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THE GOOD GIRL
DECEMBER OF JUNIOR YEAR

Ariana Osgood just wanted to go home.

She knew it was insane. She was, after all, standing at the edge of the ballroom at the Driscoll Hotel, playing witness to the most decadent party of the year. The party she had circled in red on her social calendar three months ago and had been looking forward to every day since. But now that she was at the Winter Ball, watching all of Easton Academy mingle and chat and dance, all she wanted to do was go back to Billings House and be with her friends. Her sisters. Inside Billings it was simple. Inside Billings she could just be.

Ariana reached up and touched her light blond hair, making sure for the fiftieth time that the chignon she'd worked so hard to achieve had held. How could she have forgotten how these events always put her on edge? Always made her feel hot and clenched and breathless. She was going to say something stupid. Or do something wrong. And everyone would see. Everyone would know.

Which was why she had spent the past fifteen minutes leaning against a grooved marble column on the outskirts of the room, just out of view of the table where her friends and boyfriend, Daniel Ryan, were sitting. Sooner or later they were going to notice her marathon bathroom trips and the current column-hugging, and she was going to have to rejoin their reveling. Better make these last few minutes of invisibility count.

Taking a deep breath, Ariana let the sounds of laughter and clinking silverware fade into the recesses of her mind and watched the scene around her unfold like a movie on mute. She committed every detail of the black and white marble room to memory as if her life depended on it. Noting details, cataloging a scene, always made her feel calm, in control.

There were her classmates, stiff and formal in their suits and dresses. The twelve-piece band singing pop versions of Christmas carols on the stage up front. The light December snow falling outside, the large flakes kissing the leaded windowpanes. The waxy mistletoe and the candlelit wreaths that—if she squinted her eyes just so—looked like explosions of gold.

But the curtains . . . well, those she had to remember down to the last filigreed stitch so she could report back to her mother about them. They were exquisite, all burgundy velvet with shimmering gold-thread fleurs-de-lis. Her mother, a New Orleans native, loved fleurs-de-lis. When Ariana was nine, her mother had given her a gorgeous gold fleur-de-lis necklace for Christmas. That had been Ariana's favorite Christmas. The last happy one she could remember.

The last one before her father started taking those extended business trips. Before her mother started to fade away. Ariana had never taken the antique necklace off, as if it could somehow tie her to those happier times.

"Whoops, sorry!" A drunk junior in a rumpled Betsey Johnson dress knocked into Ariana on the way to the bathroom, giggling and slurring and groping with her acne-scarred date.

With a blink, Ariana returned to her body, and the sounds of the ballroom rushed her ears at full volume. The band was playing "All I Want for Christmas," and a girl let out a shrill shriek as her boyfriend lifted her off her feet and spun her around. Ariana sighed and pushed away from the cool comfort of the column, giving her teeth a quick flick with her tongue to clear away any wayward lip gloss as she wove her way through the crowd.

As she slowly approached her table, Ariana took a mental picture of her friends. The Billings Girls. She loved to watch them from afar, study their mannerisms, note their tics and gestures and habits. More than anything, she loved when she caught them doing something gross or stupid when they thought no one was watching. Like picking their teeth, or adjusting their boobs in their dresses, or checking out cute-but-dorky Drake boys from across the room. She liked to make mental lists of their imperfections. It made her feel less imperfect herself.

Of course, finding imperfections among the Billings Girls was never easy. It took a practiced eye. They were, after all, Easton royalty. Which meant that Ariana was Easton royalty. She had been ever

since September, when she'd taken her place as a junior member of Easton's most elite dorm. Now the Billings Girls, the ones her mother had always talked about as if they were characters in a fairy tale, were her dorm mates. Her friends. Her sisters.

When Ariana was just a few feet away, she noticed that Isobel Bautista, a senior who had taken Ariana under her wing at the beginning of the year, was playing with her violet D&G heels under the table, letting them swing from her toes as she gazed around the ballroom. Suddenly the right one fell off and landed a few inches away from her foot. Ariana watched as Isobel scooched down in her chair as casually as possible to retrieve it. As she was fishing around with her toes, she brushed Noelle Lange's ankle, and Noelle whacked her boyfriend Dash McCafferty's arm.

"You're playing footsie with me? What are we, twelve?" Noelle joked.

"Wasn't me," Dash replied, flashing a killer smile. "But I'll play anytime you want."

