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A DEAL

I sat in the front row of folding chairs in the Great Room of Mitchell Hall and stared at the gray, unfeeling faces that hovered over the long table before me. The gray faces that would decide my fate. Our fate.

The fate of Billings House.

They were all against us. I could feel it, right in the pit of my gut—this torturous sensation like some large rodent was kicking in my stomach, gnawing greedily at my heart and lungs. And as if the vociferous organ-muncher wasn't enough, I was also in pain. Real pain. My lungs were raw from inhaling tons of smoke in the underground tunnel outside Gwendolyn Hall, the remnants of the charred building still billowing plumes into the air at the edge of Easton Academy's campus. My face hurt as if it had been repeatedly and mercilessly slapped. My head was being intermittently pierced by an invisible ice pick. My eyes were so dry that every time I blinked, my lids stuck to them for one brief, excruciating moment before popping wide open again. I tried not to close them, but that just made them drier.

This was my punishment, my penance for last night. For sneaking out and going to the Legacy instead of staying home with Josh. For downing all those frothy pink drinks. For hooking up with my best friend's boyfriend. For breaking the heart of the

guy I loved. The only guy I had ever truly loved.

Josh was behind me somewhere in the expectant crowd. The whole school had gathered to hear what would become of Billings. The anti-cipation in the air was so thick I could feel its warmth on my neck.

Or maybe that was just Constance Talbot's panicked breathing. Either way, my heart started to pound as Headmaster Cromwell finished listing the grievances against Billings. I had already lost Josh. I couldn't lose Billings. Not now. Billings House was my home. I needed my home.

"These infractions are grievous," Headmaster Cromwell said. His white hair was perfectly coiffed, his square jaw as imperious as ever, but under the harsh fluorescents I could see every crag in his face, every wrinkle. He lifted a page of stark white paper and read from it. "Hazing, initiation ceremonies, fighting, ignoring curfew on several occasions—"

"But that wasn't us. That was all Cheyenne," London Simmons complained under her breath, as if she and most of the rest of my friends hadn't gone right along with all of it. London sat a few seats to my left, next to Vienna Clark, to whom she was always attached at the hip. They wore matching black suits as if they were attending a funeral. Although no decent person would ever show that much cleavage at a funeral.

"Ignoring my strict mandate to remain on campus the night of -Sunday, October thirty-first," Cromwell continued. "And, most egregious, destruction of school property." He laid the paper down and laced his fingers together on top of it. "Destruction of one of the oldest buildings on this campus," he reiterated, looking me dead in the eye.

Me. Of course me. President of Billings. Two days ago, most

peo-ple in this room would have said that as president of the most sought-after dorm on campus, I was the most blessed of the blessed. Today I was the most loathed of the loathed. It wasn't like I'd pulled a crazy Mrs. Rochester and run through Gwendolyn with a lit torch, cackling as I burned the place to the ground. The fire had been a result of -London and Vienna's toking tour of Easton. Someone had left a burning joint behind, and it hadn't been me. But even as my cheeks stung at the unfairness of being singled out, I realized the situation was dire. When our crimes were compiled that way, they sounded really, really awful.

"Like we were the only ones at Gwendolyn," Noelle Lange said under her breath. For all her partying the night before, Noelle looked as perfect as ever in a crisp white shirt and gray wide-leg pants, her long brown hair pulled back in a tortoiseshell headband. In jeans and a black cashmere sweater she had given me a few weeks back, I felt troll-like in her presence. I wriggled back in my seat and endeavored to sit up straight. Endeavored to meet Cromwell's cool stare with my own.

"Headmaster Cromwell?" London blurted, standing up in her four-inch heels. "I just want to point out that we weren't the only ones there last night," she said, glancing at Noelle for backup. "I mean, the guys were there too, and—"

"I don't believe I opened the floor to comments, Miss Simmons," Headmaster Cromwell said, leaning so close to his microphone that his voice blasted through the suspended corner

speakers like the voice of God. London let out a yip of surprise and sat right back down.

"Now, where was I?"

As Cromwell sifted through his papers, Constance leaned in close to my ear from behind. "Whit talked to his grandmother, and she said they're going to deal with the other students individually, but since our whole dorm was there, they're viewing it as an overarching house problem and they're going to, quote, 'deal with Billings accordingly.'"

