
PERFECT
MISTAKE
A PRIVILEGE NOVEL

BY
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HOW FAR WE'VE COME

The first thing Ariana Osgood noticed was Kaitlynn Nottingham's shoes—those gorgeous, brown leather Marc Jacobs wedge sandals. Then she let her gaze travel ever so slowly from her enemy's pedicured toes up her long, recently waxed legs. She took in the pressed shorts, the pink sweater, the perfectly cropped hair. Finally, finally she looked into Kaitlynn's eyes. Jade green, they gleamed with malevolence.

In moments of abject fury, Ariana Osgood's mind often went for the details. The things she could catalogue, analyze, compartmentalize. And her particular obsession was shoes. Where the hell had Kaitlynn gotten the money for Marc Jacobs wedge sandals?

But then, Ariana already knew the answer to this question: Kaitlynn had gotten the money from her. That one million dollars Ariana had wasted blood, sweat, and tears to raise—the one million dollars Kaitlynn was supposed to be using to start a new life in Australia—had, at least partially, been used to secure a new wardrobe, an expensive haircut,

and some seriously killer shoes. All things that would help Kaitlynn blend in perfectly on the Atherton-Pryce Hall campus. *Ariana's* campus, where the two of them now stood, in the rapidly waning light of the late-summer evening, facing off amidst a hundred happily chatting prep schoolers.

“Are you okay, Ana?” Kaitlynn asked, tilting her head in faux concern. She had just introduced herself as Lillian Oswald. So very close to Ariana’s mother’s name, Lillian Osgood. Kaitlynn had clearly known this would get right under Ariana’s skin. “You look a little faint.”

“She’s right, Ana,” Brigit Rhygsted agreed, reaching for Ariana’s arm. “Have you eaten anything since the race this morning? We should get you some food.” She gestured to the far wall of the room, where a few guys were high-fiving one another. “There’s a table over there full of crap I can’t eat. Want me to get you something? Or maybe Lily can. I’m on a diet,” she explained to Kaitlynn. “I probably shouldn’t even go near it. I have no willpower at *all*.”

Ariana’s fingers curled. It was almost funny, Brigit babbling about her struggles with food as if that were important right now. But then, she had no idea there was a serious battle of wills going on right in front of her. As far as she knew, “Ana Covington” and “Lillian Oswald” had never met before this moment.

“No, thank you. I’m fine,” Ariana said through her teeth, lifting her chin to show Kaitlynn that she was not about to go weak at the very sight of her. Even though that was exactly what had happened the moment she’d spotted Kaitlynn on the crowded quad. The party

continued to bubble and swell, but all Ariana could do was hug herself tightly in an attempt to quell her rage-induced trembling.

A few yards away, Palmer Liriano laughed and Ariana found him with her eyes, needing a moment of relief. He stood near a table of sandwiches and snacks, laughing along with two of his best friends, Christian Brooks and international pop star Landon Jacobs. Ariana focused on his handsome face, his carefree smile, the way the breeze tossed his black hair back from his forehead, hoping the glimpse of her crush—the guy she would soon be calling her boyfriend—would soothe her. But it didn't work.

Kaitlynn Nottingham was here. The only person on the planet who could obliterate Ariana's carefully laid plan for a new life—the person who had sworn she'd be on a plane to another country by tonight if Ariana gave her the money she needed—was instead here. On the Atherton-Pryce Hall campus. The place that was supposed to be Ariana's new home. Her sanctuary.

The enemy had invaded. Had used Ariana's money to worm her way into APH. And now that she was here, who knew what she was going to do next?

"I think she's right, Ana. Let's get you something to eat," Kaitlynn said pointedly, claspng Ariana's upper arm in her viselike grip. Ariana imagined her skin melting away under the girl's poisonous touch. "Come on. We'll grab a snack and get to know each other better."

For a moment, Ariana assumed Brigit would follow, but there was something exclusionary in Kaitlynn's tone, and Brigit's wide blue eyes showed that she'd picked up on it. When Ariana glanced over her

shoulder at Brigit, the girl had already roped Adam Lazerri, a scholarship student who had just transferred to APH, into conversation.

