
BEAUTIFUL
DISASTER
A PRIVILEGE NOVEL

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NEW FRIENDS

“Hi, I’m Briana Leigh Covington, but you can call me Ana.”

Ariana Osgood stood before the trio of girls in the center of the sunlit campus of Atherton-Pryce Hall and held her breath. She felt the weight of this moment in every bone, every muscle, every tendon of her body. The very first moment of her brand-new life.

It seemed as if it had taken forever to get to this place. The stark memories of all she had been through—the months and months locked up at the Brenda T. Trumbull Correctional Facility for Women, the hours spent planning her escape, the days on the road, wending her way west from Virginia to Texas—all of the images and emotions crowded her brain, threatening to overwhelm her. Ariana had risked everything to get here, to earn a new chance at life. She had cheated, stolen, even killed her friend, Briana Leigh Covington, so she could assume the girl’s identity and be truly and utterly free. And now she was finally here.

“Did you say ‘Briana Leigh Covington?’” the tall, willowy girl asked. As if she had heard the name before. Ariana’s heart stopped. Did this girl know Briana Leigh? Ariana had just arrived at this hallowed private school for the ridiculously overprivileged. Just stepped onto this gorgeous, perfectly manicured campus for the very first time. The jig couldn’t possibly be up that fast.

“Yes,” she said firmly, steadily. Her fingers gripped the handle on her rolling trunk a bit tighter, but not so tightly that anyone would notice. “But I prefer to be called Ana.”

The girl’s hazel eyes quickly flicked over Ariana’s outfit, her tasteful chocolate brown Theory dress and Gucci slingbacks. They assessed her set of Louis Vuitton luggage with a glance, then slid back up to her face, lingering for a moment on her long, auburn hair, which had been dyed to match Briana Leigh’s natural hue. Throughout this ever-so-brief process, Ariana grew increasingly warm, but she didn’t move. This was a normal and accepted practice among her people. A girl had the right to take a moment to decide upon the value of knowing the stranger standing before her.

“Interesting,” the assessor said finally, noncommittally. She glanced at each of her two friends, the impeccably groomed Chinese girl to her right, and the chunky-jewelry-loving blonde to her left. The blonde smiled almost imperceptibly, and the other girl suddenly became very interested in her BlackBerry. Ariana had the uncomfortable feeling that she was being silently mocked right to her face. Something she had done to many an unfortunate girl, but which had never been done to her.

“I’m Brigit Rhygsted,” the blond girl piped up, taking a step forward and offering her hand. She had a hint of a Norwegian accent and the healthiest glow Ariana had ever seen. “This is Soomie Ahn and Maria Stanzini.”

Ariana shook Brigit’s hand and nodded as the other two girls said hello. For the first time in a long time, she had no idea what to say next. What did a person say to the people who might or might not be mocking her? She had no idea, and she detested the feeling. A group of younger girls walked by and called out hellos to the trio, which Maria and the others acknowledged with brief nods and vague smiles. They were paltry greetings that nevertheless elicited proud grins from those upon whom they were bestowed. Clearly, Ariana had chosen wisely. These were the girls whom all the other girls looked up to. The ones who could not be approached without an invitation. But she *had* approached. She had shown that she believed herself to be equal to their stature. That had to count for something.

“What year are you?” Brigit adjusted the strap on her messenger bag, and her colorful plastic bracelets clinked together.

“I’m a junior,” Ariana replied. Even though she had been a junior three years ago. Briana Leigh would have been a junior, so a junior she would be. “What y—”

“Really? Us too! Well, me and Soomie. Maria’s a senior. What dorm are you in?” Brigit asked.

Ariana hesitated at having been cut off. Also something she hadn’t experienced very often. “Cornwall. What about—”

“Where did you transfer from? You have an accent. Are you from

the South? Do you have any friends here? A boyfriend, maybe?” Brigit asked, lowering her voice and giving Ariana a conspiratorial look.

Ariana glanced around at the other cliques on the quad, chatting and laughing in the sunshine. *Had* she chosen the right crowd? There was no way she could be friends with someone who asked this many personal questions in the space of fifteen seconds. Across the way, standing on the steps of the chapel, was an olive-skinned girl with thick black hair tumbling in waves down her back, who seemed to be watching Ariana and the others from the corner of her eye while she chatted with a group of handsome guys and perfectly coiffed girls. She, too, looked like a queen bee, just as Maria had from afar. Was it possible that Ariana had aligned herself with the wrong girls? Had she already made such an awful mistake?

