Invitation Only

Kate Brian

DEAR REED

"Ugh! I just cannot take this sweater one more second," London Simmons said, pulling a creamy white cashmere sweater over her head and tossing it at her silver garbage can. Her dark brown hair grazed her bare back, falling into perfect waves.

"London! You cannot just throw away cashmere," her roommate, Vienna Clark, replied.

London and Vienna, or "the Twin Cities," as the rest of Billings called them, were two very buxom, very big-haired socialites who had apparently been friends forever. They had summoned me to their room the moment I had gotten back from dinner because they needed some help "feng shui-ing," as London had put it, which actually meant they wanted me to organize their shoes by color, then by heel height. At the moment, I was on the floor, doing exactly that.

"At least donate it or something," Vienna suggested.

London, who was admiring her double-D's in the mirror, turned to look at me.

"Sorry," she said, plucking the sweater out of the can. "Did you want this?"

Her brown eyes were completely innocent. She blinked, waiting for my excited reply.

"Uh, no thanks," I said flatly.

"Not to her! To the needy!" Vienna said, rolling her eyes as she picked up her nail file and walked over. "Don't mind her, Glass-licker," she told me, pulling the sweater out of London's fingers. "The skinnier she gets, the dumber she gets."

I smirked.

"Omigosh! You're just jealous!" London said, swiping at Vienna.

They both settled back on their beds again to continue their primping rituals. I yanked another pair of red shoes out of the back of the closet and lined them up with all the other red shoes, comparing heel heights. I was almost done. Then I could finally, finally get back to my room and shower.

"I saw Walt Whittaker on campus today," London said casually.

Instantly, all the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. Somehow I had managed to avoid Whit all day. Every time he saw me he blushed and looked away. Apparently he was just as embarrassed by our encounter as I was. He'd spent most of our

Copyright © 2006 by Alloy Entertainment and Kieran Viola
Published by Simon & Schuster Children's Books

mealtimes chatting with professors over at their tables, something I'd never seen a single student do before, and outside the caf I hadn't seen him at all. But did the Twin Cities know that we had hooked up?

"V, I am so going to make him mine."

Apparently not.

Vienna snorted a laugh. "Please. Every other girl on this campus is gonna be after Whittaker in the next couple of weeks."

Wha-huh? Why?

"So? You don't think I can get him?" London asked incredulously.

"You've got as good a shot as anyone else," Vienna replied. "But no one knows what goes on inside that thick head. Personally, I've always thought he was gay."

I stifled a laugh and shoved the last pair of red shoes into place. If he was gay it would certainly account for his lack of skills in the feeling-up department.

"Just because he's gay doesn't mean I can't use him," London said.

Then they both laughed. I pushed myself up and slapped my hands on my apron. Part of me was dying to know what London wanted to use Whit for. Money? Doubtful. Everyone around here had more than they knew what to do with. But an even bigger part of me was dying to get the hell out of there. Plus I had a feeling they wouldn't tell me anyway.

"All done," I said.

"You're excused," London said dismissively.

I shot her a look of death that she didn't even notice, then turned and walked out. I practically ran down the dimly lit hall to my room, blowing by all the black-and-white framed photos of Billings "Through the Ages." At some point I had appreciated the beautiful touches of Billings, the gleaming woodwork, the thick carpeting, the bronze wall sconces, the French windows at either end of each hallway. But now all I saw was more stuff to clean, more to scrub, more to wax. I couldn't get back to my room and away from it all fast enough. My hand was on the doorknob when I heard someone enter the hall behind me.

"Miss Brennan."

I stopped and closed my eyes. So close.

Mrs. Lattimer, the middle-aged house mother of Billings House, approached me at a broken pace, her stride hindered by her skinny pencil skirt. Her dark hair was pulled back in a bun and her white shirt was, as always, buttoned all the way up, with three strands of pearls sitting on top. Mrs. Lattimer was skinny and pointy; her skin was rough as leather. She was never seen without a thick layer of eyeliner and mascara, as if she thought drawing attention to her watery eyes would cause the average

Copyright © 2006 by Alloy Entertainment and Kieran Viola
Published by Simon & Schuster Children's Books

person to miss the rather large birthmark on her chin. I had met her on my first night at Billings and she had looked me over as if confused by my very existence. I had avoided her ever since.

"Miss Brennan, I understand that you made all the beds this morning," she said, her craggly hands clasped in front of her.

Wait a minute. She knew about that?

"You somehow, however, overlooked my own," she said, lifting her chin. "I would appreciate it if you afforded me the same courtesy you have the other women of this dorm."

She was kidding. She had to be kidding. Not only did she know about this hazing ritual, but she condoned it? She wanted in on it?

"Do I make myself clear?" she asked.