Kaitlynn released Ariana in front of one of the snack tables and started to load up a clear glass plate with sweets. All around them, friends gabbed and gossiped; a few adventurous couples had created their own dance floor at the center of the circle of tables, and every now and then someone would throw out a cheer for Team Gold and half the crowd would cheer and whoop in response. Everyone was having fun, except Ariana.

“Before you can embarrass yourself asking all the obvious questions, let me answer them,” Kaitlynn said lightly, addressing the wide array of fruit, cookies, cakes, and tarts rather than granting Ariana the courtesy of looking her in the eye. She spoke at a volume just loud enough for Ariana alone to hear. “I’ve signed over most of the money you gave me to secure my place in APH’s junior class *and* in this exclusive dorm thing you and your new friends call Privilege House.”

Ariana’s rage swelled to nuclear levels. “No. You can’t,” she said under her breath. “You cannot be in Privilege House.”

Not after all the work Ariana had done to get in. Not after she’d been forced to steal from her team to buy Kaitlynn’s silence about her true identity. Not after rigging the crew race that morning to ensure Team Gold’s victory. Privilege House was Ariana’s plum. The shiny purple plum that she had won for herself—and for Palmer Liriano and Lexa Greene and the rest of her team. She had not gone to all that trouble so Kaitlynn Nottingham of all people could share in the spoils.

“Apparently I can,” Kaitlynn said blithely, nibbling on a black-and-white cookie. “You’d be surprised how hard up the APH administration was for cash. Seems the recession hit this place where it hurts.”

Ariana’s fingernails dug into the flesh on her forearm. This was all too much to bear. Far too much to absorb over the space of two measly minutes. Her brain was still wrapping itself around the fact that Kaitlynn had lied to her about her plans to leave the country, and now she was supposed to accept the fact that the girl had duped her again? That she had forced Ariana to raise for her the very money that would buy her a spot in Ariana’s life? And not only a spot, but a significant spot? The girl was going to be living in her dorm, amongst her friends. Ariana was going to have to see her, talk to her, deal with her every single day.

But there was no denying it. Kaitlynn was standing right there. Just six inches away. Enjoying her cookie and smiling at megastar Landon, Maria Stanzini’s secret boyfriend, across the quad.

“Who’s that?” Kaitlynn asked, popping a blueberry into her mouth. “He is absolutely munchable.”

Ariana’s vision began to prickle over with gray spots. Her throat closed and her skin burned. There was no air. She was outdoors on a beautiful, late-summer night, the breeze rustling the leaves on the ash and maple and cherry trees dotting the campus, but there was no air.

Breathe, Ariana. Just breathe.

In, one . . . two . . . three . . .

Out, one . . . two . . . three . . .

In, one . . . two . . . three . . .

Out, one . . . two . . . three . . .

“Oh my God. You’re not *actually* going to faint, are you?” Kaitlynn asked in an amused tone, grabbing another blueberry.

Ariana blinked. The gray spots dissipated.

“No. I’m not going to faint.” *Bitch*, she added silently.

“Good. Because we have some business to discuss,” Kaitlynn said, nudging Ariana farther away from the table as a group of sophomores descended in search of a sugar rush. “I’m sure Grandma Covington is sending you some sort of weekly allowance. I think it’s only fair we split it.”

Ariana’s jaw clenched so hard she was sure she heard a tooth crack. “Fair? How, exactly?”

“Well, because you never would have met Briana Leigh *or* Grandma C. if it weren’t for me,” Kaitlynn said matter-of-factly, choosing a strawberry from her plate and biting into it. “You wouldn’t be here right now, masquerading as a millionaire, if it weren’t for me. In fact, you should be glad I’m letting you keep any of it.”

“Then why, exactly, are you?” Ariana asked, genuinely curious. Back when Ariana and Kaitlynn had been cellmates at the Brenda T. Trumbull Correctional Facility for Women, Ariana had thought she knew how Kaitlynn’s mind worked—had thought she was sweet, innocent, guileless—but it had all turned out to be a ruse. At this point, the girl was a complete enigma.

Kaitlynn clucked her tongue and tilted her head again, giving Ariana the tiniest pout. Her lips were stained from the berry. “Because I want you here. And you can’t exactly keep up the charade without cash now, can you?”