Isobel finally shoved her foot into her shoe and sat up again, admitting to nothing, but the snapshot of normality soothed Ariana. She smiled and finally joined them.

"There you are," Noelle said, flipping her thick, dark mane of hair over her shoulder as Ariana slipped into her chair. Noelle was, as always, wearing her signature black—a sleek satin Adam & Eve dress that showed off all her curves. "I was beginning to think you'd nicked a bottle of Dash's contraband Cristal and gone streaking through the streets of Easton."

Noelle took a sip of champagne from her crystal flute—the

champagne Dash had paid off the waiters to serve their table in lieu of sparkling cider, since alcohol was prohibited at school functions—and then took a bite of a chocolate-covered strawberry. Noelle was Ariana's best friend at Easton. They balanced each other well. Noelle was more brazen and confident, where Ariana was more reserved and cautious. During their hazing period at Billings, Noelle had helped Ariana through more than one crisis of confidence, while Ariana had helped Noelle refrain from telling off the older sisters on more than one occasion. She was sure that neither of them would have made it through initiation without the other.

"Noelle, streaking is so gauche," Ariana admonished as she took a seat beside Daniel. She smoothed her white, layered Alberta Ferretti dress over her knees and wrapped her hands around the seat of her raw silk–covered chair. "I was just taking it all in. The social committee did an incredible job."

"I swear, if you start rhapsodizing about the engraving on the silverware, I *will* kill you." Noelle groaned and slipped a silver monogrammed flask from her beaded Marc Jacobs clutch.

"I think it's cute when you go all poetic," Daniel said, draping his arm across the back of Ariana's chair. Ariana looked up at his chiseled profile, his auburn hair, his ridiculously long lashes, and felt for the millionth time the triumph of having a boyfriend like him. They'd been a couple for more than a year, and she still marveled that he had chosen her over all the other girls at Easton. "And Noelle . . ." He tipped his champagne flute toward her. "If you kill my girlfriend, you can kiss Dash good-bye."

"It's Christmas. There will be no killing on my watch," Ariana said.

"Buzzkill." Noelle offered the flask to Dash, but he waved it off.

"I have an early day tomorrow," he said, checking his thick silver watch. He ran his hands through his wavy blond hair and blew out a sigh. "I have to be in Boston at six a.m. to meet my father."

"Six a.m.? You are a saint, Dash McCafferty," Paige Ryan said as Noelle handed her the flask instead.

Dash blushed, even with Noelle watching. Paige just had that kind of power over people. Her great-great-grandmother Jessica Billings had founded Billings House more than eighty years ago. Paige, with her auburn curls and glass green eyes, *was* Billings. The true leader. The girl who made even Noelle pause with uncertainty. She was also Daniel's twin sister.

"So what did I miss?" Ariana asked.

"About ten minutes of your boyfriend talking about your Christmas vacation plans. It was lethally boring—even worse than when you get into your Emily Dickinson moods." Noelle rolled her dark eyes. A black-vested waiter silently reached over her shoulder, clearing plates and neatly laying dessert forks over fresh napkins.

Daniel gave Ariana a quick kiss. "Vermont is going to rock," he said with a wink.

Ariana gave Daniel a tight smile, her heart suddenly leaden in her chest. She knew what that wink meant. She and Daniel had long ago decided that they would lose their virginity to each other on their one-year anniversary. But when said anniversary had rolled around

back in November, Ariana had chickened out. Of course, she hadn't let Daniel know she was scared. She had simply insisted that she was not about to lose her virginity in a dorm room. Daniel had been disappointed but understanding. The very next day he had invited her to spend the holidays with him and his family at some gorgeous ski lodge in Vermont, promising some serious *alone time.*

Ariana knew what that meant. It meant no more excuses.

The question was, why wasn't she excited about it? After all, Daniel was perfect. He won Firsts every semester, was captain of the lacrosse team and model-cute, and had already been accepted to Harvard early decision. But the thought of having sex with him made her feel as if she'd swallowed a herd of elephants. That couldn't be normal. Any girl would kill to be in her position, to have a boyfriend like Daniel. What was wrong with her? She studied her napkin—white, silk, Italian—until the feeling passed.

"Well, I'm jealous." Isobel adjusted the strap of her deep purple satin dress. "My parents are ditching me for Turks and Caicos. I'm campus-bound until Christmas."

"You can come to New York with me if you want," Noelle offered with a shrug. "My parents won't even notice you're there."

