

Accepted Memories

T. E. Killian

Prologue

Alison Thompson was scared. She didn't think she'd ever been so scared in her whole life. She looked up at her nine-year-old brother. Grant was mad. Was he mad at her?

"Grant, what are we going to do now?"

Grant just shook his head and continued staring at the closed door. Maybe he didn't know what to do either. All she knew was that Mother was leaving. She swallowed hard trying to hold back the tears.

After all that time, Grant said, "Alison, you know Mom said she'd be back in two weeks. She said she's just going away with that guy Harry, then she said she's coming back to get us."

"I don't want her to leave." In spite of her efforts not to, big tears ran down her cheeks.

Alison sure hoped Grant wasn't mad at her. She didn't think he was anyway. He may be only two years older than her, but somehow he always seemed to know what was going on.

They were in the bedroom that their Aunt Sybil had said would be Grant's while Mother was gone.

"You'd better stop crying, I hear Mom coming."

Mother came into the room then. Even as scared as she was about her mother leaving them, Alison was getting that special feeling she sometimes did when she looked at her mother. Sarah Thompson Newcomb had long blond hair and blue eyes just like Alison did.

Everyone said Alison would look just like her mother when she grew up. She hoped that was true. She thought that looking so much like her mother made her special too. It made her feel pretty because Mother was so pretty.

Mother reached out and tried to pull both her and Grant into a hug, but Grant pulled away enough that her hug was only a loose one. The hurt look on Mother's face made Alison cry more.

Sarah turned back to Alison and said, "Don't cry Sweetie, I'll only be gone for two weeks. Just think of all the fun you and Grant will have staying here with Aunt Sybil. You know you always do."

Alison looked up and tried to smile while Sarah wiped the tears off her cheeks with a tissue.

"You know that I love both of you more than anything else in the whole wide world, don't you?"

Alison looked up at her and said, "Even more than Harry?"

She smiled. "Yes, dear, but I love you different than I do Harry. He's my husband now, and you'll always be my special little girl. I can love all three of you, just in different ways, okay?"

Grant turned back toward her and said, "Then why are you leaving us here?"

Mother kept smiling, but Alison knew she was upset. "Grant, you know we've talked about this over and over. Harry and I want to have a little time alone together before all four of us move to Germany." She turned back to Alison. "It's not like you'll never see me again. The next two weeks will go by so fast that it'll seem like tomorrow when we're all together again."

* * *

Almost two weeks later, Grant was pushing Alison in the swing in Sybil's backyard. Aunt Sybil had bought the set for them years before so they had it to play on when they visited. Alison knew Grant was getting tired, but she kept asking him for more and higher. That was when she heard her aunt cry out.

"No! It can't be. I would have known."

Grant stopped pushing Alison's swing and they both looked toward the house. Sybil stepped out onto the patio and just stood there with her arms at her sides and a piece of paper in her left hand.

Grant helped Alison out of the swing and together they walked toward Sybil wondering what was wrong. Alison could tell that Sybil was crying now, and her whole body seemed to be shaking. Alison didn't know what to do as tears came to her own eyes too.

Sybil dropped onto a concrete bench and held the piece of paper up to her eyes. Her arm fell on the table next to her.

Then Sybil looked at them.

“He says she’s gone!”

Alison wanted to know who was gone, but she didn’t want to upset her aunt any more than she already was. She looked up at Grant and began to snuffle too even though she didn’t know why Sybil was crying.

Grant reached out and placed his hand on Sybil’s shoulder. She looked up at him and tried to stop her crying. She pulled some tissue from a pocket and wiped her eyes, then blew her nose.

“Grant! Alison! I want you both to sit down here, right next to me.” She scooted to the center of the chair.

They obeyed as Alison sat on her left and Grant on her right.

She looked at Grant then down at Alison. “Harry sent us a telegram. He said that they were in a terrible car accident.” She sniffled so hard she almost choked then continued. “He said that your mother died from her injuries.”

* * *

That evening, after they had all had time to absorb the news, Sybil sat the children around the kitchen table to talk.

“Grant, Alison, my home will be your home now. You’ll both live here with me. We will all three be a family now. No one will ever separate us.”

