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By Kate Brian

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As if that weren't enough, old ghosts come back to haunt to the Billings Girls. Reed has been through the ringer in her time at Easton and she starts to wonder if maybe she can even make it out of this place alive.

The bestselling Private series comes to a shocking conclusion!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Kate Brian is the author of the NY Times and USA Today best-selling *Private* series and its spin-off series, *Privilege*. She has also written many other books for teens including *Sweet 16* and *Megan Meade's Guide to the McGowan Boys*.

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Vengeance

IMAGINING THE POSITIVE

The sky that early June day was the kind of blue that goes on forever and makes you believe anything is possible. As I stood at the edge of the new Billings House construction site—my boyfriend, Josh Hollis, holding my hand, and my sister and best friend, Noelle Lange, standing just to my right—I felt like that particular blue had been conjured just for me.

It was all happening. Billings was being rebuilt. A huge, yellow backhoe was clearing the plot, bringing up the dark, wet earth of spring with each drag of its shovel, releasing the sweet scent of new beginnings into the air. Construction workers in hard hats marked off the area, unloaded cement blocks and workbenches, and walked in and out of trailers, letting the doors slam purposefully behind them. It was the fresh start I had always hoped for, and I couldn't stop smiling. I reached up and touched the gold locket hanging around my neck—the one that had once belonged to my ancestor, Eliza Williams—with this warm, comforting sense that I was exactly where I was supposed to be, doing exactly what I was supposed to be doing.

“Reed, are you sure this is a good idea?” Josh asked, squeezing my hand.

My smile faltered. He squinted his green eyes against the sun as he turned to look at me. His light blue sweater had a few drops of yellow paint on the collar and his always unruly, dark blond hair was pushed up in the back by the breeze. Josh was, hands down, the hottest guy at Easton Academy—the most handsome, adorable, mature, attentive guy I'd ever met—even when he was raining on my parade.

“It just seems so . . . wrong,” Noelle added.

I gaped at her. Her dark hair was back in a low ponytail and she wore a black boatneck dress over black boots. Not very bright-and-bold, spring-fashion runway, but Noelle had never been one for color in her wardrobe. And, of course, she looked perfect anyway.

“Unbelievable. This is what you guys finally agree on?” I gestured toward the construction site. The two of them rolled their eyes at each other.

“It's just . . . when Daddy left you all that money, I don't think this is what he had in mind.”

Noelle looked down at the ground, nudging a pebble of old-Billings concrete with the pointed toe of her

boot. This had been a habit of hers for the past couple of months, ever since her father—our father—had been murdered the night of my seventeenth birthday. She looked down whenever she spoke of him. Actually, she looked down a lot more often than she ever had before. I knew how much she missed him. I missed him too, but in a different way. Noelle had spent every day of her nineteen years knowing him, loving him, calling him “Dad.”

I, however, had never really gotten to know him. I missed what I had never had the chance to have. Sometimes I wasn't sure which was worse, until I saw the way Noelle's face fell whenever he came up in conversation. At those moments I knew her loss was far greater than mine. At least the crazy bitch who'd done it, Alyssa Kane—the mother of our now-deceased Billings sister Cheyenne Martin—had been given a speedy trial and sentenced to life in prison after a mere ten-minute deliberation by the jury. Guess that's what happens when you stab someone right in front of two dozen witnesses, including about ten cops.

Of course, the dagger had been meant for me, a fact that I tried not to think about.

My phone rang for about the millionth time that day. Another demanding alumna, no doubt. I had invited every living Billings alum and some of the more influential Easton graduates to the ribbon-cutting ceremony this weekend and had planned a cocktail reception and brunch as well, hoping to show them all such a good time that they'd go back into the world and spread nothing but good PR for Billings. But the simple weekend I'd hoped for was turning into a circus. All the wealthy, influential women from Billings's past had special requirements or demands that they absolutely had to have fulfilled before their arrival in Connecticut, and each time my phone rang or beeped or vibrated, my nerves frayed a little thinner.

Noelle gave my bag the stink eye, so I reached inside the outer pocket and hit ignore. Whoever it was, I could return the call when I got back to my dorm.

“This is our chance, Noelle,” I said gently. “Thanks to your dad, we can remake Billings into what we always knew it could be.”

“I know. You've said all this before,” Noelle remarked impatiently as the backhoe beeped loudly, backing toward the far edge of the plot. “But my father—I mean, our father . . . he hated this place. Don't you think it's a tad crass to be using his money to rebuild it?”