"Uh...sure," I said.

"Good," she said with a nod. We both stood there for a long moment. "Well. Go about your business," she said, shooing me with her hand.

"Right. Okay."

I shoved the door open, closed it behind me, and leaned back against it, wishing there was a lock. A bolt. Some kind of alarm system that could alert me to approaching heiresses. I couldn't believe our house mother was in on this. As if I didn't have enough to do already, enough to worry about.

Taking a deep breath, I sank down a bit, unable to move another muscle. My nerves were fried. All day I had been waiting for my classroom doors to open, waiting to be called to Hell Hall to talk to the police. I was completely unable to concentrate and had managed to shred no fewer than ten sheets of loose-leaf into tiny squares. But nothing had happened. The day had ended without a single interruption and now a rumor was floating around that the police were starting with the senior class and working their way down, that they might not even get to us lowly sophomores until late in the week.

Personally, I wanted to get it over with. I felt like my blood had been replaced with pure caffeine. Why didn't they at least come get me? Hadn't the crack investigators found out yet that Thomas had a girlfriend?

I pushed away from the door and dropped down on my bed, looking blankly around my new room. My new room. In all the insanity I'd had yet to have the time to fully appreciate the space. It was at least three times bigger than my old room in Bradwell, with a huge arched window overlooking the quad. My desk was immense, with a built-in bulletin board and study lamp, and the double dresser near the wall actually dwarfed the smallish bed. It was also only half full and completely devoid of pictures, jewelry boxes, and knickknacks, unlike every other dresser in this place -- which, by the way, were that much more difficult to dust and polish.

Copyright © 2006 by Alloy Entertainment and Kieran Viola
Published by Simon & Schuster Children's Books

Yes, my side of the room was pathetically bare compared to Natasha's, which was replete with posters hung at exact right angles, perfectly organized books and papers, a clear plastic tackle-style box keeping each piece of her incredibly expensive jewelry separate from all the others. But it was home. My home in Billings. I had to remember that. I was here. And all the chores they could throw at me were worth it.

I think.

Finally I shoved myself away from the wall and trudged over to my desk. Some of my books were still in a crate on the floor from when the Billings Girls had gathered them and brought them over. Might as well unpack now while I still had a sliver of energy left in me. I picked up a few of my extra history tomes, which had been assigned to me the first day of school, and lifted them onto the shelf above the desk. The middle one slipped out and fell with a thud to the floor, and try as I might to grab the others, they all slipped and slid and followed, one landing right on my toes.

"Dammit," I said under my breath, dropping to my knees.

I leaned my back into the side of my bed and sighed as several bones cracked and a few muscles uncoiled. Wow, was it nice to be sitting. Maybe the unpacking could wait.

Using a minimal amount of effort, I slid a couple of the books toward me and stacked them in my lap. In doing so, I uncovered a small piece of white paper, folded up tightly, sitting on the hardwood floor. Huh. Where had that come from?

I picked it up and turned it over in my hand. Unfamiliar. Had it fallen out of one of my books? They had all been taken out of the library the first week of school. Maybe it was an old love letter someone had left in there. Intrigued, I unfolded the page. My eye went directly to the signature. The note was computer printed but signed in ink.

By Thomas.

"What?" I said out loud.

Instantly my pulse started to pound in my ears. In my fingertips. In my eyes. I pulled my knees up to my chest, scattering the books to the floor, and read, the page trembling in my hands.

Dear Reed,

I'm leaving tonight. I don't know what else to do. A friend of mine knows of this holistic treatment thing where they don't require parental permission. I'm not going to tell you where it is, because I don't want you or anyone else trying to find me. I want to get better. And I don't think I can do that if I stay in touch with the people in my life.

Please don't be mad. It's better for you this way. You're too good for me. I'm shit for you. You know I am. I love you. I do. But you deserve better than me. So much better.

Copyright © 2006 by Alloy Entertainment and Kieran Viola
Published by Simon & Schuster Children's Books

I just need some time. Some time on my own, away from my parents and all the insanity. You understand. I know you do. You know me better than anyone.

I love you so much, Reed. And I'll miss you. More than you'll ever know.

Love,

Thomas

Relief flooded through me so quickly and with such force that my eyes blurred with tears. I wiped them away, and read the note again. And again. Thomas was all right. He was fine! He wasn't lying in a pool of his own vomit somewhere; he had gone to get help. He was out there trying to get well. He was, in fact, better than he'd ever been.

I took a deep, shaky breath and read the note one more time. Suddenly a new emotion poisoned the relief, causing the muscles in my neck to tense. Thomas had broken up with me. In a note. After I'd promised to help him in any way I could, he'd taken off without so much as a good-bye and hidden a breakup note in my stuff. What kind of person did that?

