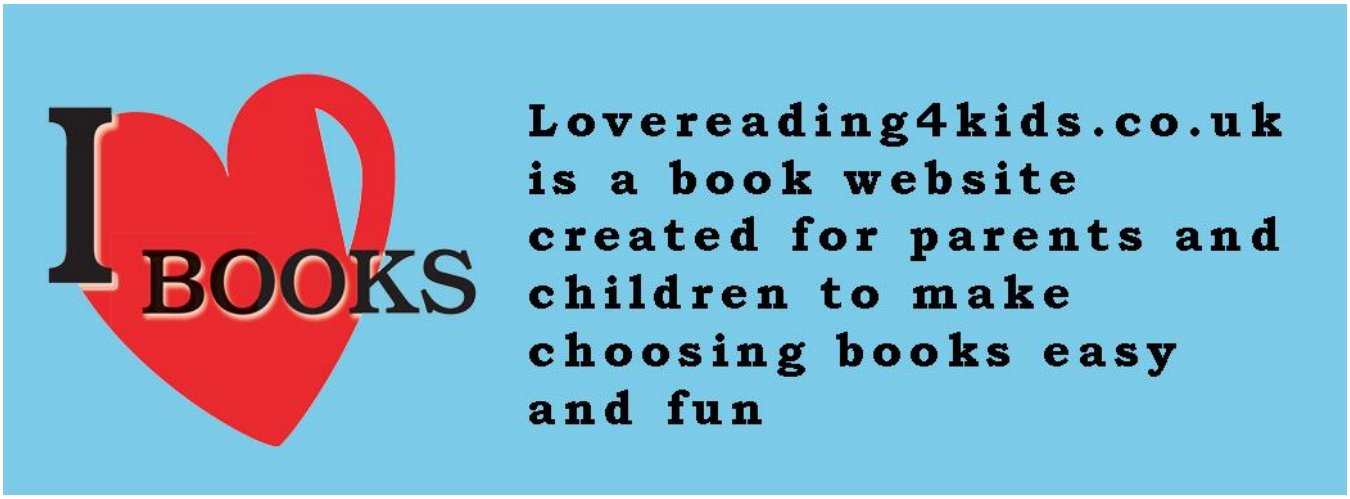


Opening extract from

Alice Jones: The Impossible Clue

Written by

Sarah Rubin

Published by

Chicken House Ltd

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.



Text © Sarah Rubin 2016
First published in Great Britain in 2016
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Sarah Rubin has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover and interior design and illustration by Helen Crawford-White
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CR0 4YY
The paper used in this Chicken House book is made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

ISBN 978-1-910002-86-5
eISBN 978-1-910655-50-4

CHAPTER 1

I was trying to prove Goldbach's Conjecture, but I wasn't getting very far. Maybe it was the fact that it hadn't been cracked by some of the greatest mathematical brains of the twentieth century. Then again, maybe it was the steady stream of spitballs hitting the side of my head that was stopping me.

'Do you mind?' I turned in my seat and glared across the aisle.

Kevin Jordan smiled, the straw still clenched in the side of his mouth. 'What?' he asked, raising his eyebrows.

'You know what.'

'No I don't.'

I knew I should have stayed in bed that morning. Kevin Jordan had a face like one of those angels Michelangelo painted in the Sistine Chapel. He had the personality of a

fungal rash. I took a breath and counted up in prime numbers until the urge to throw my pencil at his face subsided. I got to 101.

Mrs Wright had moved Kevin to the desk next to mine because I was supposed to be a good influence. Like my smart would rub off on him. Unfortunately, Kevin had spent the entire year making it his mission to stay stupid. After 180 school days of systematic mental torture, I was ready to see the end of him.

I was determined to ignore Kevin and make some progress on a Conjecture people had been trying to prove since 1742. What can I say? I like a challenge.

Kevin let off one more shot, but when I didn't react, he refocused his attentions on a trio of girls at the back of the classroom. He leant his head back, calculating the arc the little paper missiles would have to take to clear the four rows of desks between him and his target and the force he'd have to put behind them.

Then he blew.

For someone who got straight Ds in Maths, he seemed to understand the practical applications of a parabola just fine. Squeals and screams erupted from the back of the room as the spitballs rained down. He must have loaded the straw with about a dozen of the things.

'Mr Jordan.' Mrs Wright stood up from her desk. Her curly hair was frazzled beyond recognition in the damp heat and it made her look more than a bit deranged.

Kevin smiled like an angel. You could practically see the halo of innocence over his blond curls. But Mrs Wright was immune.

'You know the drill.' She pointed to the door.

Mrs Wright watched him saunter out of the classroom, on his way to the wooden bench outside the principal's office. When he graduated (*if* he graduated) they'd have to put up a brass plate naming that bench in his honour. The door closed behind him and Mrs Wright turned her gaze on me. She shook her head in that weary way adults do, like somehow Kevin Jordan shooting spitballs was all my fault. I just gritted my teeth and got back to the Conjecture.

I didn't get far.

Sitting on top of my notebook was a perfectly folded triangle of blue lined notebook paper. I looked around quickly. I'm not the kind of girl people pass notes to.

Two desks back and one desk over, Sammy Delgado Jr gave me a small wave. Sammy was a small kid with dark hair and matching smudges beneath his eyes. Before Christmas, I don't think Sammy and I had ever really spoken. I'm not exactly a people person. But everyone at school knows, when it comes to figuring things out, I'm your girl. So when Sammy had a problem he couldn't solve, he came to me for help.