Whit was Walt Whittaker, Constance's older boyfriend, whose grandmother sat on the Easton board, which meant she was one of the gray faces judging us. But right then the diminutive old woman looked like she was starting to doze off at the far end of the table. My life was on the line and she was catnapping. Real nice. Meanwhile, Susan Llewelyn, the Billings alumna who sat on the board—the woman who had sent us to the secret passage in Gwendolyn Hall—was nowhere to be found. Her seat at the table was empty.

"I am S.N.S.," Portia Ahronian said, rolling her big green eyes. "So not surprised," she clarified. "The Crom has been trying to find a way to get rid of us from D-one. He may be acting all stern and appalled, but you know he's L.O.T.I."

Headmaster Cromwell cleared his throat loudly.

"Well, with a list of infractions this long, a vote seems superfluous," Cromwell said. "But the school bylaws dictate that we must vote. So, the directive on the table is this: Shall the board of directors hereby dissolve Billings House and redistribute its members throughout the remaining girls' dormitories? Yay or nay? All those in favor—"

My pulse pounded in my temples, my eyes, my throat. They

were going to do it. They were going to take our home away.

"This isn't happening," Rose Sakowitz mumbled.

"They can't close Billings. I just got in," Lorna Gross whined.

Sabine DuLac leaned forward, grasping the back of my chair. "Do something," she whispered urgently. "Reed, you have to do something."

"Wait!" I was on my feet. My voice reverberated off the high ceiling of the Great Room, the largest gathering space on campus aside from the cafeteria and the chapel. Dead silence enveloped the room as everyone gaped at me. Dead silence as hundreds of faces blurred before my heavy, hungover eyes.

"Yes, Miss Brennan?" Headmaster Cromwell said, his upper lip curled in distaste.

At least he hadn't used his godlike voice to cut me down too. That was something. Unfortunately, I had no idea what I was going to say next.

"This . . . this isn't fair," I stated, sounding unresolved, even to myself. My querulous words were met with snickers around the room. I hadn't meant to whine, but whine I had. I took a deep breath and tried again. "With all due respect, Headmaster Cromwell, you haven't given us a chance," I said, trying for a more authoritative tone.

I saw a few people sit forward in their seats, intrigued, including towheaded freshman Amberly Carmichael and her friends, who had a vested interest in keeping Billings open. Noelle and I had, after all, promised that they would get in to the house their junior year if they caused a diversion so we could sneak off campus the night before, and they had come through. From what I'd heard, they had staged the most convincing and violent catfight in the history of Easton, drawing se-

curity personnel and Headmaster Cromwell to their dorm, right when we needed them to.

"Haven't I?" Cromwell sniffed and looked down at his all-important papers. "I believe you and your housemates have had plenty of chances."

His dismissive attitude shot right under my skin, and I felt a surge of adrenaline take over.

"No, sir, we have not," I replied firmly, earning a few surprised murmurs from my peers. They couldn't believe I was standing up to Cromwell like this. Honestly, neither could I, but I kept going. "I'm the first to admit that things at Billings have been pretty terrible this year. But in case you've forgotten, one of our best friends just died. And yeah, okay, maybe we're having a hard time dealing with that right now, but Billings has been an asset to this school in the past and it will be again. You just have to give us a chance to prove it."

My friends in the front two rows all sat up a bit straighter, held their heads a bit higher. A flutter of pride tickled my chest. My speech was working. On them, at least.

"And how, exactly, are you going to do that?" Headmaster Cromwell asked, leaning his weight on his forearms as he eyed me expectantly.

Oh. Right. I should have had a "how" ready here. I turned to look at the Billings Girls, widening my eyes in desperation and praying one of them had an answer. Noelle cleared her throat and brought her hand down to her side where she surreptitiously rubbed her fingers together.

Money. Of course. Money talked around here. Louder than just about anything else. But how much money? I knew what a

lot of cash was to me—a scholarship student from a lower-middle-class family with one car and two mortgages—but how many zeros did I need to add to impress people who paid for plastic surgery for their dogs and had personal chefs to toast their French bread?

"We'll hold a fund-raiser," I announced. "Billings will pledge to raise . . . one million dollars for Easton."

