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opening extract from

Paradise Lost (A Private Novel)

written by

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published by

Simon & Schuster Ltd

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PARADISE LOST

A PRIVATE NOVEL



KATE BRIAN

SIMON AND SCHUSTER

REALITY

Not happening. This was not happening.

I walked down the hall of the ICU at Edward Billings Memorial Hospital, trying to look as if I belonged there. Holding my coat closed tightly over my now ridiculous-seeming gold minidress and trying to make the nurses and doctors believe I knew where I was going. But I didn't. I didn't know where I was going, or where I was, or how I'd gotten there. I had never navigated these sterile halls, never had to visit this cold, ominous place with its grim-faced orderlies and somber lighting. The one thing I knew was that this could not be happening.

In my mind's eye, all I could see was the blood. I had woken up on the floor of the solarium in Mitchell Hall, the back of my head throbbing with pain. Noelle had been hosting a preparty there for Kiran Hayes's birthday fête in Boston, and I had gone to confront Sabine DuLac about her relationship with Ariana Osgood. She had pulled a gun on me, I had blacked out, and when I'd come to, I had

seen Josh's prone body, his face pressed into the hardwood floor. And blood. Blood everywhere. The scream that had escaped my throat had sounded otherworldly, like something out of a science fiction film. Like nothing that could have come from my own throat. That was when Sabine had realized the bullet had missed me. Even though the gun was gone, even though Trey Prescott and Gage Coolidge were holding her back, she had made one final lunge, intent on strangling me or clawing my hair out—hurting me in whatever way possible. I had thrown myself backward in fear and had bumped into something hard. A second body. Dark hair had been splayed everywhere, arms bent at unnatural angles. Another scream, and after that, everything had become a blur.

The shouting as the police had hauled off Sabine. The Pemberly girl who, splattered with blood, had fainted dead away. The flashing lights of the ambulance. The EMTs shouting for us to stay back as they'd sorted out who was hit and who was unconscious and who might be . . . dead.

Now an orderly shoved a meal cart out of a room and right into my path. I was so startled that my hand flew to my heart. My knees felt like they could collapse at any second. I pressed my other palm against the wall to steady myself, my fingers landing just above a gold plate with a room number printed on it: 4005. Which meant that the next room was 4007. The room I was looking for. The room I dreaded.

Deep breath, Reed. You can do this. You have to do this.

I closed my eyes for a moment. This wasn't about me. Yes, Sabine had tried to kill me. Yes, the person who, all semester long, I had

thought was my best friend had turned out to be a raving homicidal lunatic stalker. Yes, I had spent months living in the same room with a girl who had then tortured me and drugged me and sent out a lewd video of me to the entire Easton Academy community. *That* was all about me. And I could deal with all of that later.

But right now. This. This was not about me.

I took that deep breath and stepped tentatively into room 4007.

Josh's eyes instantly met mine, whisking the breath right out of me. I was aware of the machines—the beeping of the heart monitor, the strange twitching lines on the screen, the dripping IV. But for a moment, just one moment, all I could see were those eyes. The relief, the anguish, the longing, the fear. Everything I felt was right there in his eyes. He knew. He understood. But then he broke eye contact, and I dropped back to reality.

Reality, where Ivy Slade lay on a hospital bed, unconscious and pale, her eyelids appearing purple under the fluorescent lights. Tubes and wires and sensors were stuck to her temples and wrists, and her black hair was shoved back from her face in a haphazard, unparted way that she would have loathed if she could have seen it. The white hospital sheets were tightly tucked in all around her, giving her the look of a half-wrapped mummy. Only her arms were free, and Josh was holding her hand. Her delicate, seemingly lifeless hand. My throat went completely dry.

Why hadn't she stayed outside like the police had told her to do? Why had she run back into the solarium? In all the panic, I hadn't even realized that she had come up behind me. She didn't have to be

there. Didn't have to come with me to confront Sabine. I had even told her not to come along, but she obviously was worried about me in my one-track state of mind. That track being the express train to confrontation with a homicidal maniac.

It was my fault that she was here. All my fault.

"Is she going to be okay?" I whispered.

