

Chapter 1

“Alison, time to wake up.” Light ripped through the soft darkness in the room. “Alison. Now.”

Squeezing her eyes closed against the onslaught of the light, Alison Prescott rolled to her side, dragging half the pillow with her. The moan followed her like smoke from a fire. How could 5:30 have gotten here so soon?

The next thought hit her with the force of two semis, and she moaned again. Why did life have to be so unfair?

“Alison. I said, ‘Get up.’ That piano isn’t going to practice itself.” Her mother’s drill sergeant voice had a way of pulling dread from the center of her heart right to the surface. “And you didn’t take a shower like I told you to last night either, so you’ve got that to do before you leave too.”

A moan at a time, Alison dragged her head off the pillow although what part of her body or brain managed that much movement was beyond her. The sitting up part made her dizzy, and she put her hand up to her head and raked her fingers through her long blonde hair, pushing it out of her eyes as she did so. “Ugh.” Her gaze betrayed her, glancing out the slits of the blinds, it told her with certainty that the sky beyond was still cloaked in dark ebony.

She wanted to lie back down, but if she didn’t get moving, her mother would be back in minutes. So she ratcheted her eyes open and blinked twice to keep them there. The yawn attacked before she knew it was there.

Some part of her mother was right. She should’ve at least gone to bed before eleven the night before or taken a shower or any one of a hundred other things her mother always told her to do. But that couldn’t be helped right now. Pushing up, she grabbed her terry cloth pink robe and tramped to the bathroom. The bathroom lights commenced a second assault on her poor eyes. Blinking it back, she gazed into the mirror and almost laughed. It was worse than she had anticipated. “Wow, girl. You’re going to make some great first impression at Jefferson.”

With a sigh, she proceeded to get herself ready enough for piano practice. Dread for it and the day ahead formed a hard lump in her chest.

“Alison!” her mother’s voice was sharp and firm.

“I’m coming, Mom,” she called back. Six yanks of the hairbrush through her hair, and that would have to do. She tramped out of the bathroom and three doors down from her own room to the piano room. Closing the door quietly, she pulled her eyes open again and rubbed the corner of one.

The clock on the Wurlitzer read 5:37. She was going to have to book it the minute she was finished with her hour of practice. Shifting gears into near-normal, she sat down at the bench and pulled the piece she had been working on down from the shelf. She needed to have at least the first movement memorized by the time she got to Mr. Sarazynski’s on Wednesday.

Setting the sheets of music out, she went through the movement in her mind. It wasn’t impossible compared with some of the music she’d been subjected to playing over the years, but it still wasn’t easy either. She took a breath to settle into music mode, laid her fingers on the keys, and the music began to flow from her as if it was simply an extension of her soul.

The beep of the alarm clock raised only Chad Dourozette’s arm off the bed far enough to hit the snooze button. He should’ve called the game with Kyle Morgan before midnight the night before, but the understanding that it would be their last free night to just play hoops for no reason at all made it too tempting to forget about the time. In the seconds that followed, Chad forgot he was supposed to get up and get moving. His mind drifted back into the comfortable space of dreamland.

Nine minutes later the second screech of the clock’s alarm punched through him like a bolt. With a sigh and a small moan, he shut it off again and pulled himself upright. A hard sigh rocked through him. This was it. S-Day. Seniors at last. In one way he had thought it would never come. In another, it seemed to have arrived in slightly less time than the speed of light.

Rubbing the top of his eye, he pushed off the bed. Kyle would be here to get him as he always was at 7:30 on the dot, and Chad had no intention of taking advantage of his friend's generosity by being late. The more he moved, the more movement felt good, and awake drifted over him. At the window, he pulled the shades up to reveal the pinks and golds of a sky coming alive. He loved mornings. He smiled at the thought.

But then he loved nights too. In fact, all of life was just pretty fantastic. And with that thought, he went to get ready for the day.

"Now don't forget, I'll be there to pick you up at 3:30 between my 3:00 and my 4:00," her mother said as Alison sat at the kitchen table, cutting into waffles she really didn't have the stomach to eat.

