

# SCANDAL

A NOVEL BY  
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## COME TOGETHER

We came from all corners of campus. From Pemberly, from Bradwell, from Parker. Some came in pairs. Others alone. Some defiant, with heads held high. Others meek, with curled shoulders, books clutched to their chests. Salt crunched beneath our feet. The frigid New England wind bit at our noses. Our fingers stung inside fur-lined gloves. In the silence, we came together, ignoring the curious stares of students who hustled by. Ignoring the whispers, the snickers, the scoffs. We waited for the last of us to arrive, each searching the other faces. Each unsure of what to do next. Of where we belonged. Of who we were.

For the Billings Girls, this was not a familiar sensation.

But it was familiar to me. Because not that long ago I'd been Reed Brennan, Glass-Licker, the New Girl. The awkward scholarship student from a no-name town in Pennsylvania. Not that long ago I'd been no one, and I'd handled it. Which might have been why, after a

few moments of tense silence, everyone looked at me, as if searching for guidance.

"Well," I said. "This sucks."

Constance Talbot and Lorna Gross laughed. Kiki Rosen smirked. Missy Thurber and Shelby Wordsworth rolled their eyes. Tiffany Goulbourne lifted her ever-present camera and snapped some rapid-fire photos of our strained faces. Everyone else seemed to relax, shoulders lowering, postures unclenching. Maybe it was my joke, or maybe they just didn't want to look pinched and tense in the pictures.

"Tiffany, is that really necessary?" Shelby asked, lifting a hand to the camera as if Tiff were a stalkerazzi.

"Just making memories," Tiff said.

"Why would you want to remember this?" Portia Ahronian tilted her head ever so slightly toward the north side of campus, where the tall tower of Billing House once loomed. All that was left was a huge dirt patch, currently being flattened by a yellow bulldozer. The machinery groaned and creaked, and just as the huge shovel-thing at the front lowered to the ground with a bang, Gage Coolidge and a few of his more obnoxious friends let out a whoop and a cheer.

"Dude! Nothing like a little destruction to start the new year!" Gage cackled as he walked by us from the direction of the boys' dorms. He had a skullcap pulled low over his brow and his irritatingly handsome face was covered in stubble. As animated as he was, his eyes were rimmed in red, like he'd just gotten home from partying. Which he probably had. Wherever Gage went, he took the party with him. At least, so he liked to think.

"You're such an ass," Astrid Chou snapped at him.

"Oooh. Frisky," Gage replied, looking her up and down. He licked his lips in a way that made me want to lop his tongue off. "Wanna stay in my room tonight? I mean, since you no longer have one."

Astrid rolled her eyes and Gage's friends slapped him on the back, laughing as they shoved their way into the cafeteria.

"That boy needs a lobotomy," Tiffany said.

"Doesn't a lobotomy require a brain to remove?" I joked.

At that moment, Noelle Lange finally graced us with her presence. She walked up, her dark hair billowing in the breeze, her black coat buttoned all the way up to her chin.

"In case you people haven't noticed, it's freezing out here," she said with a sniff. I tried to meet her eyes to see what she was thinking, but her Gucci sunglasses were so dark all I could see was my own reflection and the gray clouds gathering over our heads. "Let's go."

She opened the double doors to the dining hall and in we walked, turning our backs on the empty space that was Billings. We moved in a pack, like a class of suburban kindergartners shuffling through a museum in the big city, sticking close for safety. As we entered the cavernous room, the walls of gray brick matching the sky outside, the place fell eerily silent. And just like that, our brief moment of levity was over.

Everyone was watching us—students, teachers, food service workers. It was the first Monday morning of the new semester and all anyone could think about, talk about, care about was the fact that Billings was no more. Once the most popular and powerful girls on campus, we were now the train wreck from which no one could look away.

We passed my friend Marc Alberro's table, and he shot me a sympathetic look, but I had to wonder if he was also taking mental notes for some human-interest piece for the student paper. Diana Waters and Sonal Shah whispered behind their hands and I felt a niggling sense of paranoia. I lifted my hand in a wave, trying to show them I was okay—that there was nothing worth whispering about—but I couldn't even muster a smile to go with it. I wasn't okay. I felt like my stomach had turned to Jell-O inside me, all quivery and unfirm. Then Constance linked her arm with mine and I took a breath. I still had my friends. And our usual tables in the center of the room were still waiting for us. That was something, at least.

When we sat, chatter started up again. Plates clinked, knives scraped. I felt like collapsing forward on the table and taking a nap. Or crying. Or both. Which was, perhaps, what the general population of Easton Academy was expecting us all to do. Break down. Show a crack in our perfect exteriors.

Not this Billings Girl, though. Jell-O might have been taking over my insides, but my outsides were going to stay intact.

"I can't believe Billings is gone," London Simmons said.

Right. Putting it out of my mind wasn't going to be an option.

"I mean, it's just . . . *gone*," she repeated. Her highlighted brown hair was down around her face and her lashes were so long and thick they made her eyes look huge. Her purple turtleneck grazed her chin but was tight enough to show off all her curvaceous assets.

"We went over there this morning to see if we could grab a brick or something. You know, as a memento?" Vienna Clarke added, leaning

forward on the table. She could have passed for London's double, but with slightly less makeup. "There was *nothing* there."