Mysteries are a lot like maths, word problems especially. Some are simple, some are complicated, but

it's the same process. There's something you want to know, and a lot of information swimming around. The hard part is coming up with the right equation, figuring out what bits of information are important and what bits are just there to confuse you. Then it's just a matter of solving for x.

In Sammy's case, the equation had gone something like this:

(strange scratching sounds in the night) +
(super spooky house) = x

When Sammy had done the maths, he'd come up with ghosts. But it hadn't taken me long to figure out that those ghosts were actually a family of squirrels living in one of the house's many secret passageways. I'd closed the case and got one very persistent fan.

I unfolded the note.

TOP SECRET: FOR YOUR EYES ONLY

Hi Alice,

Remember I told you I was helping Dr Learner with his research? Well, we made a huge breakthrough. Dad's announcing it today. You have to come. I can't say what it is, because it's top secret, but you won't believe your eyes! It'll be great!

Sammy

P.S. You can ride home with me after school. My dad's sending a car.
P.P.S. Destroy this note after you read it.

Sammy had been asking me to come over for months and I'd been saying no for just as long. Now it was the last day of school before summer vacation and he was getting his dad involved. Sammy just didn't know when to give up.

Sammy's dad runs a science laboratory called Delgado Industries. It's not as if I wasn't interested. I'd have loved to see inside a real lab. But Delgado Industries were notoriously secretive, so I didn't believe for one second that Sammy was allowed anywhere near the actual research. Sammy had hinted that his 'Top Secret' research was all about turning invisible. I was pretty sure Sammy's project was something his dad had dreamt up to keep him busy after school. People have been trying to develop invisibility technology for years. If Sammy Delgado Jr was the one to finally figure it out, I'd eat my hat.

I crumpled the note and stuffed it into the back of my desk. It looked like I'd be sneaking out the back. If Sammy really had invented some way to turn invisible, it would be a lot easier to ignore him. Then again, if he could turn invisible, how would I know he wasn't standing next to me all the time? I shivered slightly at the thought, then shook my head clear. Invisibility was something out of science fiction, not fact.

The final bell rang and I stood with the rest of the class, sliding my notebook back into my backpack and slinging the whole mess over my shoulder. I made tracks for the door before Sammy could ask if I'd got his message. But I wasn't quite fast enough.

'Hey, Alice, wait up.' Sammy's high voice carried over the crowd, even though I couldn't see him any more. I walked faster, weaving through the crush of bodies that lined the halls. Why people are unable to leave in an orderly manner is beyond me, but for once the chaos worked in my favour. I'm not tall, but I had no problem elbowing my way through the crowd. Sammy is a good four inches shorter than me, and not nearly as pushy. His calls got quieter and quieter as he was buffeted back and forth like he was stuck in a pinball machine.

I ducked around the corner into the school's second entrance hall, the one at the far end of the car park. It was a large square room with a worn red carpet. The guidance counsellor's office was on the left and the principal's office (and Kevin Jordan's bench featuring Kevin Jordan) was on the right. Outside, the rain was coming down in sheets. I could have waited for the rain to let up, but the thought of running into Sammy was even less appealing than getting soaked to the bone on the ride home. I dug out the key to my bike lock and braced myself to make a run for it.

'Hey Numbers, have fun in the rain.'

'Thanks Kevin. Have fun getting told off by the principal.'

'Will do.' He grinned.

I rolled my eyes and ran into the rain, counting my steps as I went. In three steps I was damp, at ten my shoes were starting to squelch and by the time I got to my bike (thirty-eight steps) I felt like I'd been thrown in a pool. It took me three tries to get my bike lock open. The slick metal kept sliding through my fingers.

I was winding up the chain when I noticed them. They emerged from the rain like actors stepping onstage from behind a curtain. Two men the size of gorillas wearing matching black suits. Their ties were black as well, too skinny for their broad frames. The man on the left carried an oversized black umbrella, but they looked more than a little uncomfortable to be sharing it. What I noticed most about them, though, was that they were looking straight at me.

I put my head down and finished putting away my bike lock, doing my best to ignore the two pairs of shoes that appeared in front of me.

'Alice Jones?' one of them grunted. I couldn't tell which one.

'Who wants to know?' I asked. A drop of water ran down the tip of my nose and hung there.

'Mr Delgado would like to see you.'

'Mr Delgado? Sammy's dad? Tell him to make an appointment.' I didn't like the man's tone.

Apparently he didn't like mine either.

Before I knew what was happening, I felt a sharp jerk on the back of my shirt and my feet lifted ever so slightly off the ground. I dropped my bike and tried to twist free, but it was no good.

'Hey!' I shouted as they frogmarched me towards the open door of a black town car.

I swung my arms trying to get some momentum, but the man holding me was the size of a small country and no amount of force on my part was going to move him. At least not conventional force. Instead of trying to break free, I grabbed on, wrapping my legs around his and locking my feet together on the other side. Without his feet to balance and with me holding on to him, he went down like a giant redwood. Unfortunately, I went down too, and I went down hard. I hit the concrete back first. The air rushed out of me and no amount of gasping seemed to get any back in.

I was vaguely aware of the rain hitting my face and a lot of swearing in my ear. Then I was lifted like a sack of potatoes and the world turned upside down. I could see feet running toward me, splashing through the puddles that stretched across the car park reflecting the stormy sky. With his plastic raincoat billowing out behind him, he looked like an avenging angel swooping in to save me, which was hilarious. If I could have breathed, I would have died laughing.