Even worse, how could he leave a note in some book and just trust I would find it? I might have returned this thing to the library and never seen the note that was tucked away inside. I might have just gone on worrying forever. He could have just called. Just a five-second call and he could have told me the same thing. Did he not realize the torture he'd put me through?

"Asshole," I groaned, mashing the paper into a ball and throwing it across the room. Who the hell did he think he was, just deciding we were over? Not letting me have a say in anything. Disappearing and making all of us worry. The boy needed help. Serious, professional help.

At least he was getting it.

Two seconds after tossing the note away, I got up and grabbed it from the floor. It wasn't as if I could leave it around for Natasha to find. I flattened it out on my desk and read it one more time.

That was when a new, even more torturous thought occurred to me.

The police. Should I tell the police about this note? Show it to them? Clearly Thomas didn't want me to. He said right there that he was leaving to get away from the insanity -- from his parents -- and if I told, they would track him down and he would never get the time he needed to get better. But not showing the cops would be like lying. It would be withholding evidence. I could get in serious, serious trouble.

God, I just wished I could talk to him. See him. Hold him. Talk some sense into him. Maybe if I could talk to him I could get him to take responsibility for what he had done. Didn't he realize how much trouble he had caused? Was he that scared of his parents that he thought this was the only way?

Copyright © 2006 by Alloy Entertainment and Kieran Viola
Published by Simon & Schuster Children's Books

I imagined Thomas out there somewhere, alone, trying to deal with his issues, trying to make himself well, and my heart swelled so fast I thought it might pop. I was angry at him, yes, but I also missed him. I also worried about him. I just wished that I could see him and tell him that everything was going to be okay.

And then, yeah, maybe smack him upside the head for doing this to me.

It really is amazing, how closely hate and love are aligned.

"Screw this," I said. I couldn't think about it now. I was too tired. Too emotional. Too inclined to violence. I folded the note, stuffed it in the very back of my desk drawer, and slammed it closed.

Okay. Deep breath. At least I knew Thomas was all right now. At least I knew he was out there somewhere. And if he had any sort of conscience, he'd have to call me eventually. This note was not enough. We needed to talk. Big time.

MORAL CENTER

After a long shower, and an equally long think, I felt monumentally better. Thomas's note, while it had opened up a huge can of worms, had actually absolved me from a couple of things I had been stressing over. First, he had broken up with me days ago, which technically meant that what I had done in the woods with Whittaker wasn't cheating, which made me feel much better. Second, he was gone from school indefinitely, which meant that I wouldn't have to worry about keeping him and the Billings Girls in separate corners. I wouldn't have to worry about that anyway, since he had broken up with me.

Yes. I could be very practical about this. Level-headed Reed. That was going to be my new, internal nickname.

That was part one of the plan. Part two of the plan was finding out more about this Legacy thing and getting my ass there so that I could track down Thomas, yell at him for about an hour, and then give him a chance to explain. A very brief chance. After all, Dash had said Thomas would be there no matter what. That Thomas was the Legacy. If that was the case, I was sure he wasn't going to let a little holistic treatment get in his way.

I mean, okay, Thomas wasn't good for me. He was probably right about that. Technically, after the first week or so of total bliss, all he'd caused me was confusion, pain, and embarrassment. But that bliss part? That had been really good. So good that I had slept with him. And I couldn't just forget about that. He couldn't just take my virginity and slink off into the night leaving nothing but a note. What we had done meant a lot to me, and Thomas needed to know that. He needed to know that I wasn't just going to forget him. That I would never forget him, even if we weren't ever going to be together again. I cared about him. And that was that.

Copyright © 2006 by Alloy Entertainment and Kieran Viola
Published by Simon & Schuster Children's Books

I slipped into my terry-cloth robe and cinched it, then grabbed a towel and started rubbing at my hair hard, as if I could rub out all the confusion as well. My head was tipped forward as I walked out of the steamy bathroom, so I didn't see Natasha standing there until I had walked right into her.

"Oh! God! Sorry," I said, jumping back. My free hand flew to my chest and I laughed. "You scared the crap outta me."

Natasha didn't crack a smile. She didn't move. Her stare had "doom" written all over it.

"What?" I said nervously. Had she found the note? Oh, God, had she somehow found the note?

"We need to talk," she said gravely.

"Okay," I said, trying to egg her into a smile with my own. No such luck.

She walked over to her laptop and flipped it open. "Sit," she said, pulling out her desk chair for me.

I shot her a quizzical look but did as I was told. "What're we doing?"

"Just a little slide show," Natasha told me.