Jefferson was getting closer and closer, and her stomach knew it.

"Do not be late." Her mother drank her coffee, looking over the paper. "Your dad and I are supposed to go to that fundraiser for the church tonight, so you're on your own for supper."

Alison nodded for no other reason than to get the bite of waffles down her throat.

"What a world." Flipping the paper to the table, her mother took a final drink of her coffee. With a push she stood from the table, and her black heels clicked on the smoke blue tile flooring as she crossed to the sink. "Are you about ready?"

"Oh, uh. Yeah." She might as well be. She couldn't look at the waffles any more anyway.

"You ready for this?" Kyle asked when Chad slid into the front seat of the little four-door car. It wasn't great, but it ran. And it was better than walking.

"I was born ready." Chad shifted his attention to the back. "Hey, Brooke."

"Hey," she said, but never really lifted her head. Kyle's younger sister, Brooke, was never without a book in hand. So close in age, they were more like twins, the two of them were never far out of sight of one another even though they ran in completely different circles.

Kyle, the school's jock premier, was only eleven months and three weeks older than his little sister, and although Brooke's taste ran more toward choir and books than basketball and baseball games, she never missed a one.

Chad angled his gaze over his shoulder again as they pulled away from his house. "Are you studying already? School hasn't even started yet."

"Finishing up her summer college credit thing," Kyle supplied. "She may beat us to graduation."

Lifting his chin, Chad nodded in understanding.

Kyle glanced across the seat to his friend. "So, senior year..."

"Yeah." Chad took a breath to steady the thought. "Who would've thought?"

"Not my parents that's for sure."

The laugh almost beat the smile. "Did they sign you up for that ACT class thing?"

"Ugh. Let's not talk about it," Kyle said, his ash-blond hair streaked with light blond highlights catching on the sunlight as he spun the wheel into the Jefferson High parking lot already teeming with students.

Waves of excitement preceded their approach.

"Looks like your fan club made it," Chad teased.

"Like you're Mr. Unpopular." Kyle turned into a spot and threw the car into park. "Brooke. We're here."

"K," she said, never really noticing he'd said anything.

With a shake of his head, Kyle grabbed his books. He let his eyes go wide as he glanced at Chad. "On three. One. Two..."

Together, they both said, "Three" and popped the doors open. The throng of students who attended their every move surged.

"Chad!"

"Kyle!"

"Hey!"

Chad held his hand out up top in greeting to several of the other basketball players as Jason Hansley, the baseball catcher, stepped up.

"You made it," Jason said, catching Chad's hand.

"Of course. What'd you think, I'd bail?"

As one, the group headed for the school, but at the last possible second, Chad glanced back over his shoulder to where Brooke was walking behind them, head down, reading. No one had come to the car to greet her. No one seemed to even know she was there. Something in him said that would be nice, to not always have to be on, to exist in a world that everyone wasn't so enthralled with that they invaded to get some of the limelight.

But he was where everyone else wanted to be. How could he not love it? With that thought, he reanchored his attention on the others as their excitement for the promises of the year infused his soul with anticipation. Senior year. It was going to be awesome.

It was about five minutes after her mother dropped her off that Alison first had the thought, but it would be a million times after that one that the thought would attack her. Jefferson High was nothing like St. Ann's. Nothing. Jostled in the hallways until she thought her brains would rattle free, Alison diligently worked through her schedule.

Trig, History, Computer something, French. She was in the courtyard at lunchtime, sitting up next to a pillar eating her chicken salad sandwich before she really realized there was no religion on her schedule. Perusing it again, she confirmed the fact with a munch into her sandwich. That would be strange. She'd had religion every single day for four years, and now suddenly it wasn't anywhere on the list.

Her gaze took in her final three classes—Physics, English, and Choir. Besides the Physics part, she was kind of looking forward to the rest of the day. Okay, so she would spend it alone as part of the wall like she had the first part, but at least she liked those classes. She let her head fall back onto the hard, scratchy pillar behind her and let the warm sun soak into her. Happy noises that she would never be a part of drifted around her, and she let those soak into her as well. Nobody had to tell her the loneliness this year would hold.

