

PRIVILEGE

BY

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## NEVER

“It’s not fair.”

It wasn’t a whine or a complaint, just a statement. A statement of the obvious, as far as Ariana Osgood was concerned. As she stared out the window at the Brenda T. Trumbull Correctional Facility for Women, it was all she could think to say. Outside, the leaves on the trees swayed lazily in the warm summer breeze—a breeze she would be allowed to feel against her skin for exactly fifty-five minutes during midday recess. *Recess*. That was what the warden called it. Who ever heard of a teenage girl looking forward to recess?

“It’s just not fair.”

Across the wide oak desk, her “therapist” smirked. Shifting in his seat, Dr. Meloni leaned back, forcing his expensive leather chair to let out the loud creak that he *knew* made Ariana’s skin crawl. Just outside the fence that encircled the grounds, about a hundred yards from where she now sat, Meloni’s precious Doberman, Rambo, barked

nonstop, as always. The inmates of the Brenda T. listened to that damn dog bark all day long, every day. It was as if Meloni was trying to remind them that he was always there, always watching, even when they weren't in session with him. The man also couldn't be away from the dog for more than two hours at a time. He was always going out there and feeding him treats, cooing to the animal like it was a newborn baby and the apple of its father's eye. Revolting. Someone should have been analyzing *him*.

"What's not fair?" he asked.

Ariana flicked a glance at Doctor Victor Meloni, sitting there in front of his elaborately framed diplomas from Johns Hopkins and Stanford. Thick, leather-bound books sat on the shelves to his right, most of which she was sure he hadn't even opened, let alone read. Her lip curled at the sight of his fake tan. His overly gelled salt-and-pepper hair. His heavily starched blue shirt. His capped teeth.

*Two hundred dollars a tooth, but can't spring for a pair of shoes with leather soles.* Ariana could ascertain everything she needed to know about a person through his or her footwear. In the sixteen months she had been in residence at Brenda T. Trumbull just outside Washington, D.C., she had only seen Dr. Meloni wear two different pairs of shoes. The same exact style, one pair in black, one in brown. Clearly the man thought that everyone he met would be so dazzled by the veneer of his face, they wouldn't take the time to notice his shoes.

But Ariana did. And they screamed white trash turned scholarship student turned poser. He'd probably taken this job because it meant

he'd have the chance to torture the daughters of all the deep-pocketed classmates who had never accepted him into their inner sanctum. And torture them he did. He smiled when they cried. Laughed in the face of their desperation.

Smirked . . . all . . . the . . . time.

"It's not fair me being here for twenty years," Ariana said slowly, stating the obvious. Stating the point she'd made four thousand times before.

"Twenty years to life," he corrected, his blue eyes taunting.

"I don't think about that," Ariana said, averting her gaze again. Outside the window, the lake glinted in the summer sun. A lone sailboat sliced across the frame of the window and disappeared.

"About what?" he asked. "The life part?"

He sat forward now. Interested.

"Yes," Ariana said. "It's unacceptable."

That was when Dr. Meloni laughed. Not just his usual amused chuckle, but a big, hearty, guttural laugh. Ariana tried not to cringe. She reached up and casually ran both hands through her soft, chin-length blond hair, securing it to the nape of her neck with an alligator barrette. She waited patiently for him to stop, curling her toes inside her state-issue white sneakers. It used to be that she would grab her own arm when she was tense, letting her fingernails cut into the flesh. Then one day last year Dr. Meloni had noticed this habit and pointed it out to her like he was oh so insightful. She hadn't done it in his presence since.

"Unacceptable," he repeated.

She looked him in the eye, her gaze unwavering. “Yes.”

“You do realize you killed someone,” Dr. Meloni said, in the tone adults use when scolding naughty children.

Ariana blinked, just barely betraying her internal flinch.

*Thomas’s blood. Thomas’s blood. Thomas’s blood.* Just like that, she saw it on her hands. Under her fingernails. In her hair. She had made them chop it all off when she was waiting for trial and hadn’t let it grow past her chin since. All that blood . . .

*No.* She mentally wiped it away. Gone. Back to the present. She focused in on Meloni’s quote-of-the-day calendar. Today, for the twenty-ninth of June, was a Molière quote: “The greater the obstacle, the more the glory in overcoming it.” Not a bad point.

“Yes. I do realize I killed someone,” Ariana said, in a tone *she* reserved for idiots.

What no one here seemed to understand, or cared to hear, was that she hadn’t meant to do it. Thomas Pearson had been the love of her life. He had been the only real thing she had ever possessed. It wasn’t her fault that Reed Brennan had swooped in out of nowhere and stolen him away. It wasn’t her fault that her best friend, Noelle Lange, had come up with the idea to kidnap him and tie him up in the woods to teach him a lesson after he’d humiliated Reed. And it definitely wasn’t her fault that when she had gone back to show him how much she loved him, to show him mercy and untie him and set him free, he had chosen to mock her instead of thank her. Had chosen to tear her down and act like her devotion to him was worth no more than the mud under his feet. Had chosen to push her and push her and push her until she snapped.