“I—”

“Don’t let her scare you,” Soomie said, sliding her BlackBerry into the pocket of her navy blue blazer. She smoothed her already smooth black hair and lifted her chin slightly, giving Ariana a better look at the perfectly tied knot in her gold and gray striped tie. The collar of her white shirt was so starched the points looked as if they could slice through metal. “There are three things you need to know about Brigit: A) She needs to know everything about everyone; B) she has the memory of an elephant; and C) she makes excellent hot chocolate. Really. It’s her thing.”

A phone beeped and Maria quickly removed an iPhone from her bag. She read a text, smirked, and returned the phone to another pocket altogether. Ariana’s face burned. Soomie had just put *her* phone

away, and she couldn't shake the feeling that Soomie had just texted Maria. Were they talking about her right in front of her face?

Brigit meanwhile, shrugged and smiled happily. Her uniform wasn't quite as impeccably kept as Soomie's. Her tie was a tad loose and her gray blazer hung open over her untucked shirt. "It *is* my thing," she echoed. "What's yours?"

All three of them looked at Ariana with interest. She took a deep breath. She had to stop being so paranoid. She hadn't figured out Soomie and Maria yet, but Brigit's total lack of self-consciousness was kind of sweet and endearing. Maybe even sweet and endearing enough to help her ignore the third degree. If the girl would let her.

"So, where is Cornwall, exactly?" Ariana asked, even though she knew its precise location, due to the fact that she had long since memorized the campus map.

For the last two weeks, Ariana had been holed up at the Philmore Hotel waiting for Briana Leigh's body to be found at the bottom of Lake Page, where Ariana and her former Brenda T. roommate, Kaitlynn Nottingham, had dumped it. In the meantime, she had spent hours perfecting Briana Leigh's signature, memorizing the welcome packet sent by the Atherton-Pryce Hall admissions office, and tying up loose ends—canceling Briana Leigh's phone, which had been stolen by Kaitlynn right after the girl had betrayed Ariana; writing a breakup letter to Briana Leigh's fiancé, Teó; and securing a fake ID for herself, since she knew everyone at APH would have one.

Thanks to all that time with her nose buried in the APH map, Ariana knew that the campus was laid out in a series of circles,

extending outward from the fountain, which was at the exact center of the grounds. The inner buildings—tall and stately, constructed of red brick with white columns and ivy-covered entryways—were the classroom buildings, the chapel, the dining hall and student center, and the administrative offices. Just beyond those, forming a wider circle, were the eight dorms—boys’ to the north, girls’ to the south—all of them three-story colonial-style homes, each with ten dorm rooms, two common-area bathrooms, and a lounge on each floor. The outermost circle was a bit more imprecise and formed by the gymnasium, the athletic fields, the theater, the arts building and the Pryce Building, which stood on the bank of the Potomac, grand and imposing, like a stern grandfather keeping an eye on the grounds. There was also a ninth dorm, Wolcott Hall, which had been built just down the hill from the Pryce Building, high enough to overlook the campus, but not high enough to appear more important than Pryce. In the brochure, it had been described in the same terms as all the other dorms, with the exception of one important adjective: “coed.”

Ariana had never heard of a coed dorm on a prep school campus. She was, therefore, intrigued about its existence. But the housing office had not placed her there, and she could find out more about it in time.

“Cornwall’s through here.” Maria tipped her head to the side toward the surrounding buildings. Her long gold earring just grazed her shoulder as she turned around. Her uniform looked like it had been fished from the bottom of a duffel bag. Wrinkled shirt, frayed blue jacket, tie balled up and shoved into the breast pocket, pleated

plaid skirt with a falling hem. And yet, she was the most beautiful and self-possessed of the three. “Follow us.”

“We’re all in Cornwall too. For now,” Soomie offered up as they walked away from the fountain at the center of campus. “It’s the oldest dorm on the grounds, which means, of course, that it was a boys’ dorm for about two hundred years. Which means it still smells like sweaty socks.”

Maria rolled her eyes. “It does not. You just have sensitive nostrils.”

“No, *your* olfactory senses have simply been destroyed due to hours in the studio with dozens of perspiring dancers,” Soomie shot back.

“Are you saying that *I* smell?” Maria asked, laying her fingers delicately to her chest.