She leaned over me, her breast grazing my shoulder and making me flush with embarrassment, and clicked open a window on her computer. What I saw on the screen at first made no sense to me. It was a photograph of what looked like a tongue. A very up-close shot of a tongue being stuck out at the camera. Then suddenly the view went wide and my heart dropped.

It was a tongue. My tongue. It was me. And my eyes were half-closed. And I was laughing.

"When did you take this?" I asked, glancing over my shoulder.

"Just watch," she said.

So I did. The next picture featured me chugging a beer in the woods. The next, me with my hands on Whittaker's chest. Me and Whittaker walking away from the clearing together. Me with my arms around Whittaker, my mouth hanging open sloppily, a flask of liquor in my hand. Whittaker with his mouth pressed to mine as I held his face with my hands. Then Whittaker's hand on my breast.

Dread and shame overwhelmed me as I stared at my own face. My head was tipped back and it looked like I was moaning in pleasure, when in fact I had been about to throw up. It made me look like a slut, like a drunken whore who had lured some guy out to the woods.

"Why...why are you showing these to me?" I asked, as the slideshow started up all over again. I turned my face away, from her, from the screen, from the truth of what I'd done.

Copyright © 2006 by Alloy Entertainment and Kieran Viola
Published by Simon & Schuster Children's Books

"Because I want you to understand how very serious I am about what I am about to propose," Natasha said. She grabbed the chair and spun it around on its wheels so that I had to face her. Bracing her hands on its arms, she leaned forward and looked me dead in the eye. "You do know what these pictures mean, right? You do realize that if I choose to do so, I can get you booted out of here so fast your head will spin."

Tears prickled at the corners of my eyes. She was right, of course. She had photographic evidence of me breaking some very serious school rules. Even worse, it looked as if Whittaker and I had done it all alone. Even though there had been close to a dozen other people in the woods that night, not a single one of them appeared in these pictures.

"Why are you doing this?"

What was wrong with me? I had believed her when she told me she wanted to be my friend. When had I become so gullible?

"Because there's something I need you to do for me," she said, standing up straight.

"What?" I was already her indentured servant. Did we need twisted espionage in our relationship?

"Noelle Lange and her friends are responsible for getting Leanne kicked out of school," Natasha said. "They set her up."

Her accusation did not surprise me. On the day that Natasha's roommate, Leanne Shore, had been escorted from school grounds after being found guilty of breaking the Easton honor code by cheating, Natasha had accused Noelle of having had something to do with it. I had been there, in the quad, when she had gotten right up in Noelle's face. But I had thought Natasha was basically insane.

"How...how do you know?" I asked.

"I just know," Natasha said. "The problem is, I have no proof. That's where you come in."

Oh, God, no. No, no, no. Please tell me she isn't going to make me --

"Now that you're our new scrub girl, you have unlimited access to their rooms," Natasha said. "I want you to find the evidence I need. I want you to go through everything they own. They have to have kept something. They're big on trophies. Find me what I need to nail their asses to the wall."

I stared up at her, my hair dripping cold as ice down my neck. "I...I can't do that," I said.

I would lose everything. They would find out and they would kick me out of Billings. They would never speak to me again. Everything I had worked for would be gone in an instant.

Plus Noelle would kill me. There was always that.

Copyright © 2006 by Alloy Entertainment and Kieran Viola
Published by Simon & Schuster Children's Books

"Oh, but you can," she said with a smirk. "Unless you want that e-mailed to the dean and the board and every single student and teacher at this school."

I glanced up at the screen again. Whittaker's tongue was down my throat. I tasted bile. I tried to swallow but couldn't. Tears stung my eyes all over again. These pictures represented the end of me. The end of my life, my future. Didn't she see that?

"I thought we were friends," I said blankly. Maybe guilt would work. I was grasping at straws.

"Aw! That's so sweet!" Natasha trilled. "So, do we have an understanding?"

I stared at her, hard. There wasn't a trace of regret or uncertainty in her eyes. This was so wrong. Natasha was supposed to be the moral center of Easton. At least, that was what Noelle had once called her, and Natasha had seemed proud of the moniker. Now here she was taking secret soft-core porn shots of her supposed friends and blackmailing people with them. Where was the morality in that?

Of course, she was also president of the Young Republicans club. From everything I'd read and heard my entire life, this was a maneuver of which any politician would be proud.

"Reed? I asked you a question."

My hands were trembling. I couldn't do this. Not after everything Noelle had done for me. Not with everything she could take away.

But Natasha could take away more. And I was looking at the proof of that.

The situation was a perfect lose-lose.

"Yeah. We have an understanding," I said.

"Good. Now get to bed," Natasha told me, mercifully shutting down the slide show. "You've got a lot of work ahead of you."

Copyright © 2006 by Alloy Entertainment and Kieran Viola
Published by Simon & Schuster Children's Books