If only he'd stopped when she'd asked him to.

"So you took the life of one of your schoolmates, one of your friends, and yet you don't think you deserve to be locked up for life," Dr. Meloni said.

"It was one mistake," Ariana replied.

One of three, but no one other than Ariana herself knew that.

"A mistake," he challenged, ducking his chin.

God, she was sick of this. Sick of him. Sick of his tiny little pea-brained, one-sided take on her and every other woman in this hellhole.

"You see everything in black-and-white, don't you?" Ariana snapped, her blood rising.

"And what you did was somehow gray?" he retorted.

"I'm not in denial. I know what I did and I'm sorry for it," Ariana said, her words clipped. "But this isn't how it's supposed to be. . . ."

She was supposed to go to Princeton. Supposed to take the train up to Yale to visit Noelle on weekends, or into the city to club hop with Kiran and Taylor. Supposed to join a secret society. Supposed to hobnob with literary geniuses. Supposed to graduate magna cum laude and snag the job as features editor at *Vanity Fair*. Supposed to live in a loft in Chelsea and meet some gorgeous artsy man who would sweep her off her feet and take her to exotic places like Thailand and India and Sri Lanka. Supposed to be proposed to on a mountaintop as the sun set in the distance. Supposed to have babies and take them home to Georgia to visit her family's estate and sit out on the porch and sip lemonade and watch them play tag under the same peach tree she used to climb when she was little.

This was her life. Her life the way it was supposed to be. It couldn't be over. The very thought made her heart constrict to the point where she actually thought she might stop breathing. Actually thought she might die over the futility of it all.

These were her dreams. Her *mother's* dreams. They couldn't be over. Not because of—

“One mistake,” she said again.

Dr. Meloni stared at her. She was gripping the arms of her metal chair now, her heart pounding. As he stared, Ariana realized that she had just shown emotion for the first time in a year and a half of these daily sessions. She had let the pressure get to her. And Meloni was now smiling.

“One mistake that *ended* someone else's *life*,” he said.

*I know. I know this. I see him every night. Every night as I start to fall asleep. Every night I jolt awake in an ice-cold sweat. I haven't really slept in almost two years, thinking about how he made me kill him. How he didn't give me a choice. Isn't that torture enough?*

“I just want this to be over,” Ariana mumbled. She straightened her posture and stated it more firmly. “I just want this whole thing to be over.”

Dr. Meloni leaned back in his chair again, the creak setting Ariana's arm hair on end, and let out an amused yet frustrated-sounding groan. He looked up at the wood beams that crisscrossed the ceiling and shook his head.

“It's always the same with you girls,” he said.

“What's that supposed to mean?” Ariana snapped.

She didn't appreciate being likened to anyone else in this loony bin.

He glanced at her, then slowly stood up and slipped his hands into the pockets of his white coat. Watching her the whole time, he walked around his desk—the ancient wooden floor squeaking and cracking under his feet, and stood directly in front of her. For a long moment, he stared down at her, his expression unreadable. Ariana stared back and felt an unexpected jolt of hope.

*Oh, just try something, please. Touch me inappropriately. Try to hurt me. Whatever you're thinking, do it so that I can get your pathetic, low-rent ass fired.*

Dr. Meloni leaned down and braced his hands on the arms of her chair. He brought his face within inches of hers. His breath smelled like soy sauce. Ariana wanted to recoil, but she forced herself to stay completely still.

"I have been working with psychopaths like you for the last twenty-five years," he said quietly. Up close, she could practically see her image reflected in those teeth. "You are not capable of change. If you ever were to be released from this facility, I am categorically certain that you would kill again. So no, Miss Osgood, you are never getting out of here. Not today, not tomorrow, not five years from now. Or ten. Or twenty. Not as long as I'm the one signing your chart. And believe me when I tell you I plan to stay in this job until they wheel my cold, dead corpse out that door."

He pointed at the solid metal door for effect. Ariana held his gaze. Held it and tried not to smile. Willed herself not to smile. He had no idea how wrong he was. How very, very wrong.

Finally, judging by the silence that his point had hit home, Dr. Meloni leaned back in satisfaction. His grin lit his entire face.

“Guard!” he shouted, his eyes still locked on Ariana’s.

The door instantly opened, and Miriam, the bulbous Ward Two guard, appeared, filling the doorway. Miriam, with her dyed red hair and piglike nose, had an impressive collection of steel-toed boots. Shoes that meant business. Ariana had never even rolled her eyes at the woman.

“You can take this one back to her cell. I’m done with her,” Meloni said disgustedly.

“Let’s go,” Miriam barked.

Ariana shoved herself out of her chair and walked across the room, biting down hard on her tongue to keep herself from tossing any sort of parting shot at Meloni. One wrong word, one angry glance, might give something away.

“See you tomorrow, Miss Osgood,” Dr. Meloni sang in a teasing voice. “And the day after that . . . and the day after that . . . and the day after that. . . .”

He was still chuckling when the door slammed between them.

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