

NO DIFFERENT FROM ANYONE ELSE

A Short Story



ALEX SCOTT

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By Alex Scott

Alice saw her early Christmas present and wanted to cry. Her dad had brought home a robot in a black dress, with chalk white skin, and a pair of glowing green eyes. He and Mom smiled, and expected Alice to smile, too. But this was a disaster. What made them think she wanted *this*?

She pointed. "What is that?"

"This is Marisa," Mom said. "Dad

picked her up from the adoption agency."

"Adoption?"

"Her old caretaker died," Dad said, "and she didn't have anyone else. We'd been hearing about orphaned robots for a while, and we couldn't sit back and let one get scrapped."

Mom continued, "You always said you wanted a little sister."

Yeah, Alice thought, a *sister*. Those

were *people*, and tended to be *babies* first. This thing—Marisa—was already standing on two feet, and not much smaller than Alice.

And it had those green eyes.

How could *that* be her sister?

"Does it talk?" Alice said.

"I certainly do."

Alice jumped back.

Marisa tilted her head. "I'm sorry, did I scare you?" She sounded like an ordinary girl, but with a faint buzz in her voice. "I'm sorry." Marisa stepped across the room and held out her hand. "It's nice to meet you, Alice."

Alice shook her hand. It felt like moist rubber, and when she was done, Alice wiped her palm on her leg.

Mom still smiled. "Why don't you go play outside, get to know each other?"

"All right." Alice turned and hobbled down the hall for her jacket. She had been so excited while Dad was out. The more Alice wondered what she might get, the less she could sit still. It could have been a video game, or a dress, or even a puppy.

But a robot? Did they really expect her to go along, as if robots were always the best thing ever? Like that doll could be any kind of sister? Why not move the family to Australia? It would have made as much sense, and there would have been koalas.

She put on her jacket and gloves and came back to the living room. "Okay, let's go."

Snow had fluffed the neighborhood and the yard with a cottony white. Marisa rushed ahead without a jacket, jumped off the porch, and plunged ankle deep into the snow.

Alice turned to Mom.

"She'll be fine. She doesn't get cold." She patted Alice on the back.

Dad strolled out to the car. "I'll be back soon. Still have to get groceries." He got in and drove off. Alice wished she could ride with him, get a better explanation, get away from Marisa.

"Have fun." Mom shut the door, and left Alice stranded.

Marisa's green eyes locked on her. "You don't like me, do you?"

"What? I—"

"It's okay. Not everybody is comfortable around robots."

"It's not that." Well, Alice couldn't admit it was.

She stepped down into the snow.

"You seemed surprised," Marisa said. "Didn't they tell you?"

"No, why? How long were they planning this?"

"I first met them about five months ago, so—"

"*Five months?* They never said a thing."

Marisa's eyebrows popped up. "That's odd." She squatted down and scooped some snow together. "They are very kind."

"I guess. They can be pretty lame, though. What about your old owner? What was he like?"

"My grampa? He was very nice. He treated me like a real granddaughter. He'd chat with me, take me for walks, buy me upgrades." Marisa slowed to a stop. "The whole reason I was built was so he could have company. But he had a heart attack a few years ago. I miss him."

Alice wanted to kick herself for calling him an *owner*. "I'm sorry." She remembered her grandmother. She would drive Alice down the highway on the weekends, and they would sing old songs together. Alice still missed her.

"It's okay. It's sad to think about him, but I don't have to dwell on it. I treasure the time we had, and that's all that matters." She packed together a large snowball.

"That's awfully deep."

"That's how robots think."

Alice paced over to the oak tree, thinking about her grandmother. When she died, Alice wouldn't leave her room for a week. No more highway drives. No more songs. She still stung from the loss. How could a machine know what that was like?

Marisa rolled her snowball down the yard. She stopped and turned to Alice. "I'm building a snowman. You want to help?"

"Oh. Sure." Alice started rolling the second ball, while Marisa built hers bigger and bigger. When they were the right size, Alice and Marisa put them together and started to look for

acorns for the eyes and buttons.

Alice kept watching Marisa. She had never met many robots, so seeing Marisa move so much like a regular kid surprised her. Her arms and legs moved like arms and legs, with perfect balance, and she was smiling with something like true enjoyment. With that skin and those eyes, she looked like a regular third-grader in weird makeup.

But that skin and those eyes still made a difference. Marisa wasn't real. Marisa's hair was too shiny, her skin too smooth, and there was something about her smile, as if it couldn't quite come to a point the right way. Alice couldn't stop noticing it.

For heaven's sake, she was playing in the snow in a skirt with no jacket!

And Alice had to live with that thing—that "sister" Mom and Dad dropped on her out of nowhere! Did they really think they could change the family like that without telling her?

Alice threw her acorns into the snow.

"What's wrong?" Marisa said. "We were almost done."

"I'm sorry. I can't do this." Alice marched to the porch. "It's just too weird."

