

# LAST CHRISTMAS

THE **PRIVATE** PREQUEL

KATE BRIAN

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White headlights severed the darkness as Ariana Osgood veered from the two-lane highway onto an overgrown road near the outskirts of Easton, Connecticut. She gripped the steering wheel with one hand and adjusted the rearview mirror with the other, glancing nervously into it.

*Calm down, Ariana. Just calm down.*

She hadn't been followed; she knew that. No one had seen her slip away from Billings House in Josh Hollis's Range Rover. No one knew that she was retracing the route she'd taken just an hour ago with Noelle Lange, Kiran Hayes, and Taylor Bell. That she was coming back for Thomas. And no one knew why she needed to find him. Her secrets—their secrets—were safe.

Rocks and chunks of hardened earth popped underneath the Range Rover's tires as she jerked the car off the road, cutting through the grassy field. She leaned forward and squinted into the blackness.

He was somewhere out there. She just had to find him, talk to him. And once she did, he would understand everything. Understand that he was wasting his time with Reed Brennan, that she was nothing but a novelty. A terrible mistake. Understand that he was meant to be with Ariana.

Suddenly her headlights caught something. Someone. Someone slumping limply from a pole.

Thomas.

"No!" She slammed on the brake pedal and swerved violently, barely missing him. Hands shaking, Ariana fumbled with the lock and opened the door, leaving the car's headlights on.

"Thomas!" Her voice sounded small in the open, deserted expanse around them. Thomas's head lolled forward, his chin grazing his chest. He groaned and mumbled something Ariana couldn't understand. Panic bubbled in her throat as she stared in disbelief at the figure in front of her, as if she was seeing him like this for the first time. Had they really left him in this condition? His arms and legs were tied to the pole with thick rope, and a black mesh bag was draped over his head. His chest and torso were covered with scratches from where her friends had jabbed him with tree branches. Dried blood encrusted a cut on his shoulder. The shirt he'd been wearing was on the ground, next to the baseball bat Noelle had forgotten to take with her when they'd left not even an hour ago.

Ariana's heart twisted painfully in her chest. How could she have let this happen? She'd never meant to hurt him, had only gone along with Noelle's plan so she wouldn't suspect anything.

"Thomas." The second her fingers grazed his clammy skin, he flinched, recoiling from the contact. From her. "Thomas, it's me," she choked, ripping the bag off his head. She had to cover her mouth to keep from vomiting. Thomas looked almost . . . dead. His wet curls were matted against his gray, sweaty face.

"I'm here. It's all right," she whispered, as much to herself as to him, and started to work on the knot binding his wrists. It didn't budge. "You're safe. I'm here to take care of you," she grunted, pulling futilely at the knot. She could have killed herself for not thinking to bring a knife or scissors.

His eyelids fluttered. "Take care of me?" he croaked.

"Of course." He would be so grateful to her for saving his life—for keeping their secret through all that—that he would never leave her again. Everything would go back to normal, and they could be together. Just like they'd planned. Just like he'd promised.

"Go to hell," he moaned.

The venom in his voice stung like a slap across the face. Thomas had never spoken to her like that. Digging her nails into her palms, she reminded herself that he was probably still drunk, or high. He didn't know what he was saying. He loved her, wanted to be with her. She knew he did. She just had to make him remember.

"Thomas, I just want to help." She sounded weak. She hated sounding weak. She reached for the rope coiled around his wrists and tugged at the knots. "I—"

"Don't touch me," he said, his voice stronger this time. His blue eyes bore into hers, full of disgust. "You think I don't know it was

you who tied me up like this? You think I didn't recognize your voice?"

"It wasn't me! It was Noelle! I couldn't stop her!" His image blurred in front of her as tears filled her eyes. This couldn't be happening. After everything they'd been through together, it couldn't end like this. "I would never hurt you. I love you," she said, her voice a barely audible whisper. "You love me too. You have to." A salty tear slipped down her cheek.

"Or what?" he spat. His stare sliced through her like a steel blade. "What are you gonna do, Ariana? Kill me?" A strange laugh slipped from his lips. "Like you killed—"

"Stop it. You're drunk. You don't know what you're saying. You're not thinking clearly."

He shook his head, his desperate laugh still hanging in the air between them. "The thing is," he croaked, "for once in my life, I actually am. Everything is clear now that I have Reed in my—"

"Don't you dare say that name," Ariana snapped, digging her nails into her arms. Hot rage rose inside her. "She's not like us, and you know it. She's a nobody, Thomas. A nothing."

"She's everything!" Thomas yelled. He lunged forward, his chest heaving. "Don't you get it? She's everything you're not, Ariana. I love her."

"No, you love me!" Ariana screamed. "Everything I did, I did for you. For us."

"There *is* no *us*," Thomas spat.

"No us?" she repeated dumbly, taking a step back and wincing at her vulnerability. She fought to keep her voice steady. "Do you not love me?"

"Not anymore. Not after the things you did. The things *we* did." He was silent for a while. When he spoke again, his voice was calm. "But I'm going to fix it," he said quietly. "Make it right. I have to."

"What are you saying?" Her throat felt tight, like she couldn't get enough air. How could he not love her anymore? He had to. *Had* to. He was the reason she'd done those things. The reason why those things were okay. Worth it. How was she supposed to live without him? How was she supposed to continue to watch him with Reed? Her stomach heaved at the thought and she gasped for air.

*In . . . two . . . three . . .*

*Out . . . two . . . three . . .*

"I'm going to the police. I'm going to tell them everything. I'm coming clean—about you, about me. And maybe while I'm there I'll tell them what you and your little Billings friends did to me tonight, too."

"No. No, no, no." Ariana doubled over. This couldn't be happening. Couldn't. What had gone wrong? Why was he doing this? How could he not want her anymore? Not want to *protect* her? "You'll ruin everything. My life will be over. Please," she begged, stumbling toward him. She tripped over a rock and fell at his feet, heaving sobs emanating from her shaking body. "Please don't do this to me."

"I have to," he repeated slowly. The cut from his shoulder had started bleeding again. "For Reed. She deserves the truth."

"Thomas," Ariana moaned, collapsing into the cracked earth. Tears streamed down her dirty face. Everything she had worked so hard for was slipping away. Soon, she would be left with nothing. No one.

The blurred image of a baseball bat wavered in front of her, just inches away. She watched as her fingers closed around its wooden neck. Watched as she drew the bat closer and brought herself slowly to her feet. It was as if she was watching someone else. "I can't let you do this to me. I can't let you ruin me, *leave* me," she said quietly. It was someone else's voice. It wasn't hers. It couldn't be. She was Ariana Osgood. Easton Academy's Good Girl. "I'm sorry, but I just can't."

Fear and resignation seeped slowly into Thomas's face, his voice. "You're fucking insane," he said quietly. "I should have known."

"Shut up, Thomas." She raised the bat over her head.

"Just like your mother." He looked her directly in the eye and spat at her.

"Stop it!" she shrieked. The tears were coming harder now. "I'm nothing like her! Nothing!"

"You were never good enough for me. For anyone."

*You never know what people are capable of until they're pushed to their edge, Ariana.*

"You're crazy. You're insa—"

The sickening crack of the bat against Thomas's ribs startled her. A primitive, guttural scream escaped from her soul as she felt his body give way under her hands. His cries intertwined with her own, until she couldn't tell them apart. The begging, the pleading, the hollow thud of the bat swelled around her. She needed silence. A single moment of peace. She raised the bat over her head once more and closed her eyes.

And everything went black.

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