

INVITATION
ONLY

A NOVEL BY
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New York London Toronto Sydney

WHITTAKER

It was a cold night. Cold and extremely dark, with no stars and no moon and a wind that ripped a deluge of leaves from the trees whenever it blew—leaves that were still wet from a morning drizzle. They felt slimy and foul when they happened to fall on exposed skin, so as another gust whipped through the hills, we all ducked and covered. I felt myself begin to shiver.

“Augh! There’s one on my neck!” Taylor Bell cried, doubling over with her shoulders to her ears. She clutched the bottle of vodka she’d been swigging from all night in one hand and slapped ineffectively at her back with the other. The large yellow maple leaf had sucked itself almost all the way around her neck, matting down the blond curls that had escaped from the back of her ponytail. “Get it off!”

Normally, Taylor was not the biggest drinker, but tonight she had been pounding straight alcohol like it was the nectar of the gods, perhaps because she, like many others, felt the need to expunge parents weekend—which had ended just hours ago with a

ceremony in the Easton Academy chapel—from her memory. Taylor’s parents had seemed like nice people, though, and she had appeared to be at least comfortable in their presence. I wondered if something else could be bothering her.

“Get it off!” she whimpered again. “Guys!”

“Don’t look at me,” Kiran Hayes said, taking a ladylike swig from her silver flask. She pulled her long cashmere coat around her knees and held it there. “I just had a paraffin wrap.”

Kiran, the first actual model I had ever known and one of the more gorgeous girls I had ever seen in real life, had always just had *something* done. Highlights, lowlights, dermabrasion, seaweed thigh wrap, eyebrow threading. Most of it sounded like torture, but apparently it all worked.

Noelle Lang rolled her eyes and plucked the large wet leaf from Taylor’s skin. “Prima donnas,” she said derisively. She whipped the leaf at the ground, and it landed right in front of the long, flat rock on which Ariana Osgood sat. Ariana looked down at the leaf for a moment, studying it as if it held the meaning of life. A lighter breeze lifted her long, almost white-blond hair from her shoulders and she looked up into it, then closed her eyes in pleasure.

I pulled my third beer from the cooler across the clearing and watched this tableau unfold like I was an anthropologist studying some previously unclassified subset of human. I had been fascinated with the Billings Girls from the moment I had first seen them a month ago through the window of my sophomore dorm at

Easton Academy—fascinated from afar, that is, with seemingly no hope of ever gaining up-close access. But that hadn't been the case for long. The Billings Girls were now my friends. My dorm mates. The people with whom I partied illegally in the woods on the outskirts of campus on a regular basis.

If you could call "twice" a regular basis.

I was one of them now. I had ascended to greatness at Easton. Though if someone asked me to sit down and tell them how I had done it, I would be rendered speechless. Last I checked, I had pissed them all off by continuing to talk to my boyfriend, Thomas Pearson, of whom none of them approved. I thought I had lost them forever going behind their backs and offering to stick with him and help him through his issues. Instead, I had apparently impressed them.

Somehow. And thank God I had, because with their help I might actually have a shot of leaving my past behind. Of not being one of the many Croton, PA, progeny who return to the hometown after two years of community college to take assistant management positions at Costco. With the Billings Girls behind me, I actually had a shot at a life. A future. A shot at being part of a world I had only ever dreamed of—a world of success. Of privilege. Of freedom.

"Are you all right over there, Reed?" Noelle asked, lifting her long, dark hair over her shoulder. "If you don't want another beer I'm sure Kiran would be happy to mix up a Hayes Special for you."

Her eyes danced with mischief and I knew she had noticed my

state of contemplation. I didn't want to appear ungrateful for having been invited here, for everything they had done for me. For the fact that I was getting a beer for myself, rather than running errands for them, as I had been doing pretty much nonstop since the first week of school. So I waved her off.

"That's okay. I'm good with this," I said, lifting the bottle.