Alison looked at Sybil, “Does that mean that the room I’ve been sleeping in will be my very own bedroom now?”

Sybil attempted a smile, “Yes, dear, it will be your very own special bedroom. You can decorate it any way you want to.”

Alison didn’t quite understand all that was going on, but she knew that Grant understood it all better than she did. She didn’t want to believe that mother was never coming back. Hadn’t she told them she was coming back before she left? Grant would explain it all to her later.

That old fear began to build up in her again. She watched Grant as he went outside, picked up his baseball bat, and began hitting the swing set with it. When Sybil stopped him and took the bat away from him, he ran into the house and into his bedroom slamming the door behind him.

Alison was thankful that Sybil allowed her to sleep with her that night. But she wouldn’t let Alison do it the next night. For a long time after that, she followed her big brother around everywhere he went. She didn’t want him to leave her too. She had to make sure Sybil didn’t leave her either. It wasn’t easy to do, but she thought she became quite good at being with one of them almost all the time. She was more successful with Sybil though, since Grant was always with his friends.

Chapter One

Twenty-One Years Later . . .

Alison Thompson looked up at the large church building as she approached the entrance, which consisted of four pairs of glass doors. This was the church her Aunt Sybil had brought her and her brother Grant to while they were growing up. Except for the rehearsal last night, she hadn’t been inside the church for several years. She just hadn’t felt the need.

Why now? What was she doing here now? She didn’t know the woman her big brother was marrying. Oh sure, she’d been around Kelly quite a bit over the last ten months. Grant was always bringing Kelly to family gatherings at Sybil’s house. But Alison didn’t know her that well.

Yet, here she was acting as Kelly Newcomb’s Maid of Honor. When she thought about it, she felt sorry for Kelly in a way though. To be twenty-nine years old and not have any close friends to be in her wedding party made Alison shudder. Then, when she thought about it, did she have any close friends? If she were to be honest with herself, no, she didn’t have any close friends. Sure, she knew lots of people, what realtor didn’t? But she just didn’t have anyone she could, in truth, call her close friend. Grant? He didn’t count. He was her big brother. Why? Why didn’t she have any close friends?

Kelly had tried repeatedly to be Alison's friend since she had come into Grant's life. Maybe she should let Kelly in a little more, now that she was going to be family.

Well, she'd just have to think about all that later. She had no more time for those thoughts now as she stepped into the room where they were supposed to be getting ready for the wedding.

Kelly was already there, and so was her grandmother. Alison hadn't been around the woman much but she liked what she'd seen. If Alison had had a grandmother, she would have liked her to be like this petite, loving woman who at seventy-three was still quite peppy. Even her hair was still more brown than gray.

That other woman was there too, the one they said was Alison's mother. She almost turned around and left the building. But, no, she couldn't do that to Grant. She'd just have to stick it out. Maybe she could avoid the woman.

As she stepped farther into the room, she had to marvel at the fact that Kelly was one woman who looked great in white. Alison sure didn't with her long blond hair and fair complexion. But Kelly's long black hair and dark complexion was the perfect contrast with all of that white in her wedding gown. The white veil sitting on top of her black hair completed the contrast.

Kelly turned to her grandmother and said, "Oh, Grandmother, I almost forgot my bouquet. It's in the refrigerator next door in the fellowship hall."

Before Beth Newcomb could start to move toward the door that other woman, her daughter-in-law, Sarah, said, "I'll go get it, dear. I'll be right back."

When the door closed behind Sarah, Kelly turned to Alison, motioned her to come closer, and said, "Alison, I'm so happy that you've agreed to be my Maid of Honor." She clasped both of Alison's hands in hers. "I love your brother so much, and I'd do anything to make him happy. Wouldn't you?" When Alison nodded, Kelly continued, "He requested that Sarah be here today."

Alison started to turn away, but Kelly tightened her grip on her hands. Even though Kelly was two inches taller, she was ten or fifteen pounds lighter than Alison. But Kelly had strength in her hands and arms. Due to a busted ankle when she was a girl, Kelly wore a leg brace and was forced to walk with crutches when she didn't have it on. That had developed strength in her hands and arms over the years. Alison had no choice but to stay and listen to what her new stepsister, soon to be sister-in-law, had to say.