Gasps and whispered filled the room.

"If we succeed, Billings stays as is," I continued, on firmer footing now. "If we fail, you can do what you want with us."

Cromwell's sharp blue eyes narrowed. He covered his microphone with one hand and turned to whisper to the gentleman next to him. Soon the whole board was playing a game of telephone, each whispering to the next and on down the line. Finally, their comments made it back to Cromwell and he cleared his throat. I held my breath. Everyone in the room held their breath.

Slowly, Cromwell leaned toward the microphone. It was impossible to read his expression. Possibly because he had only one—annoyed.

Please. Please don't take this away from me. Not now.

"Make it five million, Miss Brennan," he said with a small but devilish smile, "and you have a deal."

"Yes!" someone behind me cheered. The room erupted in conversation and squeaking chairs, but all I could see was that number. Five million. A huge number. An impossible number.

"We can do that, no problem," Vienna said, clapping her hands happily.

"Silence!" Headmaster Cromwell's voice boomed through the speakers once more.

He got his silence.

"There is one stipulation," he said, looking at the Billings section. "This five million dollars must be *raised,* not gleaned from your trust funds or borrowed from your parents. You must actually raise it, and you must raise it in one month's time. I will also be contacting the Billings alumni and making it clear to them that they are not to help you with the preparations for whatever you conjure up. This fund-raiser will be planned by you and paid for by you, and any profit will be fairly earned. Is that understood?"

Suddenly, my friends were no longer cheering. I turned to look at them. They couldn't back out on me now. I'd gotten us a reprieve. I'd taken a stand. *Please don't make me look like an idiot now.*

Portia glanced at the Twin Cities. Vienna whispered something over her shoulder to Shelby Wordsworth. Rose bent in conversation with Tiffany Goulbourne and Astrid Chou. Everyone conferred while I stood there and waited. Finally, they all faced forward and Portia nodded confidently. I faced the board, looked Cromwell in the eye, and smiled.

"Done."

NEW FOCUS

"Reed, seriously, have you ever considered a career as a poli-

tician?" Tiffany asked as we emerged from Mitchell Hall into the crisp, cold New England air. The sky over Easton Academy was a shade of blue so bright it looked almost fake, and orange and yellow leaves chased one another across the cobblestone path in front of us. Tiffany wrapped her white coat closer to her tall body and flipped up the collar so that it grazed the smooth ebony skin of her cheeks. How could she look so perfect today, when I felt as if I had been run over repeatedly by a monster truck?

"Um, no," I replied.

"Well, maybe you should." Astrid nudged me with her elbow as the wind tossed her short dark hair. She wore a colorful plaid skirt over hot pink tights and purple shoes, her eye makeup colors chosen to match her lower half. "That was bloody brilliant."

"Amazing," Sabine agreed with sheer admiration in her eyes. "Headmaster Cromwell didn't see that coming at all."

"Agreed. If you pull this off, you will go down in history as the president who saved Billings," Shelby said. Her leather-gloved fingers moved swiftly over her iPhone's touch pad as she checked for texts. Shelby had a sophisticated air that made her seem like she was in her mid-twenties instead of her late teens. She wore a -double-breasted brown tweed coat; her blond hair hung in loose waves around her face; and she held her chin slightly up, as if her photo might be snapped at any moment.

"Yeah, or the last," Missy Thurber put in with a sniff of her wide nostrils. Her comment earned her a whack on the back of her blond head from Portia. "Ow! Was that necessary?"

"Neg the neg," Portia ordered, shoving her hands into the

pockets of her cropped fur jacket. “We need positive thinking from here on out, right, Reed?”

“Exactly,” I said with a nod. I decided right then and there that I was going to be Shelby’s version of a Billings president rather than Missy’s. From now on, I would focus all my energy on this fund-raiser and on saving Billings.

Besides, it wasn’t like I would have much else to do now that Josh had made it clear that we were over.

My heart constricted as fuzzy flashes of last night suddenly assaulted my brain. Dash McCafferty’s lips on mine. Josh’s face when he found us in that private tent. The way he’d practically spat in my face as he told me it was over. How could someone who supposedly loved me so much look at me that way? And how was my heart ever going to heal when every time I thought about Josh, it broke a little more?

