

NEXT IN LINE
Chapter 1: Hit and Run
Alison

He came out of nowhere from between two parked cars.

I hit the brakes on reflex only, no time to think or even to scream. I felt the thud rather than heard it, and he was rolling on the tarmac in the ghostly glare of my headlights.

“Oh my God! Oh my—!” I was screaming as I fumbled frantically with my seatbelt. I wrenched the door open and practically fell from the car. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t see you. I—” I dropped to the wet street beside him, barely noticing that my knees were in a puddle of cold water.

He was moving; groaning and pushing slowly to his hands and knees.

“Are you okay?” I asked stupidly in panic. “I mean, of course you’re not! Don’t move! I’ll call 9-1-1!”

“No!” he gasped, reaching out to grab my arm with his grazed and bleeding right hand. He grimaced in pain and immediately let go. “No. Please don’t call anyone. I—I’m all right.”

There was a distinct accent to his words. Spanish, maybe, or French. No time to wonder about it now.

Grasping the arm I offered for support, he got to his feet, only to stagger and sway and sit heavily down again on the curb. “Just give me a minute. Please.”

In that minute, I saw that he wasn’t much older than me. Early twenties, no more. His longish hair was dishevelled and so were his clothes. He was soaking wet and thoroughly scuffed from the accident; a thin trickle of blood ran from a scrape on his right cheek. He swiped at it with the palm of his uninjured left hand and contemplated the blood on it for a second before wiping his hand clean on the thigh of his jeans.

I realized I was trembling, but whether from cold or shock—or both—I had no idea. The late October shower that had stopped a while ago was beginning again, and my car had stalled right there in the middle of the road. I wondered vaguely if it would start again.

A couple of cars honked and rolled slowly past us. The drivers gawked, but were either afraid to become involved, or too concerned with getting wherever they were going to stop. A handful of passers-by gathered, pressing in closer until suddenly he looked up at them, his eyes startled and wide like the eyes of a hunted animal. Even under the dim light of the street lamps I noticed that they were a rich chocolate brown, and framed by thick dark lashes.

“I—I must get a—away from ‘ere,” he whispered, making a second and more successful attempt to stand.

“But what about . . . um . . . shouldn’t we wait for the police?” I asked as a police siren wailed shrilly in the distance. I assumed someone had called 9-1-1 in my place.

“No police!” he hissed, limping away from the side of the road, his arms wrapped protectively around his ribs. He leaned back somewhat into the substantial cedar hedge lining the sidewalk, still breathing in audible gasps.

“Okay then, whatever you say,” I agreed hastily. I had no idea why, but I would have said anything to prevent his taking flight the way I suspected he was preparing to do. “Get in my car. I’ll take you wherever you want to go.”

He nodded and hobbled obediently around my car while I dove in and stretched across the front seat to unlock the door on the passenger side.

He collapsed in the seat, pulled the door closed with a heavy click, and said, “Let’s go.”

“Where do you want to go?” I asked as the police siren grew louder.

“Anywhere but ‘ere!” he yelled sharply, his accent becoming more pronounced. French, I decided. “Go!”

My hand shook as I turned the key in the ignition. My car promptly sprang to life in spite of whatever damage the collision with a human body might have caused, and I pressed the accelerator as hard as I dared. We rolled down the street, passing the police car and ambulance with their lights flashing and sirens screaming as if all the commotion was no concern of ours.

“You need to go to the hospital,” I began, glancing over at the guy in genuine concern for his well-being. “You might be really hurt. I mean . . . God, I hit you with my car!”

“No,” he said through his teeth with a shake of his head. “No ‘ospital.”

“Then where?” I asked again, flustered but determined nonetheless to help him. The words spilled from my mouth almost before they’d formed in my mind. “I’m taking you home.” I jerked the steering wheel and made a sharp right turn onto Waite Street. “My dad’s a doctor. At least he can check you out and make sure you’re not going to die . . .” I expected him to object or argue or maybe bail at the next stop sign, but he didn’t.

