

SHE'S
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LIAR!

Alison Cherry



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president of the "Committee," the all-powerful student organization that controls
extracurricular life and rules the student body through intimidation—and
inevitably the two clash, because they both know what the other is hiding, and
soon they are hopelessly tangled up in the lies they have created for themselves.

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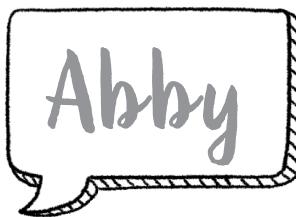
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CHAPTER 1



The minute my parents leave me alone in my empty dorm room, I stand very still, close my eyes, and let myself disappear.

Just like I've been practicing, I concentrate on my top layer of anxiety first, willing it to waft away like campfire smoke. I force myself to forget that I've never been away from home for more than two nights in a row, that I don't even know where the bathrooms are, let alone the dining hall or any of my classrooms. I let go of the fact that after dinner, my parents are leaving me here at Brookside Academy and driving two whole hours home, across the Vermont state line and back into Massachusetts. I tell myself I'm not nervous to share this room with a complete stranger, a mysterious sixth grader named Christina who has literally five times as many shoes as I do.

When all the surface-level jitters are gone, I reach down deeper and focus on the shyness that has spent so many years wrapped around my bones. I unwind the tendrils that keep me from raising my hand in class even when I know the answers. I find the Abby who sits alone at lunch, nose buried in a book so no one will talk to her, and I let her wither away to ashes. I breathe out the impossibility of making friends with any of my brand-new classmates and breathe in clean, fresh air.

And when Abby is nothing more than a light, empty shell, I let Abbi climb inside me and make herself at home in my skin.

When I open my eyes, I am an entirely different person. Abbi pulls Abby's hunched shoulders back and weaves her tangled hair into a neat side-braid, leaving her face exposed. When I look in the full-length mirror on the back of my closet door, I see Abbi's straight spine, the lift of her chin, the way her hands tuck casually into her pockets like they're resting, not hiding. For all anyone at Brookside knows, I've always been Abbi, confident and relaxed. They'll never know they're looking at the girl who cried in front of the whole school during the third-grade talent show, who accepted zeroes on presentations after that because she couldn't bear to stand in front of a class and face the pity in twenty-five pairs of eyes.

I'm ready to begin my brand-new life.

Turning into Abbi gives me energy, and I start unpacking. Before my parents went to drop Sydney off at her dorm, Mom helped me make my bed with my new green sheets and duvet with the leaf pattern, but all my clothes are still in boxes. I rip open the top one and start unloading my Abbi outfits and

Brookside uniforms. Abbi wears colorful shirts printed with stripes and polka dots and stars when she's not in her kilt and blazer. She's not trying to hide. She even has a few dresses. I stuff all my too-big Abby sweatshirts with the stretched-out sleeves into the back of my bottom drawer, behind my pajama pants. I like knowing they're here, but I don't ever plan on bringing them out.

There's a corkboard hanging over my bed, a group of clear pushpins clustered in the corner. Christina's board is already covered in pictures—a few family photos, a couple of shots of little kids, and a whole bunch of pictures of girls holding tennis rackets, their arms slung casually around one another's shoulders. I don't have any photos to hang, so I tack up a few of the paintings I did this summer: one abstract with swirls of red and orange and gold, another of stark winter trees and flying birds. I hope people will think I'm artistic and mysterious when they see them and not realize I just don't have any friends to photograph.

A key clicks in the lock, and the way my heart jumps into my throat makes my Abbi facade waver like water rippling around a skipped stone. But I breathe slowly and remind myself that Christina doesn't know a single thing about me. She won't ever know anything besides what I choose to tell her. I can be whoever I want here.

The door swings open, and a short girl with a heart-shaped face, light brown skin, and curly black hair takes one step into the room, then freezes at the sight of me. All those shoes made me think she'd be super glamorous, way too cool for me, but

she looks totally normal. Actually, to be honest, she looks kind of terrified.

“Oh!” she says. “I didn’t know you were . . . I guess you’re my . . . Are you Abby?” She immediately starts blushing. “I mean, I guess you must be, or why would you be in here, right?”