I used the rusted bottle opener to pop the cap off and took a long drink, knowing she was still watching me. Earlier tonight I had my first ever beer. Now I was on my third one, which was going down more smoothly. The key, it seemed, was to take long drinks and not let it stay in my mouth long enough to touch my tongue. Yeah. Refreshing. I took a deep breath and let it out into another cold breeze, pulling my sweater closer to my goose-bumped skin. I was about to rejoin the girls, when a sudden conversation shift near the fire stopped me.

"I'll tell you one thing," Dash McCafferty said. "This is going to go down as one of the great disappearing acts of all time."

"Maybe he's at his grandmother's in Boston," Josh Hollis suggested.

Dash shrugged. "Eh, I'm sure they already raided the old bat's place."

Thomas. They were talking about Thomas. I couldn't believe that the last time I was here, he was here as well. It had been approximately forty-eight hours since anyone had seen Thomas Pearson. He had disappeared from Easton without leaving so much as a note behind. And, according to his roommate Josh

Hollis—who stood near the fire with the other guys just then, staring into the flames—Thomas had gone without packing one stitch of clothing, not even his favorite black T-shirt. On Friday morning Thomas had told me he loved me, had made me promise I would be there for him no matter what, and had then proceeded to vanish.

I wondered how much Josh knew—about me, about what Thomas and I had done together. Had Thomas *told* Josh what we had done in their dorm room? I wasn't sure. I hadn't known him long enough to find out. But now, every time I saw Josh, I wondered if he knew what I'd done and the thought made me squirm. I didn't need half the school knowing I had lost my virginity to a guy who maybe meant well but was clearly too troubled to be in a healthy relationship. Lost my virginity to a guy who I now knew (even before he vanished) I probably should not be with, but who I still felt irresistably attached to anyway. Lost my virginity to Thomas Pearson, the most popular guy at Easton and also, as I'd recently discovered, was the campus's foremost drug supplier. I still couldn't believe it.

Josh took a swig of his previously untouched beer. He had such a baby face that he looked out of place holding the green glass bottle. His blond curls danced in the breeze and he wore a long, striped scarf over a wrinkly, rust-colored T-shirt and brown corduroy jacket. He had that artsy, earnest, creative thing going. I liked that about him. I also liked the fact that he had a loud voice—loud enough for me to eavesdrop without letting on.

“What about their place in Vail?” he offered.

"Dude, Pearson is not holing up anywhere obvious. Believe me," Dash said with an elaborate snarfle of phlegm. For an extraordinarily good-looking guy—chiseled, blond, Abercrombie-esque—he had some serious hygiene flaws. He spat into the fire and took a swig of his beer.

"Very attractive, Dash," Noelle called across the clearing.

"Thanks, babe," he replied, and then got back to the topic at hand. "I just can't believe they called the local police in. It's such a waste. If Pearson is crashing anywhere, he's crashing in New York."

"You think?" The hope in Josh's voice gave life to my own.

"Are you kidding?" Gage Coolidge said. Gage was of the skinny, tall, metrosexual variety, with dark hair that stood straight up from his head: he looked like a member of some British pretty-boy band. "Thomas Pearson is pulling the biggest punk of all time right now. He's got the entire eastern seaboard looking for him and he's off somewhere partying himself sick."

"Yeah, maybe," Josh said, chewing on his inner cheek and staring at the fire.

"No maybe," Dash told him. "Trust me. Halloween is in less than a month. And you know what that means."

"The Legacy," Josh said.

"Exactly." Dash removed one finger from his beer bottle and pointed it at Josh. "Pearson is not going to miss that. If his ass isn't there, I'll give up the Lotus."

"That's serious, man," Gage said.

"No shit."

"It's true," Josh said, nodding. "Pearson is the Legacy."

"Dude. If he's there, we should drag his sorry ass back up here and collect our medals," Gage said.

"Aw, yeah," Dash replied, smacking hands with Gage over Josh's head.

The Legacy? What the heck was the Legacy? I pushed myself away from the tree where I had been lounging, figuring Noelle and the others could clue me in, but before I could take a step, Natasha Crenshaw intercepted me.

"Reed! Where are you going?" she asked, slinging her arm around my neck.

