

SWEET
DECEIT
A PRIVILEGE NOVEL

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A PROMISE

“To know Brigit was to love Brigit,” Lexa Greene said, lifting her chin. Tears shone in her green eyes. Hundreds of candles adorned the marble stairs of the Atherton-Pryce Hall chapel, flickering in the cool autumn breeze. The black-clad crowd of students, faculty, and parents huddled even closer together against the cold—and their own sadness.

Ariana Osgood held a white candle in front of her, the flame blurring before her tired, tear-stung eyes. Her heart felt like it was collapsing in on itself over and over again, radiating misery and pain throughout her body. She’d arrived at Atherton-Pryce Hall just over a month ago, and she hadn’t imagined that she’d become true friends with anyone as fast as she had with Brigit Rhygsted—or that it could hurt so badly to lose her. It had been a week since Brigit had died, and Ariana still couldn’t believe she was gone. A vivid image flashed through Ariana’s mind. She saw Brigit’s body, so slight, so broken,

crumpled at the foot of that regal staircase where she'd met her end. The pain in Ariana's heart twisted ever tighter and her throat closed over. If only she'd been there. If only there was something she could have done.

"She was all about adventure and laughter, and she exuded pure joy," Lexa continued.

Ariana heard a loud snuffle to her left. Kaitlynn Nottingham was weeping, holding her trembling fingers over her lips as if to keep from sobbing out loud. Ariana's free hand curled into a fist, and in her mind's eye, she saw herself punching Kaitlynn in the face. Imagined the satisfying crack of her nose and the thud as the girl hit the ground.

Kaitlynn had killed Brigit. Shoved her down the huge, marble staircase at the Norwegian Embassy for no better reason than her desire to be accepted into Stone and Grave—the secret society for which all three of them had been tapped. And now she had the gall to stand there and cry?

Hovering next to Kaitlynn was Adam Lazerri, his curly brown hair frizzy and his chin spotty with stubble. He stared at the ground, swallowing repeatedly, clearly trying not to cry. He, at least, had a right to be sad. He and Brigit had just started dating. Along with Adam was Landon Jacobs. The pop star's long bangs grazed the top of his dark sunglasses as he stared straight ahead. Next to him, Maria Stanzini let out a sob and Ariana saw Landon reach out to squeeze her hand. Maria pressed her face into Landon's shoulder, looking for all the world like a girl who was leaning on her friend for support. Only

Ariana knew that the two of them were secretly dating. At least her friend was able to take comfort from the boy she loved and not worry that anyone would read anything into it. For once, Landon was not the center of attention.

Ariana's own secret love, Palmer Liriano, stood at the edge of the group, his hands folded at waist level, his dark hair slicked back from his face. Every now and then he would sniffle and blink, holding back tears. Ariana wished she could go to him, comfort him, be comforted. But now was not the time to be selfish.

"If you would all bow your heads for a moment of silence in honor of our friend," Lexa was saying.

Soomie Ahn reached out and took Ariana's hand. The coil of Ariana's heart loosened and she took a long, deep breath. She looked up at the large photo of Brigit propped up on the black velvet-covered table next to Lexa. It was surrounded by small pumpkins, brightly colored leaves, and mums in gorgeous gold and white. In the photo, Brigit beamed on a white-sand beach, her blond curls lit by the sun. She looked alive, happy, and completely oblivious to the fact that her life would be cut short by a psychopath masquerading as a friend.

For a long moment, everything was still. The breeze whistled through the bell tower atop the chapel, and a boat's horn sounded from down on the Potomac River below campus.

"Thank you," Lexa said finally.

Ariana opened her eyes. Lifted her head. Forced herself to breathe the crisp autumn air.

"I know that many of you have brought flowers for Brigit. If you'd

like to come up one by one, you can take a moment and leave them here by her picture,” Lexa said.

Conrad Royce, Lexa’s boyfriend, slipped quickly from the crowd and left a white rose in front of Brigit’s picture, before engulfing Lexa in a hug. Soomie gave Ariana a slight nudge and they started for the chapel steps, hand in hand as the large crowd of mourners broke and shifted behind them. Maria walked over and held on to Soomie’s arm on the other side, bringing Landon, Adam, and Palmer with her. Together the six of them climbed the first tier of steps to the landing where Lexa and Conrad waited.

“We’ll miss you every day, Brigit,” Lexa said, placing her yellow sunflower—Brigit’s favorite—in front of the photo.

Soomie started to cry in earnest, her silky, black hair covering her face. “I just . . . I can’t . . . I can’t imagine being here without . . .”