“Are you all right?” Noelle asked me. “You just went all *visage blanc*.”

I blinked and tried to look normal. It wasn’t like I could confide in Noelle about what had happened. After all, she and Dash had gotten back together last night, and she had no clue that I’d gotten hori-zontal with him. Had no idea that this indiscretion was the cause of my breakup with Josh. All I had told her was that Josh had ended it out of nowhere. Big, big lie.

“I’m fine. Just an adrenaline crash,” I told her.

“Reed!” Amberly shouted, hustling over to me with her two ever-present lackeys at her sides. Her loose blond curls bounced around her angelic face and she wore a light pink coat with a white-and-pink plaid scarf over white thin-wale cords. As matchy-matchy as ever. “We just wanted to let you know that if you need any help with the fund-raiser—anything whatsoever—

we're here for you," she said, clasping my arm.

"Thanks," I said vaguely. "I'll keep that in mind."

I turned around to search the crowd for Josh. Maybe I'd focus on saving Billings after I talked to him. I had to talk to him. Had to try to explain. Try to make things right. Try . . . something.

Most of the student body had divided into klatches that now dotted the lawn around Mitchell Hall. Gage Coolidge, Trey Prescott, and some other guys from Ketlar Hall stood about ten feet away, huddled together against the cold, since guys were too cool for outerwear, but Josh wasn't with them. Then, from the corner of my eye, I spotted him. Alone. Head down. Skulking toward the edge of campus. Toward the Jonathan Arthur Montgomery Building, which housed the art studios, the *Chronicle* newspaper office, the literary magazine office, practice rooms for the choir and orchestra, and several other venues for artistic pursuits. The J.A.M. Building was one of Josh's two favorite spots on campus, the other being the art cemetery, where we used to rendezvous before he rendezvoused there with Cheyenne.

God, that seemed like ages ago. When Cheyenne was alive, when I had caught her trysting with my boyfriend, when I had almost lost him over her. A lot had happened this year. So much had changed. And it was only the first of November.

"Reed? Where are you going?" Noelle asked me as I turned away from my friends. "We have a lot to do if we're going to make this fund-raiser happen."

I paused. "I know. I just have something I have to take care of."

One step away and a dark blue sweater blocked my path. I

looked up. Hovering over me was an unreasonably tall guy with brown eyes and a preppy haircut that screamed Young Wall Street.

Weston Bright. West for short. Ketlar Hall. Senior. Lacrosse captain.

My brain recited these things, though why it knew them or cared, I had no idea.

“Reed, what you did in there . . . that was amazing,” West said, speaking the first words he’d ever spoken to me. He pushed his hand into the pocket of his gray slacks. His smile was genuine, affable. “How’d you do that? I think if I tried to stand up to Cromwell, I’d keel over drooling.”

“I don’t know,” I replied, glancing at Josh’s disappearing form. I really didn’t know. Considering everything I’d been through in the past twenty-four hours, I should have been curled up in a ball somewhere, babbling incoherently.

“Maybe we can get together sometime and you can float some theories,” West suggested. “I wouldn’t mind a few tips before my college interviews.”

I blinked at him. He was asking me out. This unusually tall person and his preppy hair were asking me out. The near corpse of my relationship with Josh was, I hoped, still revivable, and this guy was asking me out. How did he even know Josh and I had broken up? I had only told the Billings Girls. Was Josh spreading the word? Was he so psyched about his new-found freedom that he was shouting it from rooftops everywhere?

“Um, maybe. Can we talk about this later?”

“Sure. What’s your number? I’ll text you,” West said. He typed in my phone number and gave me a smile before saun-

tering off.

“Wow, Reed,” London said, sidling over to give me a hip-nudge. She looked West’s departing form up and down like he was a piece of meat and tossed her thick, artificially streaked hair over her shoulder. “Way to bounce back.”

“Are you kidding me?” I hissed at her. “I just broke up with Josh. I’m not just going to start dating.”

“Who said anything about dating?” London replied. “Just hook up with the guy. West is an excellent kisser,” she said, smiling at him over my shoulder.

I glanced back there as well.

“Ew,” I said, realizing that London knew from experience. “I have to go.”

There was only one guy I was interested in right now. The one fleeing the scene—my scene—as fast as his Dsquared sneakers would carry him.