Her deer-in-the-headlights expression makes me feel calmer. The more flustered she is, the more collected I’ll seem. “Yes, I’m Abbi. Hi.” I hold out my hand to her, which feels totally weird—I’ve never shaken hands with someone my age, or maybe anyone at all. But it seems like something Abbi would do, so I commit to it and force my arm not to tremble.

The girl stares at me, then rushes over and grips my fingers for a second. Her hands are freezing cold and slightly damp. “I’m Christina,” she says. “Ha, I guess you knew that already. I hope you don’t care that I took the right side? I share with my sister at home and . . . I mean, I was hoping . . .” She lets the sentence trail off and finishes with a shrug.

“I like the left side,” I say.

“Oh good,” she says, obviously relieved. She plops down on her bed, picks up the stuffed octopus by her pillow like she’s considering hiding it, then puts it down again. “Are your parents still here? Mine had to . . . Um, my grandparents came with us, and they had to . . . They left already.” She digs the toes of her bright blue sandals into the nubbly industrial carpet.

“Mine are still here,” I say. “They’re helping my sister move in across campus. She’s in eighth grade.”

Christina’s eyes widen. “You have a sister here? Oh wow.

Did she . . . You probably know how everything works here already.”

I don’t know how anything works—Sydney has never offered any information, and I don’t intend to ask her for it. Actually I plan to make sure our paths cross as little as possible. First of all, she’s the only one at Brookside who knows the old me, and I refuse to let Abby crop up and ruin all my plans. And second of all, Syd’s not exactly the friendliest person in the world, so I don’t want my name attached to hers before people get to know me. I’m pretty sure Mom and Dad thought sending us to the same boarding school would make us closer, but if I have anything to say about it, that is definitely not going to happen. Considering the fact that Sydney barely talked to me even when we lived at home, I think she’d agree.

But Christina doesn’t need to know any of that, so I shrug one shoulder and smile. Hopefully it looks modest.

“You’re so lucky,” Christina says. She pulls the octopus into her lap and winds one of the tentacles around her hand. “Are you guys, like, best friends?”

“No,” I say. “We’re into different stuff.” I don’t know how Syd spends her time at Brookside, but before she went, she mostly hid in her bedroom, reading about space and doing a million extra-credit assignments even though she was getting all As. For a long time, her only friends were her Dungeons & Dragons group, and then I guess she had a falling out with them when she was in sixth grade, and Mom and Dad decided boarding school might be a “healthier environment” for her for

seventh and eighth grades. I still don't know exactly what happened; when I asked, Syd told me to leave her alone.

Christina nods. "So, do you think you'll do any clubs or sports or anything?"

At my old school I was in Art Club, a safe, quiet place where I could work on my own projects and never speak to anyone. But I feel like maybe I could do something *bigger* now that I'm here. "I'm not sure yet," I say. "I'll go to the activities fair and see what I think. I'm not ready to commit to anything yet. How about you?"

"The tennis team, probably. If I make it, I mean. And . . . I don't know, maybe concert band? Next semester when I'm settled in? I'd like to learn cello." Christina says it quietly, like she's never admitted that out loud before. Maybe she hasn't. Maybe she's creating a new self here too.

"You totally should," I say. "That sounds awesome."

A cheer goes up from outside, followed by a bunch of girls' voices shout-singing about Brookside spirit. Christina hops off the bed and struggles to raise the blinds so we can see what's happening, but they're caught on something and won't go up. She tugs harder, and as the song reaches its climax, the blinds detach from the top of the window frame and come crashing down on Christina's desk. We leap out of the way with identical shrieks as they hit the corner, bend in the middle, and slither to the floor, where they lie like a snake that's been whacked with a shovel.

For a second we both stare at them in horror. Then Christina whispers, "Oh *no*. What do we do?"

Abby wouldn't have known what to do. She probably would've hidden the broken blinds in the back of her closet and gone the whole year without new ones, scared that asking for help would draw unwanted attention. But Abbi doesn't want to change clothes in the bathroom for the next nine months. She's ready to take charge.

"I guess we tell someone we need new ones? The RA, maybe?"

"Do you think we'll get in trouble? Will they give us detention? Classes haven't even started yet." There's a quaver in Christina's voice.

"I don't think so. It was an accident." But my roommate just stares at me, wide-eyed and scared as a baby rabbit, and it makes me say, "Do you want me to go ask?"