Kelly looked deep into Alison's eyes. "I know you don't want to accept Sarah as your mother. I know how I would feel if my father were still alive and were here today. The fact that he stayed away from my brother and me for twenty years still hurts. But, it was him who kept Sarah away from you and Grant, not her. She didn't know anything about it. Her permanent amnesia from that car wreck on their honeymoon took all that away from her. And Harry, my father, was the one who chose to take her away from you."

All of a sudden, Alison was angry. No, she wasn't angry with Kelly, or even Sarah, but at herself because tears were streaming down her cheeks. She was embarrassed.

Kelly's grandmother, Beth, stepped up beside Alison, handed her a box of tissue and pulled her into a hug. "You know dear, whether you realize it or not, you are now my granddaughter too, and I want to get to know you much better. Won't you at least let Kelly and me into your life?"

Alison didn't know what to do or say. It was bad enough that she'd been fighting off Sarah's attempts to insinuate herself into her life, and trying to avoid Kelly's attempts at friendship, but this kind older woman was more than Alison could resist.

She turned in Beth's arms and burst into serious tears this time. Kelly stepped up behind Alison and placed both hands on her shoulders. She was surrounded, and the surprising thing to Alison was that it didn't hurt after all. In fact, it felt kind of good.

Well, she'd just have to shove all these new emotions aside for now. Her brother was marrying this wonderful, caring woman, and she didn't want to go out there with puffy eyes looking like she'd been hit in the face.

After drying her eyes and repairing her makeup, Alison still couldn't face Sarah. Right now, she couldn't think about all that Kelly had said. She would just have to think about it all later. Now though . . . she thought she just might be ready to go through with this whole thing.

As they walked out the door of the room they'd been in for the past half hour, Alison couldn't help thinking how lucky her brother was marrying Kelly. She seemed to be perfect for him. Alison didn't notice Kelly's limp

much anymore. Kelly was such a sweet, caring person that Alison decided right then that, somehow, she would let her in.

Everything was okay for her until she stepped into the open doorway of the auditorium. There stood her big brother down at the altar. He looked so nice in his tuxedo. His brown hair and eyes were such a contrast to her blond hair and blue eyes. But they were alike in so many other ways.

Grant had been her big brother in all the important ways. He had always been her protector, the one who had stood between her and the outside world. He belonged to Kelly now. What was she going to do now, without him always close by?

Then her eyes moved to Grant's right where Stan Becker was standing. Well, he was Grant's best friend after all. But he was Alison's tormentor. He had always teased her and chased her when they were growing up together. He lived two doors down from Sybil, so he had always been around. If she were honest, she'd have to say that Stan was nice looking with his dark blond hair and blue eyes. At six feet one, he was well muscled and still slim. He just wasn't her type, that was all there was to it!

Again, she got the urge to just turn around and leave. But she couldn't do that to Grant though, and now she realized that she couldn't do it to Kelly either.

* * *

Stan Becker stood beside his best friend and partner, Grant Thompson feeling several strange emotions. They had grown up together since his parents died when he was ten, and he had moved in with his grandparents, two doors down from Sybil's house. He and Grant had gone to the police academy together and now they were both detectives and were even partners.

But everything was changing, had changed so much since last August when he and Grant had knocked on the front door of the Newcomb estate and Kelly Newcomb had opened the door. Stan knew right then, from the way that Grant had been stunned that this day would come soon. Grant had been so wrapped up in Kelly ever since that he had almost ignored everyone else.

In a way, Stan was jealous of what his best friend now had. He had a wonderful woman in his life and Stan didn't even have so much as a pet goldfish to go home to. His grandparents had died soon after he graduated from high school, so he'd lived alone, been alone, for twelve years now.

Enough about him! He was here today for Grant, and right now it looked like his best friend needed someone to lean on figuratively or possibly even literally. Grant was visibly nervous, but what could Stan do about it?