My mouth suddenly tasted sour. How could she not remember that this whole thing had been her idea? Back before my birthday, back when Mr. Lange was still alive, she was the one who had suggested I ask him for the money to rebuild Billings as my birthday gift. She had known then how much he hated Billings, and she'd still tried to pressure me to do it anyway. But now that the Easton Board of Directors had granted me the building rights—after accepting my offer of a huge cash donation to the school, of course—it was like she'd forgotten all about her initial involvement.

But I couldn't remind her of it, because I knew it was all coming from a place of sadness and regret. I knew that she was just trying to honor her dad's wishes now that he was gone. I got that. I did. I just wished it could be different. I wished I could find a way to win her over. Because rebuilding Billings without her support just felt . . . wrong.

“Well, I think that he would understand,” I said, turning to gaze out across the upturned earth. I saw my construction chief, Larry Genovese, shake hands with another burly man. “I think he would appreciate that I want to do things right this time. I want Billings to be a place we can all be proud of. There's going to be an actual application process now. I'm going to make sure that girls are admitted based on their merits, like

GPA, school involvement, community service—”

Noelle scoffed, but I wasn't sure if she was laughing at my Girl Scout version of the new Billings, or if she was annoyed that I was dissing the old ways.

“And I'll be making the final decisions even after I graduate,” I said, looking at Josh. “It won't be a bunch of girls talking behind each other's backs, accepting people based on catty, shallow criteria like who was the first to snag the latest limited edition Gucci bag.”

“Oh, so now you're qualified to decide what it takes to be a Billings Girl?” Noelle said snarkily.

My face burned. I was about to reply when my phone rang again. Frustrated, I tugged it from my bag. The caller ID read “Janice Winthrop.” One of Billings's wealthiest alums. She was supposed to be coming in for the ribbon-cutting ceremony and had RSVP'd yes to both the cocktail hour at Mitchell Hall Saturday night and the brunch in town on Sunday morning. Now my heart all but stopped, hoping she wasn't calling to cancel. I was counting on both her financial and moral support once Billings was up and running. This was one call I could not ignore.

“Hang on a sec, you guys.” I brought the phone to my ear. “Hello, this is Reed,” I said in my most professional voice.

“Reed, hi! Janice Winthrop here. I'm so sorry to bother you again, but I just called the Driscoll to confirm my reservation, and they have me in a business suite rather than the royal suite, and they swear someone else has booked it. I'd have my assistant look into it, but he comes down with these migraines at just the worst moments.”

I somehow felt both relieved and even tenser, all at the same time. At least she was still coming. The logistics I could deal with. “I'll call them right away, Ms. Winthrop,” I promised. “I'll have it all worked out before you arrive.”

“Good. Thank you, Reed. I'm so looking forward to meeting you in person and seeing all my old friends!” Ms. Winthrop said. “Our reunions always take place on the week of my firm's board meetings, so I can never make them. I can't thank you enough for getting everyone together like this!”

I pressed my lips together. Interesting how she made it sound as if this whole thing were being put on for her benefit. But all I said was, “It's my pleasure. I'm looking forward to meeting you, too.”

“All right, then. See you on Saturday!”

There was a click and the line went dead. I looked down at the phone and noticed that I also had twenty-five new texts and thirty new e-mails, all from Billings alums, no doubt. I felt my skin growing warm and my shoulder muscles coiling, and I told myself to relax. I could answer all their questions and concerns later. Right now, Janice Winthrop was the pressing issue.

I was about to speed-dial the Driscoll Hotel, when a puffy cloud moved in front of the sun, and an awful chill went down my back. Someone was watching at me. I could feel it. Standing still as stone, I scanned the campus, and something moved in the corner of my eye. I turned quickly, just in time to see a shock of blond hair as it disappeared around the corner of the library. My hands went clammy. My heart was in my throat.

“Who was that?” Noelle asked from behind.

For a split second I thought she’d seen the blond girl too—the girl who looked so much like Ariana Osgood, I could hardly catch my breath. But then I realized she was referring to my call.

From this distance it could have been anyone, I told myself. Don’t start looking for ways to freak yourself out now.

“Janice Winthrop. Just confirming her plans,” I replied lightly, tossing my phone back in my bag. For some reason, I didn’t want Noelle to see me sweat, and the Driscoll call could wait a few minutes. I turned around and tried to remember what we had been talking about before the interruption.

“Ah, Janice Winthrop. One of the most notoriously needy Billings Girls of all time,” Noelle commented, crossing her slim arms over her chest. “Don’t let her get too involved, or your phone will never stop ringing.”