She lets out a huge breath of relief. "Would you?"

"Sure. No problem." And weirdly enough, I find that it isn't. I open the door and step into the hall alone.

Stronger Hall is in complete chaos. Hesitant sixth graders trail behind their parents, lugging suitcases and boxes and looking for their rooms; I wonder which of them will be in my classes. Reunited seventh and eighth graders scream and leap into one another's arms, and I barely avoid being knocked over as a lanky girl barrels out of her room and hugs her friend so hard that they spin all the way around and crash into the wall. My heart tugs painfully toward them the way it always does when I see best friends. But now that I'm Abbi, willing to reach out and talk to other people, a friendship like that might actually be possible for me. I can't wait to find out if it is.

I continue down the hall, past a girl gathering a spilled armful of books and another girl arguing with her dad, until I find the RA's door. I knock, three confident raps. Nobody answers. I knock again, a little louder this time—still nothing. On my third try, a girl comes out of the next room over. She's got pale, freckled skin, long reddish hair, and even longer knee socks patterned with stars. “Are you looking for Amelia? I think she took someone to the infirmary.”

“Oh,” I say. It’s not a big deal, but it’s hard not to be disappointed. I really wanted to burst back into our room and assure Christina that I handled everything, all Abbi-to-the-rescue.

“Maybe I can help?” says the girl.

She looks about Sydney’s age, which means she actually might know the answer to my question. “The blinds in our room broke,” I say. “Do you know how we get new ones?”

“Oh, the Committee handles that.”

I blink at her. “The . . . what?”

“Oh, sorry, you’re new, aren’t you? The Brookside Academy Student Representative Officers Committee? We call them the Committee ’cause BASROC sounds super dumb. Brookside’s really big on the students running everything. So if you need something repaired, or if you want to reserve a room or get money for your club or throw an event or something, all of that goes through them.”

“Huh.” This is a lot more complicated than I was expecting—I thought I could just tell the RA and someone would magically bring us new blinds. “So, I have to, what, email them?”

The girl laughs like I've suggested I sing my request through a megaphone from the top of Memorial Church. "No, you go to Petition Day and ask for what you want."

I've only been a Brookside student for two hours, but she says it like it's totally obvious. Maybe it is. Maybe I missed something important in the welcome packet. I don't want to look more clueless than I already do, so I say, "Okay, thanks. I'll get my sister to explain how it works."

"Oh, you have a sister here? What's her name?"

I consider lying. But people are going to figure out that Sydney and I are related eventually, and being caught in a lie first thing is worse than being associated with her. So I say, "Sydney? She's in eighth grade."

The girl's eyes get big. "*Sydney*'s your sister? Really?"

My heart speeds up at the expression on her face. "Yeah?" I brace myself to hear something about how weird my sister is, how she acts like a know-it-all and alienates everyone like she did at our old school. I desperately hope that saying her name hasn't destroyed my chances of being cool, glamorous Abbi.

But the girl just says, "So you know all about the Committee already!"

Like Christina, she obviously assumes that Sydney has taught me what to expect here; most big sisters probably would have. I force a laugh, which comes out higher and more musical than my regular laugh; I guess this is how Abbi laughs. "Oh, it's *that* Committee?" I say. "Of course. I forgot for a second. Thanks."

The redhead is staring at me now like I've become five hundred times more interesting in the last ten seconds. "I'm sure *you'll* never have any trouble getting what you want," she says. "What's your name?"

"Abbi," I say. "With an *i*."

"Hi, Abbi-with-an-*i*. I'm Grace. It's really nice to meet you. Do you think maybe you could put in a good word for me with the Committee?"

I'm not sure why explaining things to a sixth grader would get her special privileges with the Committee, but I'm happy to tell them how helpful she's been, so I say, "Sure. It's nice to meet you too. See you around?"

"See you," says Grace, and she disappears back into her room. I can hear her talking excitedly to her roommate, but I can't understand what she's saying.

As I turn and make my way back to my room, I break into a smile. I didn't accomplish what I came out here to do; I have no answers for Christina, and I'm actually a lot more confused than I was five minutes ago. But I had a perfectly normal interaction with a stranger, and I didn't freak out even when I couldn't follow the conversation. I bet Grace had no idea I was even nervous.

It turns out Abbi's an excellent actress. It makes me wonder what other skills she might have.