I froze, wondering what the joke was. Natasha Crenshaw was my new roommate at Billings. And the only reason she was my new roommate was because her best friend, Leanne Shore, had gotten kicked out for cheating in the biggest public scandal Easton had seen all year. Ever since I'd started to unpack my stuff yesterday morning, Natasha had been seething with resentment. It dripped from her very pores.

Thus my current state of confusion.

"You okay?" I asked her.

"I'm fine!" she said, her pearly whites nearly blinding. Natasha was dark-skinned, dark-haired and Tyra Banks bodacious. I could feel all the soft curves of her body as she pressed it closer to mine and it made me blush. As a woman of seriously boy-like proportions, I had no idea how she walked around with all

that stuff. "Listen. I just wanted to apologize if I've been less than welcoming the last couple of days," she said, pulling me back away from the guys. "I'm still a little upset about Leanne and I think I've been taking it out on you. And that's not cool. Do you forgive me?"

The other thing about Natasha was that she was always coming out with these frank, no-nonsense statements. Unlike every other girl I had ever known, she seemed to have nothing to hide. It was a foreign concept.

"Uh . . . sure," I said uncertainly.

"Good! Because I really want us to be friends," Natasha said, grasping my hand. "Good friends."

Her expression was so earnest it made me smile, half in amusement, half in genuine pleasure.

"Okay. I'd like that too," I said.

"Good!" Natasha cried. She produced a miniscule digital camera from the pocket of her black leather jacket and held it up with one hand, while hugging me to her with her other. "Smile!"

I did as told and the flash went off. I blinked at the floating purple spots.

"An instant classic," Natasha declared, checking the tiny screen.

"Cool." I glanced past her at Josh and the others, who were now conferencing in lower voices. I wondered if they were still talking about Thomas, and if they would tell me anything if they were. "I'll . . . be right back."

I was halfway across to the fire when suddenly all the guys looked up as one and shouted, right at me. "Whittaker!"

I nearly tripped. "What?"

"Gentlemen! Ladies! Ah, it warms my heart to see everyone gathered here, just like old times."

Huh?

Walking up behind me was the largest specimen of a guy I had ever seen outside a college football game. He had to be at least six foot four and was well over 250 pounds, but he carried all that weight with dignity, his shoulders back, his stride confident. He had ruddy cheeks, round glasses, and a much older man's haircut, the kind that stood up in the front about an inch and was matted down with gel in the back. He strode across the clearing, nodding to the Billings Girls like some aristocrat before reaching out a hand to smack palms with Dash, Gage, Josh, and the others.

"How are we all this fine evening?" he asked in his booming voice. He placed his hands over the fire, rubbed them together, and then held them out again.

Who *was* this guy? And why did he talk like he'd just stepped out of a Jane Austen novel?

"How was East Asia? Is Chinese food really better in China?" Gage joked, swigging his beer.

I missed Whittaker's response due to another gust of wind, but all the guys laughed at whatever he had to say, gathering around and looking up at him with amused smiles and excited eyes. It was as if Santa Claus had just walked into a room full of kindergarteners. I found myself gravitating slowly toward Noelle and the others.

"Reed, I was starting to think you'd forgotten about us," Noelle

said flatly, taking a sip of her beer. She was the only Billings Girl who drank beer, which had been my motivation in choosing it. The rest opted for mixed drinks made from whatever bottles Kiran and the boys managed to procure. "What're you, in love all over again?"

"Huh?"

"You can't stop staring at Whittaker," Kiran put in, her brown eyes gleaming. "Interesting choice."

"Please. I'm not staring," I said. "I'm just . . . Who is he?"

"Whittaker?" Noelle said. "He's . . . Whittaker. He is a class unto himself." She looked around at the other Billings Girls and slowly smiled. "In fact . . . you should meet him."

She got up, grabbed my wrist, and started pulling me across the clearing, all in one motion—all before I could get out a word of protest.

"Whit! Hey, Whit!" Noelle shouted, gesturing with her bottle. "This is the girl I was telling you about."