Stan looked out into the seating section in front of him and his eyes fell first on Sybil who had a bright smile on her face. Seated next to her was Sarah Newcomb, her sister, and Grant's mother. He wasn't sure how that was still panning out after she suddenly dropped into their lives last August when her husband, Air Force General Harry Newcomb, was killed in Afghanistan. Stan and Grant had worked on the case since it turned out that he had been murdered. Sarah's amnesia kept her from knowing any of them from before.

He looked behind Sybil and Sarah and there sat Detective Sergeant Sonia Nordstrom who was always harassing him. Couldn't he at least get away from her on his day off? The rest of the detectives and most of the Sycamore Police, officers, and civilian employees were all there too. He was glad. Grant deserved their support.

Just then, his attention was drawn away from the people in front of him. Alison had stepped into the open doorway at the other end of the auditorium. Alison! Stan had not only grown up with Grant, but with Alison as well. She was Grant's little sister who had always been in the way or telling on them for everything they did.

Alison, the little brat! When had all that changed? When had she stopped being a nuisance? When had she become a woman? When had she become the most beautiful woman in the world? When had he begun to look at her as a desirable woman rather than his best friend's little sister?

The biggest question of all was, would Alison ever look at him as anything other than the bully who had always teased and chased her while they were all growing up? How could he get her to look at him the way Kelly looked at Grant? Whoa, where did that come from? Did he want Alison to look at him the way Kelly looked at Grant?

No time for that now. He had to go up and meet Alison halfway to walk her back down to the front. When he held out his arm, she grabbed it the way they had practiced at the rehearsal last night, but she kept her eyes straight ahead.

When they approached the others, she pulled away from him just a little sooner than she was supposed to. Now, she was glaring at him from the other side of the pastor. What had he done now?

Then the music changed as Kelly stepped through the doorway on the arm of her grandfather, Harold Newcomb. Stan glanced over at Grant who was now leaning a little forward in anticipation of meeting Kelly and her grandfather. Stan hoped Grant didn't fall on his face before they arrived.

Out of the side of his mouth, he said, "Last chance to bail."

Grant didn't change his expression or his posture in the least when he answered with, "Not a chance, buddy!"

When the ceremony was over and they were all four standing in the foyer to greet the people as they left. Stan had to laugh, which only earned him a dirty look from Alison when he did so out loud. Kelly was first, then Grant. Alison was so close to Grant that if Stan were to try to get close to her, he'd almost be touching Grant.

Message received, loud and clear! But the question that wouldn't leave his mind was, 'Why?' To be fair, he also had to ask himself why that answer was so important. Sure, he and Grant were too close for him to be fighting with his best friend's sister. But he knew, deep down, that there was another reason. He just wasn't ready to admit it yet, even to himself.

Thirty minutes later, at the reception, again Alison was sitting as far away from him as she could get. He knew he had to say something, but what?

He was saved by Grant when he turned to Alison, put his arm around her and said, "Alison, please don't make a scene here with Stan. Can't you try to get along with him for just a couple of hours? For me?"

Stan couldn't see her face, but he was sure that she was giving her brother a dirty look. He was surprised, though, when she turned around in her chair, scooted it a little closer to Stan and smiled at him.

What a smile! Even though he knew she didn't mean that smile one little bit, it blew him away. She was so beautiful. Her golden blond hair almost sparkled in the light from the chandeliers in the banquet hall. He couldn't have said anything if his life depended on it. She mesmerized him.

She was talking to him and he had to listen. "Are you going to sit there and stare at me all night? We're supposed to be having fun. Act like it."

He shook his head to clear it. Yes, he realized then that he did want to have fun with Alison. He didn't think they were thinking along the same lines though.

* * *

Alison was sitting between her brother and Stan at the reception deep in thought. Stan was sitting there grinning at her like a baboon. What was with him anyway?

Then she thought back to the receiving line in the church foyer earlier. When Sarah had come through, Alison hadn't been prepared. She didn't know how to act toward the woman. Sarah had been with Sybil, but that didn't help much. If anything, that had even made it worse. She remembered thinking, what should she do? What could she do? Out of the corner of her eye, she had noticed that both Kelly and Grant were watching her too. So, she couldn't just ignore the woman. She had to do something, but what could she do?

