

“I see your record at your last school was... problematic.” As he spoke, the headmaster peered at Allie over the tops of his glasses.

Perched on a dingy plastic seat facing his desk with its ostentatious sign reading “Headmaster Ross” in block letters, Allie affected abject boredom as she studied her sparkly purple nails.

They need to be filed, she noticed absently. *Must do that.*

He was still talking. “I’ve seen your previous records, though, and I know you are capable of better things. You were a high achiever just over a year ago – on your way to university and then who knows what kind of brilliant career. But it’s as if your marks went off a cliff.”

That’s actually a pretty good way of putting it, Ross-o. Her eyes skittered off his face.

She thought he was strangely unattractive, with bulging eyes and a bald head that was perfectly egg-shaped. But he didn’t seem unkind.

“That doesn’t just occur in a vacuum,” he said. “What happened, Alyson?”

She looked back down at her nails.

After an uncomfortable pause, he continued. “Your parents have sent you here because they’re hoping teachers who are skilled in working with difficult children will be able to help you.”

“I’m not a child.”

It was the first thing Allie had said since she’d walked into his office and for a moment he blinked at her in surprise.

“You’re fifteen years old, Alyson.”

“So what?” She raised her resentful grey eyes to meet his gaze. “That’s a number. It doesn’t make me a child.”

“Then what are you?” He leaned back in his battered black faux-leather chair, crossing his hands across his narrow waist. “Because you’re certainly not an adult.”

“I am,” she said after deliberation, “an angry young woman.”

“Our teachers can work with those, too,” he said dryly. “Follow me and I’ll introduce you to them.”

Sighing dramatically, Allie stood, flipping her arrow straight, jet-black hair out of her eyes. She’d dyed it yesterday in honour of her first day at her new school. Her mother had been furious.

At least she noticed.

Someone had painted the walls of Brixton Hill School a pale olive green; it gave the hallway a vaguely militaristic look. The painting had clearly happened some time ago, though, as the walls were scuffed and dusty. Spots of brighter paint showed where something – graffiti probably – had been more recently covered up.

The linoleum floor was stained and dirty, and dead bugs slowly decayed overhead in the covers of the fluorescent strip lights. It all conspired to give the building a depressing, muddy hue. It felt like the last school at the end of the world.

This place is awesome. Thanks Mum and Dad. I’m sure I’ll get the best education here and go on to do great things with my life...

Allie’s resentful thoughts stopped as the headmaster tapped on a white door with a square window. The paint was flaking off it in chunks.

The door opened just a little, and a small woman looked up at him through the crack. She was unnaturally thin, her wiry black hair shot through with threads of grey. Her skin seemed to sag on her face, as if it had given up. As she peered at him, her expression was weary.

“Headmaster Ross,” she said. Her eyes skipped to Allie’s face and then back again to his.
“The new student?”

“Mrs Williams,” he said, “this is Alyson Sheridan Alyson, Mrs Williams will be teaching you English and History.”

With a look on her face that said admitting another truculent teenager into her classroom was the last thing she needed right now, Mrs Williams held the door wider for Allie to pass through.

Inside the room was crowded with students in a varying array of rebellious attire. Allie was surprised to see so many in one room – the class was even bigger than those at her last school. It smelled of sweat and cheap perfume.

“There’s a seat at the back,” Mrs Williams said. “I suggest you take it. And watch your bag. They steal.”

With that endorsement ringing in her ears, Allie stepped over the legs stuck out into the aisle, and around the backpacks that spilled their contents onto the floor to a wobbly desk in the middle of the room.

Two boys sat next to it. One had a narrow, interesting face, with sharp eyes and shaggy hair dyed jet black, much like Allie’s. The other had chubby cheeks and spots. He’d bleached his hair pure white and added a blue streak to one side.

Both of them openly stared at Allie, as she sat down without acknowledging them and pulled out her notebook.

Her skin crawled with the sensation of being observed.

“What are you staring at?” Lowering her heavily painted eyelids, Allie turned to face the dark haired boy. “Haven’t you ever seen a girl before? Jesus.”

Undaunted, he continued to stare.

“What did you do?” Blue Streak asked her.

With exaggerated patience, she turned to face him. He had a perpetual mischievous expression. Something was tattooed on his hands but Allie couldn't quite make it out.

“I don't understand the question.” Her voice was flat.

“He means to get in here.” Black hair was studying her, his gaze steady but curious. “You have to do something to get in here.”

“I set my mum on fire.” Allie said coldly. “And fed her to the nanny.”

Blue Streak smiled at Black Hair. “I don't think she likes us.”

Black Hair gave an impatient shrug. “She doesn't know us yet.” He turned back to Allie. “It's just a question.”

Allie sighed. “Nothing.”

“What kind of nothing?” Black Hair pressed her.

Under cover of her thickly mascaraed lashes she studied him. She could see the small holes in the worn material of his black t-shirt, which bore the message “Kill Your Heroes” in faded white letters. A skinny white knee poked through a rip in his jeans. The dyed hair cast his pale skin in stark relief; his complexion was like china. She noticed that his fingers twitched with repressed anxiety.

“The kind of nothing in which you don't go to school when you're meant to,” Allie said. “I have a bad attitude.”

He nodded as if he'd suspected as much.

“What about you?” Her voice held a challenge.

“I graffiti things.” He sounded proud. “I’m quite well known, actually. He,” he pointed at blue streak, “has an anger problem.”

Blue Streak grinned at her broadly. He was missing a tooth on the right side.

Black Hair was still looking at her. “What’s your name?”

As usual, she thought about lying. Sometimes she did, but it could get confusing and today she didn’t really care what people called her.

“Allie.”

“I’m Mark.” He pointed at the boy with the blue streak. “This one’s Harry.”

Allie nodded to show she understood but before she could speak, Mrs Williams called for quiet in a shrill voice, and she turned to face her.

Mark touched her arm to get her attention – his fingertips were calloused but his touch was surprisingly gentle. Surprised, she glanced over at him.

“You should come out with us tonight,” he whispered.

“Where?” she whispered back, frowning.

His smile was impishly crooked. “Does it matter?”

Mrs Williams was still talking but Allie wasn’t hearing a word she said. Nothing teachers had to say interested her these days.

When she glanced back up at Mark, he was still watching her expectantly. There was something in his eyes – a kind of... hope, maybe. An offer of friendship. A connection.

After a long pause, she inclined her head very slightly.

“OK,” she said. “I’m in.”

