

Becoming Allison Cassidy

By Emily Zitnik

“Alright pick up from where we left off.” The director, a red headed woman who was intimidating for her size looked my way through her wire rimmed glasses. “Jack,” she said, as she flicked her gaze to the boy sitting next to me on stage.

Right on cue Jack gazed at me dreamily and smiled. “I do love you, Allison.” I nervously cleared my throat and finished lamely “And I love you for all your talk, funny boy.” I was practically gritting my teeth through the whole sentence. Then he leaned in and kissed me. I froze up and pulled back as soon as possible.

“Hold!” the director thundered from her spot in the auditorium. “*Emily*, that was absolutely terrible, my seven year-old niece wouldn’t have believed that. I need you to sound like you’re in *love!*”

That was the problem: I wasn’t.

In fact I didn’t want to be anywhere near Jack, who through no fault of his own, just made me feel really uncomfortable and awkward.

It didn’t help that I was wearing a dress two sizes too small for me. The blinding stage lights were giving me a new tan. Not to mention I was slowly being consumed by the love seat—no pun intended—Jack and I were smashed into. My overall situation was this: I was expected to become an entirely different person under the most uncomfortable of settings and pretend to enjoy it.

Even during school hours or at home I couldn’t escape the play and that awful kissing scene. It was all my mother, friends and the occasional classmate could talk about. Things

changed from bad to worse when people learned how much hearing about it bothered me. Paying attention in class was all I could do to stop myself from covering my ears with my hands and yelling “La la la la la! I can’t hear you!”

When I tried out for the school play I hadn’t been expecting *anything* like this. I had been auditioning for the school productions ever since freshman year and now, as a junior, I had merely done so out of pure habit. At the most I was hoping for a “Maybe next year” from the director. But here I was, less than three weeks to go till our first show and I still couldn’t get my character right, let alone my lines.

It wasn’t just romantic scenes I had a hard time nailing down, but the personality of my character in general. Allison Cassidy is a wealthy, young, Cinderella-story heiress. Her father struck oil on the family farm as a child, and she hasn’t looked back on her poverty-filled past since. She loves all things high-society and proper, drives recklessly, sneaks around with her boyfriend behind her mother’s back and is far more interesting than average Emily Zitnik. Too bad Allison isn’t real and Emily is the one stuck in reality.

Apparently what had made me stand out from the crowd at auditions was losing its sheen when the director pulled me aside after rehearsal and expressed how tiresome it was watching me clam up around Jack. In turn I *begged* her to cut the kissing scene, and she in turn refused.

“Don’t think it’s Jack, think it’s the cutest boy you’ve ever seen, or your favorite actor. Do *whatever* it takes!” she advised before shoosing my protests and me away.

The next day at rehearsal I tried her theory out. I pictured Jack as John, the senior boy I had a major crush on. Unfortunately that had the opposite effect. I became shy and nervous when I realized I couldn’t be romantic with John, a boy I had said less than five words to.

“Hold it!” the director shouted, and I knew it was aimed at me. “Em, what *happened?*” I shrugged my shoulders and hurried off stage to avoid more of her scathing glares and criticism. I hid in the hallway and avoided everybody by pretending to read over my lines like the coward I was.

Thankfully, practice was canceled the next day due to the drama club’s trip to downtown Chicago. We were seeing a play done by a small-time theatre company one of the art teachers knew well. After the play the actors answered any questions we had for them, and I most definitely had a question to ask.

I approached one of the actors and begged him for some much-needed advice. When he asked for specifics I informed him of my situation. He smiled sympathetically.

“Well, the best thing I can tell you is don’t go out of your way to be someone else when you’re acting. For example, don’t give yourself a snooty accent just because you’d think it would fit since she’s an heiress. Her personality is *yours* to create and shape. More importantly you should feel comfortable with the character and really enjoy it. Just don’t drive your director too crazy.” I laughed and thanked him for making me feel better.

When I got home I sat up for the rest of the night thinking of what he had said. Then I made a decision. Before, I had been so busy fighting Allison that I hadn’t really let her become a part of me. I had been so scared I would lose myself and she would take over. That’s when I realized *I* was the one in charge, not the other way around. I decided to try reinventing her instead of struggling with every little detail during rehearsal that I allowed to annoy me.

From then on I was a changed girl. During rehearsals my scenes were smoother because I didn’t have to feel anything for Jack, or his character Edgar: that was Allison’s business. I cuddled and smiled without a fuss.

I found out that acting could really be a lot of fun. Turns out it's a great feeling slipping into someone else's personality. Granted, it was my personality altered here and there to suit my character, but it worked. When I thought of fast cars I glowed with pleasure rather than panic about going over thirty miles per hour. I even felt bolder on stage. I had really buckled down on my lines to the point that *I* was helping out my other castmates instead of the other way around. Even my criticism-happy director noticed a change in my stage presence. Best of all, the thought of hundreds of people watching me didn't bother me so much, when a month ago the very idea would have sent me into a coma.

I wrapped my mind around Allison's character; I came up with reasons about why she was the way she was. I even wrote a short story about her to get to know her better. I knew her inside and out by the time it was opening night. At least I thought I did.

I made the unfortunate mistake of peeking behind the curtain as the audience waited for the play to begin. All of the panicky fears that I was sure had disappeared washed over me. I tried my best to keep my composure, but one person didn't fall for my act.

"Emily, what's wrong?" My friend Dorothy, who played my mom on stage and plenty of times off stage, looked at me with amused concern.

"Dorothy," I squeaked, "there are *people* out there!" She turned to face me and spoke like she was talking to a very adorable, but slow child.

"Yes Emily, they're here to see *us*," she teased, and pulled me offstage.

I thought about what she said. Then I smiled to myself. *I* didn't have to worry about the people in the audience. I had wrestled with problems bigger than this for the past three weeks and I wasn't going to let a little thing like stagefright ruin all I had worked for.

From the wings I observed the opening scene while waiting for my cue. Everyone seemed very natural as their characters; the feeling was contagious. My insecurities faded away and were replaced with desires for excitement, coy smiles, and an air of confidence. So when I walked onto the stage, for two hours, Emily ceased to exist and Allison was standing in her place.