I narrowed my eyes at her as the sun emerged again. Right. We’d been talking about how unqualified I was to choose the new residents of Billings.

“Noelle, I’ve told you a million times that you could help me make all the decisions about Billings. I’d make you a full partner like that,” I said, snapping my fingers.

Noelle took a deep breath and blew it out audibly. She tilted her head up and stared at the sky, letting her ponytail tumble down her back, taking in all that blue. For a second I thought that the gorgeousness of the day was working its magic on her and she was finally going to agree, that she was going to give me her blessing and offer to help—an offer I could sorely use now that things were really getting under way. Mr. Lange’s business partner, Chester Worth, had helped me a ton—finding the architect and hiring the contractors and the project’s accountant—but there were decisions to be made every day, and as much as I put on a competent front, sometimes I felt like I was in way over my head.

“I don’t think so,” she said finally, leveling her chin again. She shook her head. “In the end, this place brought us more misery than anything else. You were almost murdered at Billings, Reed, in case you’ve forgotten. It’s where Sabine tortured you, where she killed Cheyenne. . . .” She drew a pair of dark Donna Karan sunglasses out of her bag and slipped them on. Only then did she turn to fully face me, when I couldn’t see her eyes at all. “Honestly? I’m glad Hathaway had it torn down.”

My mouth went completely dry. She couldn’t be serious. Billings was her life for two and a half years. Yes, some awful things had happened there, but Billings had also brought us together, made us friends, and in a way made us sisters. But before my stunned brain could formulate a response, she’d turned on her spiked heels and was striding across campus. Josh put his arms around me from behind and gave me a squeeze.

“I can’t believe she just said that,” I told him. My chest was all hollow, like she’d punched a hole right through it.

“Hey. Noelle wouldn’t be Noelle if she wasn’t a stubborn bitch,” he joked, nuzzling my ear.

I tilted my head away from him and turned around. “You get why I’m doing this, right?” I said, looking up into his eyes. “I mean, I know you hated what Billings was, but it’s not going to be like that anymore. Not with me in charge.”

“I know.” He leaned in to kiss my lips. “Forget what I said before. I’m proud of you. You’re taking something negative and imagining the positive possibilities. Not a lot of people would bother.”

I grinned. “Wow. Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

He kissed me again, this time longer and deeper and so perfectly that I almost forgot where I was until one of the construction workers whistled at us, eliciting a round of applause from his coworkers. Josh blushed and I lifted a hand.

“Yeah, yeah. Get back to work!” I shouted jokingly.

Josh checked his phone. “Actually, I should be getting back to work too. I have a lot of studying to do this week.”

“You do realize you already got into Cornell,” I said, taking his hand as we started toward the center of campus. “Plus you’re, like, a shoo-in to win half the senior awards at the banquet next week. Give yourself a break already.”

Josh’s face reddened all over again. “Yeah, about the awards ceremony . . . I’m not even sure I’m going to make it.”

I blinked. The end-of-the-year Easton Academy awards ceremony was the biggest school-sanctioned event of the year. All the seniors’ parents came, plus a bunch of alumni, and everyone got dressed to the nines to watch one another receive awards for academic achievement, leadership, philanthropy, and athletics. Aside from graduation, it was the most anticipated event of the final semester, and Josh was one of the senior class’s shining stars. He should’ve been psyched.

“You can’t not go,” I said, placing my hands on his chest. “Who’s going to collect all your hard-earned bling?”

Josh smirked, but looked away. “I have my bio final at eight the next morning and I want to ace it. I’m sorry, but I don’t want to be one of those losers who slack off just because they can.”

“Okay,” I said, knitting my brow. I’d never heard of a second-semester senior working as hard as he was. We paused at the intersection of two stone pathways, one leading to the library and administration buildings, the other back toward the dorms. “Well, then . . . I guess I’ll see you at dinner later?”

“Definitely,” he said with what seemed like a relieved smile.

I was just letting go of his hand when my phone rang. I fished it out of the outer pocket of my leather messenger bag and blinked. It was one of the Easton Academy numbers, but not one I recognized. Josh gave me a quizzical look as I answered.

“Hello?”

“Miss Brennan? This is Headmaster Hathaway.”

My heart skipped a startled beat.

“Oh. Hi, Headmaster,” I said, looking at Josh.

“Double H?” Josh mouthed, confused. I shrugged.

“I need to see you in my office,” the Headmaster said, his tone making my toes curl and my fingers clench. “Now.”

Users Review

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