She used her tremendous arm strength to practically whip me at Whittaker. The sudden velocity took me by surprise and I stumbled, bracing my hands against his large chest to stop my fall. All the guys, of course, cracked up laughing. Whittaker put his hands gently on my elbows and steadied me.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

He had very warm brown eyes.

"Fine," I said, embarrassed.

Wait a second. Had Noelle said I was the girl she had *told* him about? What the hell had she been saying?

"I'm Walt Whittaker," he said, offering his hand. "But my friends call me Whittaker, or Whit. Your preference."

"Reed Brennan," I said, shaking his hand. It was unbelievably soft and warm.

"So, Reed. You're new to Easton, I understand. Welcome," he said.

The timbre of his voice made my skin tingle in a pleasing, humming way. It was comforting. Familiar, somehow.

"You're not?" I asked.

Again, everyone laughed. Even Whit. "No. No. My family has been a fixture here for generations," he said. "I've just been on holiday with my parents. We did a tour of East Asia. China, Singapore, Hong Kong, the Philippines . . . Do you travel, Reed?"

Not unless you count all those trips to Hershey Park back when I still wore pink sneakers.

"Not really," I said.

He looked at me for a long moment, as if what I had just said did not compute. I started to grow warm under his scrutiny,

"That's a shame," he said finally. "You can't truly know yourself until you've seen the world, you know?"

I was struggling to formulate an answer that wouldn't make me sound naïve and unworldly, when Gage slapped his hand down on Whittaker's shoulder from behind.

"Dude! Get over here! We were just talking about the Legacy. You gotta tell us what you know."

Whittaker smirked. "Ah, the Legacy. So it begins," he said.

What *was* this Legacy thing? I wanted to ask, but it seemed like one of those things that all of them already knew about, so if I asked about it, I would just be making it abundantly clear that I knew nothing—thereby reminding them of what an outsider I was. I decided to keep my mouth shut and hope I'd be able to overhear all about it in time.

"Perhaps we can catch up later?" he said to me.

"Uh . . . sure," I replied.

Gage pulled Whittaker off for a private confab with the boys and Noelle stepped up next to me.

"So? Work your spell on him yet?" Noelle asked.

"You *told* him about me?" I said.

"Yeah. I thought maybe you guys could get to know each other," Noelle said with a shrug. "Whit could be good for you. He's very . . . cultured."

I ignored the implied insult in that statement.

"Noelle! I'm with Thomas, remember?" I said. I no longer cared that she didn't want me to be with Thomas. The fact that he had mysteriously disappeared kind of negated all other concerns.

Her expression turned hard. "Right. And Thomas is . . . where?" she asked, looking around.

"I . . . I don't know," I said, my stomach responding with a clench. Over her shoulder, I watched Ariana, Kiran, and Taylor approaching, clearly interested in the topic of our private tête-à-tête.

"Exactly. Some boyfriend, bailing and not even telling you where he's going. Or *that* he's going," she said. She rolled her eyes

again and took another sip of beer, allowing this to sink in. "Look, Whit is a great guy. He's a *nice* guy."

"Unlike some people," Kiran said snarkily.

Even with his mysterious disappearance they couldn't let their disdain for Thomas go. They had never liked him. They never would.

"Plus, Whit can give you things," Ariana put in. "Things you might not otherwise have access to."

Give me things, huh? Well, color me curious.

Ariana gazed at Whit with her clear blue eyes and I wondered if he felt it. If it gave him the chills the way it always did me.

"Like what?" I said.

"Like a life," Kiran said with a snort.

"Kiran!" Ariana scolded.

"Just go talk to him," Noelle said. "You don't have to marry the guy."

I took a deep breath and drained the last dregs of my beer, all the while keeping an eye on Whit. He seemed nice. Polite and mature. Plus the guys clearly loved him. And yeah, maybe he was a little overweight, but who was I to judge?

"Bring him some of this," Kiran said, handing over a spare flask of her Hayes Special. "Whittaker loves my recipes."

The flask was ice cold and sleek to the touch. I held it in one hand, my beer in the other. Maybe it was time to give a Billings-sanctioned guy a chance. After all, I was a Billings Girl too, now. It seemed high time I started acting like one.

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