I wish I could take her up on that, Ariana thought, then immediately felt guilty. She picked one of the decorative red and gold–wrapped boxes off the table and ran the ribbons between her fingernails until they curled.

"Or you could come to Vermont with us," Paige said with a toss of her hair.

She was just passing the flask to Ariana when Thomas Pearson appeared out of nowhere and grabbed it from her fingers. He dropped into the empty chair between Ariana and Paige and took a swig.

"Good stuff," he said, clearing his long brown bangs away from his eyes with a casual flick of his head. "But then, you girls always have the good stuff, don't you?"

"Great. Now I'm going to have to have it sterilized," Noelle groused, leaning over the table to snatch the flask.

Thomas turned and smiled at Ariana, his deep blue eyes merry. She silently cursed her bad luck. Thomas had always made her uncomfortable. The way he thought he was better than everyone else. The way he constantly teased her. The fact that he was a loser drug dealer with no respect for anyone around him . . .

"Sterilized, get it?" he said to Ariana, his tone deadpan. He loosened his black tuxedo tie and slung one arm over the back of his chair. "Because I'm ridden with germs. She's hilarious."

Ariana shifted her gaze and inched away from Thomas and closer to Daniel, tucking her shoulder into the crook of his arm.

"Seriously, come to Vermont," Paige said to Isobel, ignoring Thomas as she always did. Even though he was Dash's best friend and came from one of New York's best families, Paige never gave him the time of day. "Save me from being the third wheel to the sappy couple over here," she added, gesturing at Ariana and Daniel with a strawberry.

"Aw, you're just bitter because Brady dumped you the second he got to Yale," Daniel teased his sister.

Paige's eyes flashed angrily. "Excuse me, I did not get dumped. *I* broke up with *him*."

Everyone glanced around the table. They all knew that Brady Flynn had booted Paige. Several Yale-bound Easton alums had witnessed the dumping and instantly texted their friends about it. But of course no one would contradict Paige—to her face, anyway.

"So what's the Lange family's Christmas protocol?" Isobel asked Noelle, deftly changing topics before Paige exploded. The last time Paige lost her temper, it had not been pretty. During chores one morning post-breakup she had reduced the normally tough Leanne Shore to tears, demanding she remake Paige's bed ten times until the hospital corners were at perfect ninety-degree angles. Afterward Leanne had spent an hour in the nurse's office with her inhaler, fighting off a panic attack.

Ariana was proud that she had never broken down like that during hazing. Not in public, anyway.

"The ballet, cocktails with my father's miserable excuse for an attorney and his overstuffed wife. The usual," Noelle said. "My parents will probably try to sneak in a little face time with the extracurriculars and write it off as Christmas shopping, meaning they have to buy me more presents. They get a little ass, I get a little Armani. It's a win-win."

Noelle talked about her parents' affairs like she was giving an oral report on the Industrial Revolution. As if there were nothing in the world that could have been more mundane. Ariana fingered one of her aquamarine drop earrings, envying how everything was so easy, so straightforward for her best friend.

"I can't imagine what that's like, worrying about when your parents are going to schedule in their 'face time' with their sloppy sides." Daniel leaned back as the waiter delivered coffee cups and bowls of sugar to the table. "That's gotta suck."

Ariana inhaled sharply. No one at this table needed a reminder about how happy and functional the Ryan family unit was. Noelle's dark eyes smoldered at the dig.

"Well, Daniel, not everyone can have the perfect family, perfect grades, and the perfect girlfriend," Thomas said wryly, teasing Ariana with his eyes.

"If we did, what would we tell our therapists about?" Dash joked.

"Or pop Xanax over," Thomas added with a short laugh.

"Like you need an excuse to pop anything," Noelle put in.

Thomas smiled. "Touché, Miss Lange." He snagged a sugar cube from the bowl and tossed it into his mouth. "What about you, Ariana. Popped anything lately?"

Prickly heat assaulted Ariana's skin.

"Dude," Daniel admonished, sitting forward to glare at Thomas.

"What?" Thomas feigned innocence with upturned palms.

Ariana forced herself to glance at Thomas. He was looking directly at her with his searing blue eyes.

Just then a camera flashed, illuminating the beveled edges of her glass with sparks of light. Ariana flinched.

"Jesus," Noelle snapped, waving her napkin in the direction of the flash. "Sergei, enough with the stalkerazzi act already. Find new muses."

