

# AMBITION

A NOVEL BY  
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New York London Toronto Sydney

## A DEAL

I sat in the front row of folding chairs in the Great Room of Mitchell Hall and stared at the gray, unfeeling faces that hovered over the long table before me. The gray faces that would decide my fate. Our fate.

The fate of Billings House.

They were all against us. I could feel it, right in the pit of my gut—this torturous sensation like some large rodent was kicking in my stomach, gnawing greedily at my heart and lungs. And as if the vociferous organ-muncher wasn't enough, I was also in pain. Real pain. My lungs were raw from inhaling tons of smoke in the underground tunnel outside Gwendolyn Hall, the remnants of the charred building still billowing plumes into the air at the edge of Easton Academy's campus. My face hurt as if it had been repeatedly and mercilessly slapped. My head was being intermittently pierced by an invisible ice pick. My eyes were so dry that every time I blinked, my lids stuck to them for one brief, excruciating moment before popping wide open again. I tried not to close them, but that just made them drier.

This was my punishment, my penance for last night. For sneaking out and going to the Legacy instead of staying home with Josh. For downing all those frothy pink drinks. For hooking up with my best friend's boyfriend. For breaking the heart of the guy I loved. The only guy I had ever truly loved.

Josh was behind me somewhere in the expectant crowd. The whole school had gathered to hear what would become of Billings. The anticipation in the air was so thick I could feel its warmth on my neck.

Or maybe that was just Constance Talbot's panicked breathing. Either way, my heart started to pound as Headmaster Cromwell finished listing the grievances against Billings. I had already lost Josh. I couldn't lose Billings. Not now. Billings House was my home. I needed my home.

"These infractions are grievous," Headmaster Cromwell said. His white hair was perfectly coiffed, his square jaw as imperious as ever, but under the harsh fluorescents I could see every crag in his face, every wrinkle. He lifted a page of stark white paper and read from it. "Hazing, initiation ceremonies, fighting, ignoring curfew on several occasions—"

"But that wasn't us. That was all Cheyenne," London Simmons complained under her breath, as if London and most of the rest of my friends hadn't gone right along with all of it. London sat a few seats off to my left, next to Vienna Clark, to whom she was always attached at the hip. They wore matching black suits as if they were attending a funeral. Although no decent person would ever show that much cleavage at a funeral.

"Ignoring my strict mandate to remain on campus the night of Sunday, October thirty-first," Cromwell continued. "And, most egregious, destruction of school property." He laid the paper down and laced his fingers together on top of it. "Destruction of one of the oldest buildings on this campus," he reiterated, looking me dead in the eye.

Me. Of course me. President of Billings. Two days ago, most people in this room would have said that as president of the most sought-after dorm on campus, I was the most blessed of the blessed. Today I was the most loathed of the loathed. It wasn't like I'd pulled a crazy Mrs. Rochester and run through Gwendolyn with a lit torch, cackling as I burned the place to the ground. The fire had been a result of London and Vienna's toking tour of Easton. Someone had left a burning joint behind or something, and it hadn't been me. But even as my cheeks stung at the unfairness of being singled out, I realized the situation was dire. When our crimes were compiled that way, they sounded really, really awful.

"Like we were the only ones at Gwendolyn," Noelle Lange said under her breath. For all her partying the night before, Noelle looked as perfect as ever in a crisp white shirt and gray wide-leg pants, her long brown hair pulled back in a tortoiseshell headband. In jeans and a black cashmere sweater she had given me a few weeks back, I felt troll-like in her presence. I wriggled back in my seat and endeavored to sit up straight. Endeavored to meet Cromwell's cool stare with my own.

"Headmaster Cromwell?" London blurted, standing up in her four-inch heels. "I just want to point out that we weren't the only ones there

last night,” she said, glancing at Noelle for backup. “I mean, the guys were there, too and—”

“I don’t believe I opened the floor to comments, Miss Simmons,” Headmaster Cromwell said, leaning so close to his microphone that his voice blasted through the suspended corner speakers like the voice of God. London let out a yip of surprise and sat right back down.

“Now, where was I?”

As Cromwell sifted through his papers, Constance leaned in close to my ear from behind. “Whit talked to his grandmother and she said they’re going to deal with the other students individually, but since our whole dorm was there, they’re viewing it as an overarching house problem and they’re going to, quote, ‘deal with Billings accordingly.’”

Whit was Walt Whittaker, Constance’s older boyfriend, whose grandmother sat on the Easton board, which meant she was one of the gray faces judging us. But right then the diminutive old woman looked like she was starting to doze off at the far end of the table. My life was on the line and she was catnapping. Real nice. Meanwhile, Susan Llewelyn, the Billings alumna who sat on the board—the woman who had sent us to the secret passage in Gwendolyn Hall—was nowhere to be found. Her seat at the table was empty.

“I am S.N.S.,” Portia Ahronian said, rolling her big green eyes. “So not surprised,” she clarified. “The Crom has been trying to find a way to get rid of us from D one. He may be acting all stern and appalled, but you know he’s L.O.T.I.”

Headmaster Cromwell cleared his throat loudly.