Ariana glanced at Lexa and bit her lip. She removed her own sunflower from the pocket of her coat and looked at Brigit’s picture. “We didn’t know each other for very long, Brigit, but you meant more to me than you could ever know. Thanks for being such a good friend.”

She lay down her flower. Then Soomie lifted her head and added her offering, still sobbing. Ariana held her breath—held in her own tears. She and her friends all realized that, as Brigit’s roommate and best friend, Soomie was taking Brigit’s death harder than the rest of them.

Maria rounded her shoulders. Her light brown hair was back in a bun, and her angular face was makeup-free. “Wherever you are, B, I hope it’s a party worthy of you,” she said as she added her red gerbera daisy to the pile.

As the rest of the large crowd started to form a long, solemn line at the foot of the stairs, the boys lay their flowers down before Brigit's photo. For a long moment, the eight of them stood, staring at the picture of their friend. A stiff wind hit from behind, but Ariana didn't shuffle sideways or grip Lexa or Soomie tighter. She couldn't. She felt rooted to the spot. Like if she tried to move her legs, her feet might stay behind.

"Come on, girls. A lot of people are waiting," Lexa said quietly.

She blew out her candle and Ariana and the others followed her lead. Soomie rested her head against Maria's arm as they descended the steps. When Ariana's foot hit the first stair, her ankle started to buckle and she found herself grabbing for Lexa to keep her balance. Instead, she caught Kaitlynn's arm.

"Ana! Are you okay?" Kaitlynn's green eyes were wide. She had the concerned act down pat, but Ariana could see right through it.

Ariana snatched her hand back. The idea that Brigit's murderer had listened in on their last words to Brigit made her skin crawl.

"I'm fine," Ariana said through her teeth.

Her friends had moved off to the side at the bottom of the stairs, where they watched the procession of mourners approach Brigit's memorial. Ariana walked over to join them and, of course, Kaitlynn followed. As they huddled into a group, a few more familiar faces from their exclusive dorm, Privilege House, approached the altar. April Corrigan, the editor of the literary magazine, was followed by Tahira Al Mahmood and her boyfriend Rob Mellon. Then came Allison Rothaus, along with Christian Brooks, one of Palmer's crew

teammates, who was whispering with an angular boy with blond hair. Ariana had seen him around the dorm, always with a kind of placid, distant look in his eyes. He wore no coat over his suit, even though the night air held a distinct chill. As Ariana observed him, another breeze kicked up the skirt of her coat, bringing with it the crisp, musky scent of a fire burning in one of the school's ancient stone fireplaces. Maria took a deep breath and tilted her head back, looking up at the stars.

"God, Brigit would have loved this," she said.

Soomie let out a sound that was half sob, half laugh.

"Not her memorial service," Maria said, rolling her eyes and squeezing Soomie tighter. "This night . . . the decorations . . . the weather. She loved this time of year."

"Especially Halloween," Lexa said, pushing her hands into her pockets. "They didn't really do it up in Norway the way we do here. She lived for Halloween parties."

"She'd be so pissed to be missing yours," Maria said to Soomie.

Soomie sucked in a breath and produced a crumpled tissue from the pocket of her black coat. She pressed it under her nose, gathered herself, and shook her hair back.

"Actually, I think I'm gonna cancel it," she said.

"What?" Lexa said automatically.

Soomie's dark eyes flashed. "Well, let's see. A) Brigit and I were going to dress up together and every time I think about that it makes me bawl, B) I can't even wrap my brain around the idea of digging through the decorations, half of which Brigit shopped for with me, and C) I can't even dress myself right now, let alone decide whether

or not we should serve spider eggs this year! So I don't think that I'm really equipped to throw a party."

"I'm sorry, Soomie. I didn't mean . . ." Lexa's eyes brimmed with tears. "It was just a reaction. I . . ."

Lexa trailed off and Ariana looped her arm around Lexa, holding her close. The group fell silent. The guys eyed each other and surreptitiously edged away, leaving the five girls to themselves.

"Um, well . . . I can at least help with the last one, Soomie," Kaitlynn said. "I do *not* think anyone should be serving spider eggs. Ever."

Soomie, Lexa, and Maria exchanged a look, then laughed. Even Ariana smiled.

"They're not actual spider eggs," Maria explained, tucking her dark hair behind her ear. "Just deviled eggs and veggies constructed to look like spiders."

"I don't know, you guys," Soomie said, looking at her battered black flats, worn over dark blue tights.

"We'll hire someone to finish the planning," Maria said. "Seriously, Soom. Brigit would die if you cancelled Halloween."

