string bikini, Stacey stands with hands on her hips like some kind of superhero underwear model. *Blink*—what is *with* you? You spin away to where the purple dress lies like a deflated balloon, whip off your clothes and tug it over your head. Too tight and too short. You stop plucking at the hem when Stacey comes over. She walks a little half circle.

"Can't wear this with that dress," she says, flicking her fingers under the back of your bra. Her touch, an unexpected shock, makes you jerk away. "Jeez, Ali," Stacey says with a giggle, "Stressed much?"

You try to laugh, too, fumbling with the dress, the bra. Stacey is beside you again, pulling the elastic off of your ponytail. You want to say "Don't," but her hands move through your hair, combing it, fluffing it out as if it's hers. Your mouth never even opens.

"Let me do your makeup," she says.

Sitting on the cupcake, you lift your face to Stacey.

"Tonight," she says, brushing softly at your eyelids. "I want to *really* kiss someone."

Your eyes open and her face is there, so close that your breaths mix, and you have to lean back. Have to. Really, really quick.

"W-who?" you say, because you have to say something to break up whatever it is that's suddenly there—invisible, but there—between you.

"You looked funny for a sec." Stacey's face is a question. "Are you, like *okay*?"

"Yeah." You shake your head as if shaking off a chill. She gazes at you for a beat, then fills a round sponge with peach-colored blush. You wrap your arms tight over your chest, too grateful that whatever that thing was, Stacey didn't feel it. Just you—*blink, blink* goes the eyeball—just hidden, inside just you.

Still you can't help asking. "Who do you want to kiss?"

"*Well*," she draws the word out as she leans toward you again, "I don't know."

How could she *not* know? "What about Chris Detmer?" The name flies out of your mouth, a life rope you are already hanging onto. "Didn't you kiss him last year?"

"Thanks for reminding me, but no, I want a real kiss."

A real kiss? You shift in your seat, too warm, too uncomfortable. "You told me you really did kiss him."

"Well, yeah. I did, sort of." Stacey rolls her eyes, pats on more blush. "Except, I don't think it counts when it's with a kid you've known forever. I mean, I watched him pee his pants in first grade. I'm talking about something different. Make your lips soft."

## Tipper/WaitingforAlice

You do, and she rubs on cinnamony lip gloss. It feels wet and slippery, making you wonder about a “something different” kiss. Images crowd behind your eyes: doll faces mashing together, Jeanie-Mom pecking you goodnight, slurpy movie-mouth kisses. You’ve kissed exactly one boy: Luke Spaulding in the final scene of the eighth grade play. For a second your lips remember the dry, marshmallow press of his.

“There.” Stacey turns you to the mirror.

It isn’t you. It’s some other girl. With a bush of reddish-blond hair and huge shadowy-brown eyes and big shimmery lips. Not beautiful; not a hag. Nobody you know.

“Well?” Stacey’s head peeks over your shoulder, as if she waits for a present.

“Wow.” The words stick. “I-I—”

“I *know*,” she says, flicking her hair behind her shoulder. “Too awesome, right?”

Her eyes get big, ready to whisper a secret. “Wait right here.”

She dashes out of the room. You don’t move, just breathe in, breathe out. And look at the girl in the mirror. Does that girl know something? (The eyeball blinks out questions like an asking machine.) Does that girl know what to do?

Stacey bounces back in, makes a show of closing and locking her door.

“Here,” she says, pushing a can of soda into your hand. You sip and—*bleck!*—almost choke on Stacey’s nasty mix of fizzy grape and alcohol. It tastes the way ammonia smells. Stacey laughs, her breathy-donkey laugh, and takes the can, swigging from it herself.

“Come on, Ali.” Her voice insists, and she holds the can out to you again. “Loosen up. Everybody does it.”

The eyeball is hot on your shoulder. You reach for the can, roll your eyes and conjure words that fall off your tongue heavy as rocks. “Quit freakin’ balls, Stace.”

She smiles, all surprise and delight and your smile is a mirror. You take a longer drink, another and another, until nothing watches anymore. Time to go.

How right is Stacey? You are loose, fuzz blanketing your brain, head swaying way above your neck. The minute you get to the dance, Stacey grabs Doug Webb, a kid from freshman English. She pulls his head down, whispers in his ear. He checks you out, like a bike he is considering taking for a ride, smiles. Stacey drifts away, and Doug angles his head toward where kids dance. You follow him and then, stepping over an invisible line between dancing and not, he begins shuffling and gyrating. The music is loud and the light in the gym is thick, washing everything and everyone with a blue and purple glow.