She swung the door open and threw it shut behind her.

Mom was on the couch, watching TV, and looked at Alice as she passed by. "Done already? Where's Marisa?"

"Still outside." Alice pulled off her

jacket. "I don't wanna play with her anymore."

Mom rose and stood over Alice like a storm cloud. "You're just going to leave her out there? Alice Amanda Collins, I cannot believe you. This is Marisa's home now, and we need to make her feel welcome. It can't be that hard to play with her, can it?"

Alice shrank back. "Mom, she's creepy."

"She's no different from anyone else."

"Yes, she is. Can't you tell?"

"Only on the surface. Can't you give her a chance?"

"Maybe I could if you didn't keep this a secret for five months!"

Mom sighed, and turned to the window. "I'm sorry. We wanted to wait until all the paperwork went through, and we thought since the date was close to Christmas, it would be a fun surprise."

"Well, it isn't." Alice crossed her arms. "I hope you're happy. I'm getting on the computer."

"Wait." Mom grabbed her shoulder. "I know we kept you in the dark, and maybe that was a mistake. But she doesn't have anybody else, and we're not taking her back. Alice, you want to know what Marisa wanted to talk about every time we met her? You. She's been waiting months to meet her new big sister. You think she likes finding out you hate her?"

Alice froze. "I don't *hate* her."

"Then maybe you should show her.

Go out and apologize." Mom spun Alice toward the door. "Maybe she will take some getting used to, but that's no reason to be rude."

"Fine." She went outside with Mom behind her.

The wind stung her cheeks.

Marisa leaned against the oak tree, arms crossed. A snowman with a friendly smile stood in the middle of the yard.

"Hey," Alice said. "Sorry I ditched you. I'm just not used to being around robots, is all. We can keep playing if you want."

Marisa pouted. "Okay."

Mom stroked Alice's hair and patted her shoulder. "Very good, dear. Call me if you need anything."

The door shut, and Alice stepped back into the snow. "So what do you want to do now?"

"I don't know," Marisa said.

"I like how you did the snowman. Let's make another one. He could use a friend."

"He's fine the way he is."

Alice pressed her mouth shut. Marisa probably just needed to vent a little.

Alice stooped down, packed together a handful of snow. "Think fast." She flung it at Marisa.

"Hey!" Marisa threw her arm up, and bits of snow burst on her. "What was that for?"

"I'm just playing. Haven't you ever had a snowball fight before?" Alice

rolled up and tossed another one.

"Stop it. Of course I have. I just don't want to."

"Come on, you can throw as much as you want at me."

Marisa glared. Without a word, she scooped up and threw a snowball at Alice. It popped on her shoulder, and Alice laughed.

"That's it." Alice threw another one. "Isn't this fun?"

"I guess so."

After they went back and forth a few minutes, Alice drew away to roll up an even bigger snowball. "Just you wait, it'll be so huge."

She rolled and stuffed together the snow until she had a chunk the size of a cantaloupe. "All right, here it is."

She turned, and shrieked, and dropped the snowball. Marisa's arm had become a cannon, pointed right at Alice.

"Bang," Marisa said. "Ha, gotcha."

Alice backed up, and slipped to the ground.

Mom's voice rang from the porch. "Marisa, what on earth is that?"

Marisa spun to the door. "Huh? This? Just... my arm cannon."

Mom rushed out to her. "Why do you even have that?"

Marisa rapped her fingers on the barrel. "My grampa installed it. He was afraid of burglars, and..." A panel opened up, and a canister with empty slots rolled out. "Look, it's not even loaded. And all it shoots are jolt charges. They just shock

you a little bit."

"And since when is it okay to point something like that at your sister?" Mom came and pulled Alice to her feet. "Are you okay, sweetie?"

"I'm fine." Alice brushed the snow off her clothes. Her legs were like rubber.

Marisa's arm unfolded, and formed back into a hand. "I was just trying to scare her a little."

"Well, your plan worked," Mom said.

Marisa's lip pouted. "I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

Alice felt a wrench in her heart. There was real fear rattling Marisa's voice. Maybe she wasn't as fake as Alice thought.

"I'm okay, Mom, really," Alice said. "She just startled me, that's all."

Mom's brow knotted together. "No one told us about an arm cannon."

"Must have slipped their minds," Marisa said.

"Maybe you should come inside. Alice can show you her room." Mom groaned. "I need to call your father."

"Okay." Alice went inside after Mom, and led Marisa upstairs to her bedroom. Marisa swayed around aimlessly, then came to a stop by the bed.

"You were still mad, weren't you?" Alice sat on the edge of her bed.

Marisa's eyes crunched. "It's okay if you hate me. I can accept that. But you can at least tell me."

Alice shuddered at the thought of a robot being mad at her. But she said, "I don't hate you."

Marisa began to tug at her skirt. "Now they're gonna send me back, because of the arm cannon."