She knew it when her dad announced the move back in July, and for all intents and purposes, she had already lived with the loneliness for the better part of five years. At that thought she yanked her head up. Dwelling on things that would never change no matter how much she

wanted them to did no good. That much she had learned. Move on. Move on, and don't look back. Pushing to her feet, she crumpled the bag and tossed it into a nearby trashcan. One swipe on her light blue straight skirt, and she yanked her backpack up from its resting place. Onward and upward. At least that's what she hoped.

"You headed to English?" Kyle asked, clapping Chad on the back as he leaned over to get a drink in the fountain.

He stood to straight, wiping the water that had jumped onto his face. "Yeah. You?"

"You know it."

Together they started down the hall.

"So, you going to the gym after school?" Chad asked.

"Na, I figured we'd go to my place. The gym's going to be a mob scene with all the wanna be's."

"Cool." Chad followed Kyle into the English classroom and right to the back where he slid into the desk right in front of his friend. "You got much homework?"

"As little as possible."

The bell rang just as Mrs. Whitman entered. Chad sat up a little straighter. He'd waited three long years to get this teacher. She was the coolest of the cool, not because she goofed off but because she didn't. However, that didn't mean Mrs. Whitman's class was boring. No, instead she was quite famous for her unorthodox teaching style.

"Nice to see you all made it today. Welcome to Senior English. I'm Mrs. Whitman, kind of like Walt Whitman except without the Walt."

Up front and off to the far right Alison smiled at the joke. Just less than 30 years old and full of energy, Mrs. Whitman had a spirit about her that screamed, "This is going to be fun."

"Okay. We've got the boring stuff to take care of today," the teacher said, hefting two stacks of huge books onto the desk.

Several students groaned.

"Yeah, me too." She pulled her class roll from the desk. "Let's see. Since you're seniors, I'm assuming you can manage this part yourselves."

I'll put the roll here, and the books here. Come up and get a book, find your name." She stopped and looked up at them. "I assume you know your name."

The moans turned to laughs.

"Good." She laid the roll next to the books. "Write the number of your book—legibly next to your name. If it's not legible, I'll assume you were not meant to be in senior English and talk to Mr. Hunsley about taking you back to *junior* English."

What was so bad about Mr. Hunsley, Alison had no idea, but everyone moaned at that.

"I promise I won't tell him you said that," Mrs. Whitman said. "Let's start over here in the corner. Oh." She stopped with a jerk when she looked at Alison. Tilting her head, the confusion was evident. "And you are?"

Alison cleared her throat but it didn't do much good. "Al... Alison Prescott."

The teacher turned her roll around, located the name, and smiled. "Well, Miss Prescott, it's great to have you aboard. Come on up, and get us started."

Chad was busy writing "Senior English" on his notebook along with his contact information. He'd found out the hard way about not doing that in Freshman English. It was then that he felt the poke on his shoulder. He swiveled his head to find Kyle standing behind him, pointing up the aisle.

"Oh!" With a jump, Chad was out of his desk, headed to the front.

"Mr. Dourozette," Mrs. Whitman said when he got to the front. "I've heard some good things about you."

Chad ducked his head, sending his kink-curved dark black-and-bronze afro into his eyes as he smiled a half-smile.

"I'm looking forward to hearing you debate Shakespeare like you make three pointers." Mrs. Whitman smiled with no sarcasm whatsoever.

Raised expectations, always a scary proposition. "I hope I don't let you down."

She shook her head, the smile never leaving. "I'm sure you won't."

Alison ducked her head to keep from staring at the two guys presently standing at the teacher's desk. The white guy had longish blond-streaked hair that brushed the tops of his dark eyebrows in the front and the top half of his collar in the back. His smile was nice, but what she noticed most was the faded jeans ripped just so and the light blue knit jersey that set off his eyes. Something about them screamed, look how cool I am.