“You want me here,” Ariana said dubiously.

Kaitlynn's eyes widened innocently. She looked almost hurt. "Of course I do, *Ana*. You're the only friend I've got." She hooked her arm around Ariana's in an affable way and looked out across the crowded party with her. Handsome boys in their well-worn APH T-shirts or broken-in oxfords chatted with fresh-faced girls in designer outfits, their laughter and babble mingling on the breeze. Overhead, white and gold paper lanterns bounced and swayed, hanging from poles set up in a circle around the party area. In the background, music played at a low volume from hidden speakers. Kaitlynn let out a contented sigh. "Can you believe how far we've come? A few months ago, would you ever have imagined this was possible?"

Ariana thought about the sterile cell they used to share at the Brenda T., about the better life she'd imagined for herself and Kaitlynn. Of course, back then she hadn't known Kaitlynn was a seriously evil girl who was going to use her to get that life.

"We've really done it, A. You and me. I'm not saying it was all champagne and roses, but we've done it."

Ariana didn't buy Kaitlynn's act for a second. They were never going to be friends. If Kaitlynn actually wanted Ariana here, it was for some reason other than friendship. Some dark, sadistic reason.

"You're sick, you know that, don't you?" Ariana said.

Kaitlynn glanced at Ariana out of the corner of her eye. "You're going to have to stop saying such ugly things to me, *Ana*, now that we're going to be besties again."

"Munchable? Besties? Who talks like that?" Ariana asked with a sneer.

“Lillian Oswald does,” Kaitlynn said with a smile. “She has an endearingly innocent side. I’ve played that well before, no?”

Ariana stared her down, fuming at the reference to their past.

“You’re going to give me that money,” Kaitlynn said, giving Ariana’s arm a squeeze. “You’re going to play along. And as long as you do, we should both get exactly what we want out of this place.”

“And if I don’t?” Ariana asked.

Kaitlynn shook her head, amused. “Do you really have to ask?”

Brigit chose that moment to bounce over to them like a bunny on Red Bull.

“Hey guys! Christian’s setting up *Rock Band* over by the chapel steps. He’s on guitar and I’m on drums, but we need a singer. Landon’s being all prima donna about it. You in?”

“I don’t sing,” Ariana replied flatly, forgetting for the moment that she was supposed to be ingratiating herself to these people. She was too busy trying not to explode.

“Seriously? Lexa said you guys used to duet for all the talent shows at camp,” Brigit said, her brow creasing.

Ariana cursed her bad luck. Of course Briana Leigh sang in talent shows. The girl was the biggest exhibitionist Ariana had ever known, aside, perhaps, from Kiran Hayes, her former friend from her former life at Easton Academy.

Kaitlynn’s brows arched at this news. “Do you have an old friend who goes here, Briana Leigh?” she said, clearly amused.

“Lexa Greene. They went to equestrian camp together back in the day,” Brigit supplied helpfully.

Kaitlynn's grin widened. "How . . . *nice* for you, Ana."

Ariana bristled. She and Kaitlynn both knew that having someone at APH that knew the now-deceased Briana Leigh Covington was anything but nice.

"You have no idea," Ariana said, forcing a chipper tone. "It was *amazing* to see her, and now it's like we've never been apart," she added pointedly. Just so Kaitlynn would know that she had everything under control. "But I don't really sing anymore," she told Brigit.

Brigit frowned, fiddling with the colorful plastic bracelet that encircled her wrist. "Okay. What about you, Lillian?"

Kaitlynn shrugged, still holding Ariana's gaze. "I can carry a tune." She released Ariana and placed her heaping plate of food down on the table, hardly touched. "See you later, Ana!"

She twiddled her fingers as she turned and dove into the crowd with Brigit. Soon Landon and Adam had joined them and then, inevitably, Palmer gravitated over as well. Maria, Lexa, and Soomie Ahn were off somewhere, dealing with Lexa and Palmer's breakup. But if they had been there, Ariana was sure the three of them would have been holding court with Kaitlynn as well. Kaitlynn was just that pretty, just that magnetic, just that interesting.

And, infuriatingly, just that difficult to ditch.

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