He didn’t say or do anything, just sat with his head bent slightly down like he was trying to hide, his hands clasped in his lap. I wondered if he might be praying.

I took a left on tree-lined Ridge Road and pulled into the asphalt driveway beside my dad’s navy SUV. I parked my car, turned the motor off, the overhead light on, and looked hard at my curious passenger.

Blood was still trickling down the side of his face from the scrape on his cheek. A drop fell onto the front of his gray nylon windbreaker and glistened in the pale light.

“Can you walk?” I asked doubtfully.

“Yes, of course I can walk,” he replied, but he stumbled getting out of the car and grabbed the wooden railing to prevent himself falling flat on the front stairs.

“Alison! Good heavens, what’s . . . who is this?” asked my dad as I helped the guy into the house. Dad was used to my arriving with all sorts of stray cats and dogs—our current pets were all rescues—but I had to admit I’d never before brought a bedraggled human home.

“I—I hit him with m—my car,” I stammered. “But he’s okay, I mean, I guess he isn’t, really, but he won’t go to the hospital . . .” I stopped for a gulp of air. “I didn’t know what else to do, Dad. Will you help him?”

“What’s your name, son?” My dad went immediately into Dr. Mitchell mode, asking the simple question that hadn’t even entered my mind.

That hunted animal look crossed his face again and it was a moment before he replied, “You may call me John.”

“John,” Dad repeated doubtfully. “Well . . . I’m Fred Mitchell, Alison’s father. I’m a doctor. I don’t have a clinic here at home, but if you come into the bathroom I’ll take a look at you and see if you shouldn’t go to the hospital, after all.” He helped John hobble toward the bathroom with one long, exasperated look back over his shoulder at me.

I kicked off my wet sneakers and hung up my raincoat in the hall closet. I was shaking again as I sank down on the living room sofa. A dozen questions ran through my mind as I absently patted the head of Bax, our beagle, but two in particular returned over and over: *What—or who—was John running from that he nearly got himself killed in the street? And why did I invite him into my car without a second thought? That’s totally wild, even for me.*

Fifteen minutes later, my dad came alone from the bathroom carrying John’s clothes under one arm. “You’re just like your mother,” he said with a sigh and a shake of his head, and I saw what I recognized as a spark of admiration along with sadness in his deep blue eyes. “You can’t resist an adventure, nor the chance to help someone.”

The mention of my mom tugged at my heart. Barely more than a year had gone by since she'd passed away from cancer. My dad and I'd helped each other through the worst times, but now we almost never talked about Mom. In fact, we hardly ever talked about anything anymore. Dad had somehow managed to move on, but I was stuck somewhere between an intense feeling of loss that still had me crying myself to sleep some nights, and the need to strike out in anger and frustration at the injustice of a world that would let a loved and loving mother die so pointlessly.

I pushed thoughts of my mom away to a distant corner of my mind. "What else could I do?" I asked as I heard the faint drumming of the shower, "after I'd just practically run him over!"

"You could've waited for the police, Alison. You don't know who this young man is, but he's obviously running from something. He may have committed a crime. Heaven knows what. Drugs? Rape? Terrorism? He was extremely evasive about answering my questions. He's certainly not from around here. All I could get out of him was that he's in good health." He looked down at John's clothes as if suddenly remembering them. He turned the pockets inside out and came up with nothing. No wallet. No cell phone. Not even any loose change. "Get these washed for him, will you?" he asked, handing me the bundle of wet clothes.

I jogged downstairs and threw John's socks and underwear, black designer jeans, navy Yale golf shirt, and stained windbreaker into the washing machine with some detergent, noting as I did so that they looked and smelled as though he'd worn them for days on end. Joining my dad in the living room, I asked, "He's not hurt too badly, is he?"

Dad shrugged. "He has a number of cuts and scrapes, and his entire upper left leg is banged up quite badly—"

"I hit him on the left side," I explained. "He ran out in front of the car; I couldn't stop in time."