Just in front of him, talking to the teacher, was the black guy, leaning in to sign the roll—obviously a regular in the gym. His arm muscles rippled in perfect proportion down to his long fingers. He seemed as if nothing in the world ever had been or would ever be a problem. In a dark gray "Rock On" T-shirt, he looked the embodiment of cool confidence. The conversation came to an end, and the two made their way back to the back corner.

Alison closed her eyes in annoyance and put her head onto her fingers. Like anyone like those two would ever pay her two seconds worth of attention. Class started, and with a determined straightening, she got back to the real business of life. She of all people knew straight A's didn't make themselves.

By the time she got to choir, Alison could stand the hair in her face thing no longer. Never one for more than ponytails or anything much more difficult than a tiny tooth clip, she pulled the top of her hair up and snapped one in. With no more than a rake through her hair, she let it go at that. She didn't have to be fashion-plate perfect. No one knew she was alive anyway.

The teacher, a sweater-vested, graying man who looked no happier than absolutely necessary, strode in. "We will have auditions today," he said before the bell even rang, and Alison pulled herself up straighter. "These will determine where you sing or if you sing in this choir or if you are to be transferred into study hall for this period."

Panic seized her. If she didn't get into the choir, her mother would throw the fit of the century. Alison could hear the yelling already. Seeing nothing else that could be done, she bent her head and prayed.

Prayer might not be allowed in this school, but what they didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

The carnage began with a student unfortunate enough to have sat on the front row. Student after nervous student stood for the 30 seconds that would decide their fate, and then it was Alison's turn. She couldn't stand. She could hardly breathe through the fear. Closing her eyes she pulled every second of training to her as she forced her legs to hold her up.

"Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved and set me free..."

"Thank you very much," the director said. "Next."

Shaking like a leaf in a hurricane, Alison smoothed her skirt underneath her and lowered herself into her chair. She didn't have to ask. She knew she was study hall bound. Worse, now it seemed that everyone was staring at her. Pulling into her well-worn shell, she put her gaze on her knees and kept it there. Why had her dad insisted upon this move? He wasn't even unhappy in his company back home. Now he'd dragged her into a disaster of colossal proportions.

She did her best to look only at her knees the rest of the class until the director cut the last student off.

"Audition results will be posted in the morning on the wall outside the rehearsal room. If your name is not on it, please don't bother me with your excuses."

The bell rang, and like a full audience of funeral-goers the students stood and started out.

"Man, that was awesome," the girl next to Alison with the dark glasses and long brown hair waving gently down across her shoulder to her chest said.

For a moment Alison snagged on the voice and turned to see who the girl was referring to. A brick to the eyes could've been no more surprising.

"Me?" Alison asked as her eyes went wide in shock.

"Yes, you. Who'd you think I was talking to, Bobby Reynolds?" The girl's smile and manner were like a 1,000 watt bulb.

Alison had no clue who Bobby Reynolds was, but she wasn't about to ask.

“Do you take lessons?” the girl asked, following her out of the row.

“Oh, uh, yeah.” Alison couldn’t quite figure out why this person was suddenly talking to her when no one else had bothered the whole day. She anchored her wayward hair over her ear. “Since I was four.”

The girl all but stopped as she raised her eyebrows and lowered her head. “Four? I was in Mom and Me gym when I was four.”

Alison shrugged because she felt the compliment that was never really spoken. “It was Mom’s idea.”

“Ah.” The girl lifted her chin in understanding and then stuck out a hand. “Brooke Morgan.”

Trying to shift her books so as not to be rude, Alison finally got her hand out. “Alison Prescott.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Alison Prescott. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow in choir.”

How anyone could be sure of that was beyond Alison. “I guess so.”

“Well, this is where I get off,” Brooke said, turning one way in the hall. “See ya later.”

And Alison was left standing smack in the middle of the hallway intersection. “Yeah, later.” Knowing she must be dreaming, she turned her own steps in the general direction of her locker. Jefferson High. It was no St. Ann’s.

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