"It's like it never existed at all," Amberly Carmichael confirmed, bringing both hands under her chin. The belled sleeves of her pink angora sweater were pulled down to her fingertips, and her long blond hair was slicked back under a matching pink headband.

"Don't say that," Missy snapped, her wide nostrils flaring. "Billings has been part of this community for over a hundred years. We have to keep its memory alive, at least."

My heart squeezed. I'd never heard Missy sound so impassioned about anything—even Billings. Even if it was bitchily impassioned.

"What're we going to do?" Rose Sakowitz asked. She looked tiny and meek at the far end of the second table, cuddled into a huge white sweater, her red hair drawn into a low ponytail. "I mean, we can't live like this, all split up."

"They put me back in Bradwell," Amberly muttered. "My old roommate, Cassie, has had a single since I moved to Billings. She was *not* happy to see me."

Everyone had received their new room assignments in their mailboxes the day before. The administration had not only scattered the Billings Girls over three dorms, but they'd separated roommates, just for kicks. Portia and Tiffany were now living together in Parker, along with the random pairings of Rose and Astrid, London and Shelby, and Kiki and Vienna. In Pemberly, Lorna and Constance were living together, while Noelle and Missy each had singles there, like me. I'd been placed there last semester when the Billings Girls had thrown

me out of the house for betraying Noelle—a crime of which I’d since been absolved—so I was the only one of us who didn’t have to move.

“Our room doesn’t even have a view,” Portia said, glancing at Tiffany.

“We’re looking out at the Dumpsters behind the gym,” Tiff confirmed, sticking her tongue out slightly.

“And the closets? They don’t even hold my coats,” Portia added, flicking her long dark hair over one shoulder. “I mean, WTF? What did we do to deserve this?”

“Nothing,” Astrid put in. She’d dyed the tips of her black hair white and had on more green eyeliner than strictly necessary. But as always, it worked for her. “It’s bollocks. This is the school’s fault, not ours. They’re the ones who let loony Ariana Osgood and her half-baked sister Sabine in here in the first place. Why should we be punished because their admissions process is total shite?”

Everyone muttered their agreement, shifting in their seats, getting riled up.

“We have to do something, right?” Shelby said. Her dark blond hair was pinned back in a prim bun and she wore a houndstooth jacket over a white T-shirt and pearls. As always, her iPhone was out and vibrating on the table in front of her. “I mean, this is my senior year. I can’t spend the rest of it living in that . . . *hovel*.” She gave a shudder. “It’s completely ridiculous.”

“It’s like we’re not even us anymore,” Constance said.

“Noelle, you have a plan, right?” London asked, biting her bottom lip.

Thirteen pairs of desperate eyes turned to Noelle. She removed

her sunglasses slowly, folded them, and placed them on the table in front of her. She laid both hands flat over the frames for a moment as she took a breath. When she lifted her eyes, she looked around the two tables. A tingle of excitement raced down my spine. Whatever Noelle had in mind, it was going to be good. I could feel it.

"Ladies," she said. "It's time to move on."

"What?" I blurted, voicing the sentiments of every shocked person in earshot.

Noelle looked me dead in the eye, her brown bangs swept sideways like a curtain drawn over her face. "This is it. Billings, as we know it, is gone. We're going to have to accept it."

I felt as if my chair was shaking beneath me. Then I realized it was me. I was trembling in my seat.

"Don't say that," I replied. "It can't be over. There has to be something we can do."

"Like what?" Noelle said, arching one perfect eyebrow. "What're you going to do, little piggy? Build a new house out of straw?"

I clutched the edge of the table. What was wrong with her? London was right. Noelle was always in charge. She always, *always* had a plan. And Billings House meant more to her than anyone else at these two tables. Of that I was certain. How could she possibly be giving up so easily?

"She's right, Reed," Tiffany said, leaning back in her chair. "The house is gone. I think this is going to be a tough one to overcome, even for you."

My heart started to sink, but I yanked it up again. A tough one even for me? The girl whose boyfriend had been murdered by one of her

best friends? The girl who'd almost been shot less than a month ago? The girl who'd been stranded on a deserted island for a week and left for dead?

If I could handle all that, how could I *not* handle this?

"No," I said. "This is not over."

"Reed," Noelle said in a condescending voice, "there's this little thing called knowing when to quit. A smart person can see a lost cause by daylight."

"Well, then call me an idiot, because I'm not giving up," I replied, crossing my arms over my chest. "Billings is my home. Our home. I'm not letting it go that easily."

*Come on, Noelle. Say you're with me on this. You have to be.*

But Noelle scoffed and shoved back from the table. "I'm getting a bagel," she said as she stood. "Anyone else want to join me over here in Realityville?"

Ever so slowly, they started to follow. Portia, Shelby, Vienna, London, Amberly. They shot me sad, sorry looks as they trailed after her.

Fine. Let them follow her—for now. I was going to prove her wrong. Somehow, I was going to convince them. I looked around at the rest of my friends, most of whom were now eyeing me with nervous hope. Somehow, I was going to bring us all back together.

And for maybe the second time in her life, Noelle Lange was going to have to admit that she was wrong.

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