Sarah had taken the decision away from Alison when she smiled and said, "You look so beautiful in that delightful blue dress Alison."

Alison had shaken the hand that came at her and mumbled a soft 'Thank You' to the woman who looked so much like her. Sarah just happened to be wearing a dress that was the same shade of blue that Alison's dress was, which made her feel like she was looking into a mirror. She had wondered who had arranged that little coincidence. One look at a grinning Kelly and she had had her answer.

Why didn't that make her mad? For some reason, she just couldn't get mad at Kelly anymore. Sure, at first, she had resented the time Grant spent with Kelly, but not anymore. It was more than the fact that Kelly had just married Alison's brother. She couldn't help feeling that she and Kelly were very much alike. At least they were

in the fact that they'd both grown up without either parent, one having died and the other out there somewhere for twenty years.

Yes, they had a lot in common. And it was time for Alison to do something about all the attempts Kelly had made to become her friend. Right then, she made the decision that as soon as Grant and Kelly came back from their honeymoon she would make friends with Kelly. She had eight days to think about how she was going to go about it. They were all going to be at a big Sunday dinner a week from tomorrow, at the Newcomb estate. She'd start then. That is if her brother would let her spend any time with his new wife.

Sybil had been next in the line. She had the same blond hair and blue eyes of her younger sister, but she was shorter and heavier. Right then, she had given Alison one of her stern looks that she and Grant had always known said that she didn't approve of what they had just done. What had bummed out now? She hadn't ignored the woman, had she? She'd shaken the woman's hand hadn't she? She had even said 'thank you' hadn't she?

Sybil startled her when she pulled Alison into an embrace and whispered in her ear, "I hope you're next, dear. In fact, I'm sure you will be."

Alison was still shaken up over that comment. She did not want to get married. Ever! According to Sybil, her parents' marriage had been terrible with her father drinking and beating on her mother. She would never get into that kind of relationship. Ever! Everyone always said she was so much like her mother. If her mother hadn't been able to tell the difference between a good man and a bad one, how would she ever be able to? And if Sarah was their mother after all, then she had picked two bad ones. Even husband number two, Harry Newcomb, must have been almost as bad for him to lie to Sarah all those years, telling her she had no family.

Kelly's grandmother, Beth, had been next in the line and she had also pulled Alison into a hug. Alison was beginning to like this nice older lady. She seemed so sweet, just like her granddaughter.

The older woman had looked her in the eye and said, "Alison, dear, I meant what I said earlier. I truly do want to be your grandmother too. I would dearly love having another granddaughter."

With that, Beth had stepped over to hug Stan as well. She sure was a hugger. Alison didn't want to think about any of that sticky family stuff right now.

Her feet had been hurting in these blasted heels. She wished there hadn't been so many people going through that receiving line. She was glad the table had cloths that reached almost to the floor. She tried to be casual about slipping both of her heels off and breathing a silent sigh of relief.

She sneaked a peak to her right where Stan was sitting. As usual, his dark blond hair was in its normal mess. He was talking to one of his cop friends who was leaning over the table in front of him. Good! Maybe he'd leave her alone for a while. She couldn't get any farther away from him without being on the other side of Grant. She almost giggled at the thought of earning her big brother's wrath by being between him and his new wife.

Wife! That was going to take some getting used to. For the last twenty-eight years, she'd had him all to herself. Now, she was going to have to share him with Kelly. Hah! If the past ten months were any indication, she'd be lucky to spend any time at all with her brother now. From the time he first met Kelly, all he did was talk about her and try to be with her every chance he could get.

She didn't look forward to the rest of the reception. It was at the country club, of course. The Newcombs were rich, after all. Kelly's grandfather owned a large company that had eight new car dealerships in three states, and they lived in a mansion in Mountainside Estates.

That was when she realized that the cop had moved on and Stan was talking to her.

Stan laughed as he said, "Are you back? I was saying that Grant and Kelly look perfect together don't they?"

All she could do was nod and say, "Yes."

She hoped that her short answer would discourage more talk. After all, she was tolerating Stan right now for her brother's sake. But that didn't mean she had to carry on a lengthy conversation with him, did it?