Kaitlynn snorted at Maria's choice of words, but quickly turned her laughter into a coughing sob. Ariana's toes curled in her boots.

Control, Ariana. This is not the time.

But when? How? Over the past few weeks Ariana had done everything in her power to try to get rid of Kaitlynn, but Kaitlynn had overpowered her every time. She'd even managed to worm her way into Ariana's group of friends. And that one frustrating fact always remained—if Kaitlynn went down, Ariana would go down, too. She was trapped. Her star was

tied to Kaitlynn's. One wrong move and they would both be headed back to the Brenda T. Trumbull Correctional Facility for Women.

"Hey, Lexa . . . is that your dad?" Maria said, squinting into the darkness.

Lexa glanced at the chapel stairs. A tall gentleman with salt-and-pepper hair approached Brigit's picture and bowed his head. As he closed his eyes in prayer, a guy in a black trench snapped his picture. A young Asian woman with short black hair and a staid gray suit stood off to the side, surveying the crowd.

"Yep. That's the senator," Lexa said.

The man walked right over to Lexa, the cameraman racing after him. Ariana saw a few people in the crowd take notice, pointing or whispering behind their hands.

"Lexa, honey, I'm so sorry for your loss," the senator said, enveloping Lexa in a tight but somehow formal hug. The camera flashed as a couple dozen shots were clicked off. Lexa quickly released her father and backed away.

"Thanks, Dad," Lexa said, avoiding eye contact with him. "You know Maria and Soomie. And this is Ana Covington and Lillian Oswald."

"Nice to meet you, Senator," Ariana said, shaking his hand.

"Hello, sir," Kaitlynn said. Neither girl missed a beat at the sound of their assumed names.

"Girls." His expression was grim.

"And this is Keiko Ogaswara. She's the right-hand woman for my family," Lexa said with a warm smile. She didn't acknowledge the photographer.

“Nice to meet you,” Keiko said. Then she turned and hugged Lexa. “How are you doing? Is there anything you need?”

Lexa shook her head and hugged the woman tightly. “I’ll be all right.”

A pair of middle-aged men hovered a few yards off, as if waiting to speak to the senator. Meanwhile, the long line of mourners continued to edge forward, their mingled conversation an ever-present hum.

The senator cleared his throat. “I have to be on a plane to Boston in an hour. But I’ll see you when I get back?”

“Of course,” Lexa said with a forced smile. “Thanks for coming.”

“You know I’m always here for you,” he said. Then, after another stiff, awkward hug and a few more flash pops, he was gone. Keiko scurried off after her boss, but turned around briefly and touched her fingers to her lips in a goodbye for Lexa. The two men who were lying in wait quickly fell into step with the senator as well.

Maria turned to Lexa, her hands in her pockets. “Since when does your dad crash funerals?”

“Since my parents are living in separate houses and his family-values supporters are freaking out.” Lexa rolled her eyes. “He’s all about his image right now. Thus the photographer. I’m sure those pictures will be in the *Boston Globe* tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry,” Kaitlynn said.

Soomie rubbed Lexa’s back. “I’m sure Brigit’s laughing about it right now—her memorial service being turned into a photo-op.”

Lexa sighed sadly, looking down at the green bangle bracelet she wore on her right wrist.

Ariana looked down at her own bracelet—just like Lexa’s, but in red. Soomie had one as well, in blue, Maria in orange, and Kaitlynn—much to Ariana’s revulsion—wore a purple one. The colorful set of bracelets had been Brigit’s favorite accessory. So when Brigit’s maid had come to take her things home, Lexa had asked if it would be all right for her and her friends to have the bracelets to remember her by.

“Life is so insane,” Kaitlynn mused, looking down at her bracelet as well. “Just a week ago, Brigit was wearing these . . . alive and well. . . .”

Ariana bit down on her tongue so hard she tasted blood. Kaitlynn took a deep breath and looked around at the group. Her eyes were full of bittersweet nostalgia. Fake. All of it fake.

“I think she’d be happy to know that we’re all going to carry a piece of her with us . . . forever.”

As the other girls nodded and sighed, Ariana grabbed her forearm and dug her fingers into the sleeve of her coat, trying to breathe.

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

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

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

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

It was the only way she could keep herself from reaching out and strangling Kaitlynn Nottingham right then and there.

All in good time, Ariana, she told herself. You’ll figure out a way. You always do. She looked up at Brigit’s photo one last time and clenched her jaw. I’m going to make this right, Brigit. I promise. I’m going to do whatever it takes to make this right.

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