Fizzy glow, fizzy purple grape, and your brain lets go: body swaying, turning, eyes opening and closing on two worlds. In one, kids dance around, beautiful and impossible as shadows. In the other, they have ugly, monster faces; their hands and legs flapping, waving; their hips grinding and grinding. You catch Doug’s eye. Beautiful, impossible. He smiles. His lips stick to his teeth. Ugly, monster. The sound of your own laughter floats as if coming from far away.

The music shifts, never stopping, and then the driving beat slows, and Doug’s hands are on your hips. You let him nudge you closer until your chest rubs his and your feet slide around and around. His chin rests against your hair, and the smell of him, like pockets opening, comes at you in small tastes. Peppermint, lemons, sweat.

His lips tickle your ear. “Can you believe we got stuck with Walsh for English? I’ve heard he’s a total psycho.”

You giggle and his arms tighten, his breath brushing against your skin, dark and soft and velvet as falling. You feel...nothing. *Nothing*. Words tumble out of your mouth, quick and needy, like somehow they will fill that nothing up. “I’ve heard he just give psycho homework.”

## Tipper/WaitingforAlice

Doug laughs now. His hands slide lower, the tips of his fingers touching the top of your butt. And the eyeball snaps open, sharp-edged as a razor. *Blink*—his hands. How hard they are through the thin purple dress. It's the same skin as on your hips, just a few centimeters down and back. Why does it feel different? Cold-cold touching places private and secret. Now he presses against you, tight to your belly—growing—and you don't know what to do, can't even think about it. No more grape fizz. No more floating. You are hollow, queasy with wrong. Just. Wrong.

You pull back, give him a *lipspressedtogether* smile. He lets go, but his expression—shadowed, half-grinning—asks the question. *What's your problem?* You turn away like you're being chased.

Where is Stacey? Pushing through masses of churning bodies, looking one way, the other. You need. To find. Stacey.

You do. Out in the hall. Tucked into a dark space, she is wrapped around that boy from the first day. Their faces mash together joined with suction cup mouths. Stacey's arms twist high and tight around his neck. His hands, sliding over her chest, slip down to hike up her skirt a little. Stacey drags her lips free, but her eyes stay closed, her mouth open slightly, the tip of her tongue running over her lips like she tastes something sweet. Concentration flickers over her face making her eyelids squeeze. Her mouth opens wide and her eyes fly open.

*Blinkblinkblink*—photo-flash images, hot and furious, rushing into your head: of you, of Stacey, of things that can never happen. *Never*. You teeter, as if balancing high on a tree branch, arms outstretched. You step back and back. Farther and farther and farther. Down the dark hall. Into the gym's pulsing light. Bodiesbodiesbodies dance and move, talking and yelling, and the smell of heat and sweat mixed with a million spritzed fragrances makes your stomach jump.

Bleachers rise up, and you climb to the top where it's quiet, and you are too small for anyone to find.

No one's looking. Except the eye. You stare into it until the gym, the light, all the movement down on the floor fades. Pictures race and race: doll faces, a Jeanie-Mom peck, slurpy movie, Luke Spaulding's lips, soft and pink and dry. Stacey. Jumping and singing on her bed, snooping in her mother's underwear drawer, "Make your lips soft, Ali," "I want a something different kiss, Ali." Her eyes flying open just now. What did she see when that boy touched her? *What?*

When will *you* see it?

You're late. That's all it has to be. Just a late, late-blooming, late-girl. Even as your head chants those words, another word pounds. All about you and Stacey, and what can't be. That stupid eye stares at you now and you stare right back. That stupid, stupid eye. You want to punch it, punch it to a jelly pulp. *Punchitpunchitpunchit!*

You pound down the bleachers, pound through the people.

There. Doug's hunching back stands at the refreshment table. You drag him out into the corridor and, blurry fast, push him against the wall and smash your open mouth on his.

Chocolate, crumbs, the clammy taste of his tongue. You pull away, wipe your mouth, gag as if you are being choked.

Doug slouches back. "A brownie," he says, cracking up, wiping at his own mouth.

You've caught him in the middle of a huge bite.

The next thing you know, you are in the Girls' room. You scrub your mouth over and over, but it's as though the taste of him lives there now. *Blink*—the night, everything that's come before, crowds in, all alive inside you. Makeup drips into your eyes and you rub at them, at your cheeks, until all that's left is your face, pale and shiny and clean.

## Tipper/WaitingforAlice

Three girls come in. They smile at you in that way that says they don't know you. It's true. They don't know you. There's a whole world out there that doesn't know you. You look beyond them to the door.

Mom and Stacey—your best friend Stacey—are out there somewhere, waiting on the other side.

The dream dark waits, too. Black and soft and velvet as falling. How much easier it would be to go back there, stay there. *Blink*—what's it going to be, Ali-girl, Ali, Alice?

You can't do it. You can't stay in that empty, lonely, not-true place.

But there won't be any falling or diving or jumping. Just one step, and then another.

Out.