“Well, with a list of infractions this long, a vote seems superflu-

ous,” Cromwell said. “But the school bylaws dictate that we must vote. So, the directive on the table is this: Shall the board of directors hereby dissolve Billings House and redistribute its members throughout the remaining girls’ dormitories? Yay or nay? All those in favor—”

My pulse pounded in my temples, my eyes, my throat. They were going to do it. They were going to take our home away.

“This isn’t happening,” Rose Sakowitz mumbled.

“They can’t close Billings. I just got in,” Lorna Gross whined.

Sabine DuLac leaned forward, grasping the back of my chair. “Do something,” she whispered urgently. “Reed, you have to do something.”

“Wait!” I was on my feet. My voice reverberated off the high ceiling of the Great Room, the largest gathering space on campus aside from the cafeteria and the chapel. Dead silence enveloped the room as everyone gaped at me. Dead silence as hundreds of faces blurred before my heavy, hungover eyes.

“Yes, Miss Brennan?” Headmaster Cromwell said, his upper lip curled in distaste.

At least he hadn’t used his godlike voice to cut me down too. That was something. Unfortunately, I had no idea what I was going to say next.

“This...this isn’t fair,” I stated, sounding unresolved, event to myself. My querulous words were met with snickers around the room. I hadn’t meant to whine, but whine I had. I took a deep breath and tried again. “With all due respect, Headmaster Cromwell, you haven’t given us a chance,” I said, trying for a more authoritative tone.

I saw a few people sit forward in their seats, intrigued, including towheaded freshman Amberly Carmichael and her friends, who had a vested interest in keeping Billings open. Noelle and I had, after all, promised that they would get in to the house their junior year if they caused a diversion so we could sneak off campus the night before, and they had come through. From what I'd heard, they had staged the most convincing and violent catfight in the history of Easton, drawing security personnel and Headmaster Cromwell to their dorm, right when we needed them to.

"Haven't I?" Cromwell sniffed and looked down at his all-important papers. "I believe you and your housemates have had plenty of chances."

His dismissive attitude shot right under my skin, and I felt a surge of adrenaline take over.

"No, sir, we have not," I replied firmly, earning a few surprised murmurs from my peers. They couldn't believe I was standing up to Cromwell like this. Honestly, neither could I, but I kept going. "I'm the first to admit that things at Billings have been pretty terrible this year. But in case you've forgotten, one of our best friends just died. And yeah, okay, maybe we're having a hard time dealing with that right now, but Billings has been an asset to this school in the past and it will be again. You just have to give us a chance to prove it."

My friends in the front two rows all sat up a bit straighter, held their heads a bit higher. A flutter of pride tickled my chest. My speech was working. On them, at least.

"And how, exactly, are you going to do that?" Headmaster Cromwell asked, leaning his weight on his forearms as he eyed me expectantly.

Oh. Right. I should have had a “how” ready here. I turned to look at the Billings Girls, widening my eyes in desperation and praying one of them had an answer. Noelle cleared her throat and brought her hand down to her side where she surreptitiously rubbed her fingers together.

Money. Of course. Money talked around here. Louder than just about anything else. But how much money? I knew what a lot of cash was to me—a scholarship student from a lower-middle-class family with one car and two mortgages—but how many zeros did I need to add to impress people who paid for plastic surgery for their dogs and had personal chefs to toast their French bread?

“We’ll hold a fund-raiser,” I announced. “Billings will pledge to raise . . . one million dollars for Easton.”

Gasps and whispered filled the room. Apparently I had added enough zeros.

“If we succeed, Billings stays as is,” I continued, on firmer footing now. “If we fail, you can do what you want with us.”

Cromwell’s sharp blue eyes narrowed. He covered his microphone with one hand and turned to whisper to the gentleman next to him. Soon the whole board was playing a game of telephone, each whispering to the next and on down the line. Finally, their comments made it back to Cromwell and he cleared his throat. I held my breath. Everyone in the room held their breath.

Slowly, Cromwell leaned toward the microphone. It was impossible to read his expression. Possibly because he had only one—annoyed.

*Please. Please don’t take this away from me. Not now.*

"Make it five million, Miss Brennan," he said with a small but devilish smile, "and you have a deal."

"Yes!" someone behind me cheered. The room erupted in conversation and squeaking chairs, but all I could see was that number. Five million. A huge number. An impossible number.

"We can do that, no problem," Vienna said, clapping her hands happily.

"Silence!" Headmaster Cromwell's voice boomed through the speakers once more.

He got his silence.

"There is one stipulation," he said, looking at the Billings section. "This five million dollars must be *raised*, not gleaned from your trust funds or borrowed from your parents. You must actually raise it, and you must raise it in one month's time. I will also be contacting the Billings alumni and making it clear to them that they are not to help you with the preparations for whatever you conjure up. This fundraiser will be planned by you and paid for by you, and any profit will be fairly earned. Is that understood?"

Suddenly, my friends were no longer cheering. I turned to look at them. They couldn't back out on me now. I'd gotten us a reprieve. I'd taken a stand. *Please don't make me look like an idiot now.*

Portia glanced at the Twin Cities. Vienna whispered something over her shoulder to Shelby Wordsworth. Rose bent in conversation with Tiffany Goulbourne and Astrid Chou. Everyone conferred while I stood there and waited. Finally, they all faced forward and Portia nodded confidently. I faced the board, looked Cromwell in the eye, and smiled.

"Done."

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