“Oh, no, Ria. You’re all roses all the time,” Soomie replied with a touch of sarcasm, earning a narrow-eyed look from Maria.

“Maria is a ballerina. It’s *her* thing,” Brigit explained to Ariana. “What’s your thing?”

“You already asked me that,” Ariana said.

“I know. But you didn’t answer,” Brigit replied, her expression openly curious.

Ariana thought back to Easton Academy. To her poetry and her stint as editor of the literary magazine. She had loved writing back then, but she hadn’t put pen to paper in over a year. All thanks to Dr. Meloni, her psychiatrist at the Brenda T. He had stolen all her poetry journals and laughed at her work—right in her face. Since then, Ariana had been unable to write a line. The man who was

supposed to help her had effectively taken away her one emotional outlet. Her blood began to boil just thinking about it. Thinking about him.

Calm down. It's over. You never have to lay eyes upon that man again, she told herself, taking a deep breath. *And don't forget, your and Kaitlynn's escape got him fired. So there's justice in that, at least.*

Still, thoughts of Kaitlynn brought up a whole *new* wave of unpleasant emotions. Fear, humiliation, the sting of betrayal. Ariana's former best friend was still out there somewhere, and she was the only person who knew Ariana Osgood was still alive—that she had not, in fact, drowned herself in Lake Page and that the body the police had found was not hers. But she took a deep breath and let it go. Kaitlynn had no idea where Ariana was. She couldn't hurt her. Not anymore.

"I think I'm still looking for my thing," Ariana replied calmly.

"Interesting," Soomie said. Ariana blinked. She was very aware of the fact that that was the second time that one word had been used to describe her. Soomie regarded Ariana for a long moment, as if she was trying to glean some sort of information from her face. A tiny knot tightened around Ariana's heart. Then Soomie suddenly looked down at Ariana's feet. "*Love* the shoes, by the way. Gucci?"

"Thanks. And yes. Good eye," Ariana said, impressed. She was always noticing people's footwear as well, and she felt a potential kinship with Soomie. "So, is fashion *your* thing?"

"Not exactly. Details. Details are my thing," Soomie replied, eyeing Ariana coolly.

Ariana smiled. Perhaps Soomie was a kindred spirit.

“Nothing gets past Soomie,” Maria added in a pointed tone.

The smile instantly fell away from Ariana’s face and the knot around her heart tightened excruciatingly. Was she trying to tell Ariana that she was still being evaluated? Or perhaps it was worse. Perhaps she and Soomie had already figured out somehow that Ariana was hiding something.

Don’t let them get to you. Don’t let them see you sweat.

“Interesting,” Ariana said, throwing their own word back at them. She saw the three girls exchange an amused look and wondered what they were thinking. Were they impressed by her gumption? Annoyed? Surprised? She wished she knew why these girls seemed to be studying her so very intently. She detested the way it made her feel—uncertain, threatened, and suddenly exhausted. Over the past few weeks she had imagined this moment hundreds of times, the moment she would arrive at her new school and begin her new life, but she had never imagined it would be quite this difficult, this confusing, this intimidating.

The three girls took extralong steps, avoiding the Atherton-Pryce Hall crest, which was etched into the stone at the crossing of three walkways. Ariana made sure to go around it with her luggage, having read in the school’s history that treading on the crest brought bad luck. She had left all her bad luck behind, along with her old identity, her old friends, her old school.

“Impressive,” Maria said, pausing and reaching back to adjust her loose ponytail. Her sleeves rode up a bit, exposing a few faded bruises around the girl’s wrists. “How did you know about the crest?”

“I like to be informed,” Ariana replied.

“Interesting,” Soomie said again.

Ariana’s shoulder muscles coiled. She was starting to grow weary of that word.

“So, Ana, what do you think of APH so far?” Brigit asked, glancing over her shoulder as they came around the class building and into the open space in front of the ring of dorms. The grassy area was dotted with shade trees, perfect for studying under in the fall and spring.

“It’s a beautiful campus,” Ariana said as a warm breeze rustled the leaves overhead. She felt a sudden surge of anticipation. As if anything could happen. So what if these girls were still evaluating her? She was certain they would accept her in time. And if not, maybe they weren’t worthy of *her* attention.

This is your new chance at life, she told herself. Don’t let anyone else make the rules.

“I think I’m going to be very happy here.”

Happier than she’d been where she had come from. Which wasn’t hard, of course. But that unpleasantness was in the past. This was her future.

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