"Yes, well . . . that's not what worries me most." Dad paused and his expression of confusion melted into a frown of deep concern. "He has quite a bump on the back of his head, some nasty bruising on his torso and as far as I can tell, either a cracked rib or torn rib cartilage. But I don't think they're from the accident tonight. He's been involved in more than one incident recently."

I caught my breath. "Oh my—really? Did you ask him about it?"

"Of course I asked him!" He let out a long, frustrated sigh. "He said he got hurt playing soccer, but I don't be—" He stopped abruptly as the sound of the bathroom door opening.

I heard uneven footsteps in the hallway, and John appeared in the living room doorway wearing my dad's gray terry bathrobe, which he'd modestly snugged tight with the belt. His hair was still wet but combed back from his narrow, handsome face. He was badly in need of a shave—unless week-old stubble was his usual thing—and the scrape on his cheek, although no longer bleeding, looked painful. His muddy black Nikes dangled by the laces from his left hand.

"May I 'ave my clothes?" he asked in a voice that left no doubt as to his intentions. He was planning to leave.

"They're in the wash. You couldn't put them back on the way they were," I said with a quick look at my dad. "Dad'll lend you something for the night. I mean . . . you can't just go back out tonight like nothing happened."

John smiled wistfully and shook his head. "I cannot stay 'ere."

"You need to rest," I insisted, getting ready for an argument from my dad.

"Alison's right," said Dad, sounding every bit like John's doctor, now, although I could see the doubt in his face. "I want to examine you again, more thoroughly. I'll take you wherever you want to go in the morning."

John opened his mouth to object, then shut it again. Slowly, he admitted, “Per’aps you’re right. A night of sleep would be nice.”

The way he said it, I was pretty sure he hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in a while. I showed him to the spare bedroom, waiting for him at the top of the stairs while he limped up them one by one, leaning on the handrail for support. I pulled fresh white sheets, pillow cases, and a blanket from the closet, realizing as I did that I hadn’t had a friend stay over since before Mom died. I shook them to air them out and made up the bed.

John dropped his shoes on the floor in front of the closet and looked around the cozy pastel pink room as though he’d never seen anything like it. “Thank you,” he said solemnly when I was done.

“You’re welcome,” I replied as my dad joined us with his black bag and a clean, striped tee-shirt and gray sweatpants, which he offered to John. My mind was still reeling with questions, but before I could open my mouth, Dad was bustling me out of the room. I looked past him to John and called out, “See you in the morning,” just as Dad closed the door in my face.

Suddenly remembering I’d left my book bag in my car, I hurried out to grab it before washing up and retiring to my bedroom.

“I’ll put the load in the dryer,” my dad said to me when he came into my room across the hall to say goodnight about twenty minutes later. “I want you to lock your door tonight, Alison. I’ll be locking mine.”

“What—why, Dad? Do you still think he’s a dangerous criminal?”

“No, not really,” he admitted. “I think he’s probably a good guy going through some bad times, but I want to make sure we’re safe. Just in case.”

I lay in bed staring wide awake at the ceiling, thinking about the strange turn my day had taken. After this morning’s class at the University of New Haven and a quick lunch in the cafeteria, I’d spent the afternoon in the university library looking for source material for my Behavioral Studies homework. I’d stayed later than planned, grabbed a Big Mac which I’d subsequently forgotten and was probably now going soggy wherever it had landed inside my car, and headed home in a hurry. Then I’d committed something close to a hit-and-run—only the hapless victim had run along with me—and invited a total but admittedly intriguing stranger to stay the night.

I didn’t feel like I was in danger. I felt insanely lucky to have turned onto Whitney Avenue at the exact moment I had. Thirty seconds sooner or later, and I would have missed John.

Who is he? I wondered as I drifted off to sleep. Why doesn’t he have a cell phone or wallet on him? And why do I feel like I absolutely have to get to know him?

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