Sergei Tretyakov stood just two feet from the table, a black Nikon

with a telephoto lens hanging from his neck. Sergei was a Latvian exchange student and an outsider at Easton. He had dark, sloping brows, coal black eyes, and a slightly crooked nose. He could have been quirkily attractive, but he was painfully shy and had a tendency to stare. Plus he always wore these old, dirty tennis shoes no matter what else he had on. He was even wearing them tonight, to a formal event. Ariana could tell a lot about a person from their choice of footwear, and Sergei's kicks screamed "street urchin." Still, she felt a certain reluctant affinity for him. She was, after all, a fellow observer.

"Just one more," he said softly in his lilting Eastern European accent.

This time, he pointed the camera directly at Ariana and snapped away. Ariana blushed at being singled out.

Daniel stood up, his chair scraping loudly against the marble floor. "Dude, did you just take a picture of my girlfriend?"

The table went silent and Ariana could feel Noelle's eyes on her. She stopped breathing.

Not again . . . not again . . . not again . . .

Ariana watched Sergei's face go ashen. He backed away slightly, his shoulders curled forward.

"I've taken everyone's picture tonight." Sergei was like a cowering puppy in the face of an irate owner. Ariana couldn't take it. Besides, the last thing she wanted was a scene like the one that had played out in the woods last summer. Not here. Not now.

"Daniel, it's fine. Don't worry about it," she said in a soothing voice.

But Daniel wasn't having it. "No, it's not fine." He fixed his eyes on Sergei and crossed his arms over his chest. "Do you think my girlfriend's pretty?"

Sergei blinked uncertainly. "Well . . . I . . . yes?" It came off like a question.

Daniel's cheek twitched. Several waiters brought out tartlets and crème brûlée on silver trays, filling the room with the scent of smoked apples and nutmeg.

"So what do you like best about my girlfriend? Her smile? Her hair?" Daniel's eyes gleamed. "Her cleavage?"

Thomas and Dash hid smirks behind their hands. Noelle and Paige stood up, rolling their eyes at the display of testosterone, and headed toward the bathroom. Isobel whipped out her Sidekick and started texting, probably alerting the other students in the room to the main event unfolding at table one.

"Daniel, stop," Ariana said quietly as Sergei stared at the floor.

"And do you take pictures of all the pretty girls?" Daniel asked, a condescending smile playing on his full lips. "Or is it just my girlfriend?"

"I think I'll go now," Sergei said, backing away from the table.

Ariana flinched as Daniel grabbed Sergei's arm. "Just a second, buddy."

With one quick motion, he lifted Sergei's camera over his head and started scrolling through the stored images. Sergei made a swipe for the camera, but Daniel held it out of reach.

"Oh, here's a picture of Ariana, and another and another. Isobel—

you're in here too. And that's a nice one of Natasha. Hmm. No guys in any of these. Interesting. You know, you're lucky I don't call the cops on you, pervert."

Thomas snickered quietly.

"That's enough," Ariana said firmly, her cheeks flushed and heart racing.

Daniel stared at her for a second, his eyes hard, angry, empty. Then his whole body went slack and he punched Sergei in the shoulder. "Kidding, man. I'm just giving you a hard time."

"So can I have my camera back then?" Sergei looked bewildered.

"A little later," Daniel said with a wink. "I think it's best if I keep it for now."

The band switched to a slow song and the air suddenly smelled like hazelnut coffee. Sergei held out his hand. "You can't just take my camera."

Daniel sat back down and cocked his head to the side. "Dude, you can't just take pictures of my girlfriend."

Sergei looked torn for a second as he stared longingly at his Nikon, then turned away. In his haste to leave he nearly knocked over a waitress refilling water glasses at a nearby table. She glared at him and sopped up the spill with a napkin.

"You shouldn't have done that." Ariana took a sip of champagne, hoping Isobel's message hadn't reached too many people. Hoping they hadn't noticed that her boyfriend had just senselessly humiliated the awkward exchange student.

Daniel held his hands up and laughed. "Hey, I was just messing

with the guy. Besides, he shouldn't being taking pictures of you. Not without asking, anyway. Guy has to learn a little respect." His voice turned serious, and he put his hand on her knee. It felt cold and heavy. Possessive. "You know I'd do anything for you, Ari. Anything. Don't forget that."

Ariana smiled tightly. "I won't."

Daniel's words should have sounded sweet and loving. But as Ariana caught a glimpse of Sergei across the room, looking naked and vulnerable without his camera, she couldn't help but hear them as a threat.