"No, they wouldn't. Not so soon." Alice touched Marisa's shoulder. "Actually, I kinda think it's pretty cool. Can I see it again?"

"Really?"

Alice nodded.

Marisa held her hand up. The arm unfolded, twisted, and compressed back into the cannon.

"That's awesome," Alice said. "You're your own security system. Too bad it's not a toy."

"I know. But I thought Mom and Dad knew. The agency's supposed to tell them about upgrades. Why would they keep me after... *this*?" She changed the arm cannon back into a hand. "Is that why Mom's calling Dad? She's gonna make him take me back?"

"Come on, Mom already told me they weren't gonna do that. My parents are lame, but they're not *that* lame."

"What if she changes her mind?"

Alice didn't know how else to reassure her. She looked around for something to distract Marisa until Dad got home. "Wanna watch a movie?" She went to the shelf above her computer. "You like sci-fi?"

Marisa dropped onto the bed. "I dunno. I prefer fairy tales."

"Okay. Here's something." She picked one out, and put the disc in the computer.

Marisa would not sit still. During the movie, Marisa wandered around the room, looking at Alice's dolls, her movies, her posters, her curtains, her window. Alice spent more time answering questions about them than watching the movie.

There was a knock on the door. Alice answered. Mom was holding two steaming mugs. "I thought you might want some cocoa."

"Ooh, thanks. When's Dad coming home? Marisa's kind of anxious right now."

"He's on his way, just has to make a few extra stops." Mom passed the mugs to Alice. One had two big marshmallows on top. The other was an ugly oily sludge. "That one's for Marisa—it's a special recipe just for robots. Don't drink it."

Alice scrunched her nose. "Don't worry."

"Tell her not to worry, either. Everything's going to be just fine."

"Okay." Alice closed the door and passed the sludgy cocoa to Marisa, who took an eager sip. Alice wondered what it could taste like for someone whose senses were all programmed. "You like that?"

Marisa nodded with a slight chocolate-ish mustache. "It's my favorite."

"Okay, well, Mom said

everything'll be okay."

"She would say that. Wouldn't want to scare a robot too much."

Alice looked around. "I just realized, you don't have a room yet, do you?"

Marisa took another sip. "Mom said I could sleep with you until they got something ready."

Of course she did.

Marisa's eyes drifted, and something caught her attention. She walked to a laundry basket by the closet, and pulled up a yellow dress that laid on top. "This looks nice."

Seeing her hold it up, Alice realized: Marisa would look so *pretty* in it. "You wanna try it on?"

"Can I?"

"I don't mind. It's a little dirty and wrinkly, but—"

"That's fine."

"Okay, you can change in the closet."

Marisa went in, and came out a few minutes later wearing the dress. Alice stood beside her in front of the mirror on the dresser. She couldn't believe how happy Marisa looked, or how pretty she truly was. She made it look natural.

There was another knock. Mom and Dad came in.

Mom gasped, then floated over to Marisa and gave her a big hug. "Would you look at this? Marisa, you're so adorable. I knew you two would get along."

Alice saw a box in Dad's hands, all wrapped up. "What's that?"

"A present for Marisa," he said.

"For me?" Marisa drew away from Mom, took the box, and unwrapped it. "Jolt charges?"

"We still need to have a word with the agency about the arm cannon," Dad said. "But we talked it over... and we decided a little extra security wouldn't hurt."

Mom stroked Marisa's hair. "If it helped your grampa feel safer, then maybe we'll feel safer, too."

Marisa cradled the box like something fragile. "So you're not sending me back?"

"Oh, of course not." Mom squeezed her again. "You're as much a part of this family now as anybody else."

"Just one ground rule," Dad said. "Never, *ever* point that thing at Alice again, or we'll have that arm replaced."

"I promise I won't," Marisa said. "I even downloaded a few failsafes, just to make sure. I'll never point it at a family member again, I promise."

Mom said, "Alice, do you have anything to say?"

Alice thought for a moment. "Welcome to the family, I guess."

Mom and Dad hugged Marisa one more time, and left them to watch their movie. Marisa stashed the charges deep inside a dresser drawer, out of sight.

"There," Alice said. "Didn't I tell

you?" She spun her head toward the closet. "I just remembered, I have an even better outfit to try on." She rushed Marisa to the closet and gave her a violet dress she sometimes wore to church. Choosing a similar blue one for herself, she sent Marisa out and closed the door so they could both change. After a few minutes, Marisa knocked, said she was ready. Alice opened the door, and as soon as she saw Marisa, grabbed her and propped her in front of the mirror on top of the dresser.

Marisa's dress was loose and baggy, but it looked beautiful on her. The two of them matched perfectly, just like real sisters.

"You know, Mom was right," Alice said.

"About what?"

"I really did always want a sister." Alice looked into Marisa's glowing green eyes, and gave her a hug. She was warm like a charged laptop, soft like plastic foam. But Alice decided to forget that, just for one moment. She could tell this was real.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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