Please say yes. Please, please say yes. I wasn't sure I could handle another death. Another funeral. Another good-bye. I wasn't sure if any of us could handle it.

"They think so," Josh replied. He looked hopefully over at her. "The bullet went through her upper shoulder and just missed her lung. If it had been half an inch lower . . . She lost a lot of blood, though, which is why she's unconscious right now. But yeah, they expect her to make a full recovery."

My eyes misted over as a crushing weight was lifted from my shoulders. She was going to be okay. *Thank you, thank you, thank you!* Ivy and I had just started to become friends. If it weren't for her, I may have never figured out that it was Sabine who was after me. That Sabine was the person who had killed Cheyenne Martin and had tried to make me believe it was my fault.

If it weren't for Ivy, I might have gone to Kiran's party with Sabine and ended up shot dead in an alley in Boston somewhere. Who knew what the details of the girl's plan had been? It seemed that, as long as it had ended with me dead, Sabine would have deemed it a success.

Josh placed Ivy's hand on the bed next to her hip and slowly got up to usher me out the door. As we left the room, I turned to him,

prepared to be a good friend—a supportive friend and nothing more. To ask the right questions. The questions that Noelle Lange and Rose Sakowitz and all the other people down in the waiting room wanted me to ask. But before I could even open my mouth, I was in his arms.

"I thought she was going to kill you," he said breathlessly.

Surprised tears jumped to my eyes. I savored the familiar strength of his arms, the crisp scent of his shampoo. I clung to him, gripping the smooth fabric of his oxford shirt like it was a life vest and I was about to go under.

"I can't believe what you did," I said as a tear spilled down my cheek. "Lunging for the gun like that . . ." I forced myself to pull back so I could look into his eyes. "When you hit the floor, I thought you were dead."

Josh placed his hands on either side of my face and looked at me as if he was trying to reassure himself that I was actually there. "I didn't even think. You were frozen, and there was a gun pointing at you, and I . . . I didn't even think. It was either throw you down or go for the gun, and I guess I was closer to the gun, so . . . I just did it."

"You saved my life," I said, a sob choking my throat.

He moved his hands to cup my shoulders and touched his forehead to mine, blowing out a sigh. "You're okay. You're okay," he said. "Thank God you're okay."

Just like that, my heart filled with bubbles of joy. Josh still loved me. He loved me so much that he couldn't stop touching me. He loved me so much he had put himself in harm's way to save me. Josh loved me. I felt so high, I could have floated right out the hospital window.

But then, reality. Like a lasso around my ankle, reality once again

slammed me back down to the ground. Because Josh's attempt to save my life had resulted in Ivy's current state. He had knocked the gun just as it had gone off. Knocked it so that the bullet had passed me by . . . and had hit Ivy right in the chest.

In trying to save me, his ex-girlfriend, Josh had put his current girlfriend in the hospital.

We both looked over at Ivy's room. I knew that Josh was thinking exactly what I was thinking, that Ivy didn't deserve this. He let his hands slip from my shoulders, and he stepped away. Suddenly, I was freezing. For the first time, I noticed the bloodstains on the front of his shirt. On his hands. Under his fingernails. Ivy's blood. It was everywhere.

"What happened to Sabine?" he asked flatly, as we started walking back to the waiting room.

"They arrested her," I told him. "Pretty much everyone heard her confess, so . . ."

"I can't believe this. I can't believe this is happening."

Josh pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. I knew the feeling. It was all so overwhelming that it was hard to decide which part to try to sort out first. Cheyenne's pointless murder, Ivy's pointless injury, or the fact that Sabine was Ariana's sister and, apparently, had come to Easton for the sole purpose of torturing me. How were we supposed to deal with that?

And then, of course, there was the issue of us. The "us" that now included three: me, Josh, and Ivy.

"So . . . now we just . . . ," I trailed off. I knew Josh well enough to

know that he always did the right thing. And the right thing at this moment did not include me.

We turned the corner and stopped down the hall from the waiting room. Josh leaned against the cinderblock wall. He looked miserable. Tired and gaunt and haunted. He raised his hands to his face again, making a little tent around his nose and mouth. For a moment, neither of us breathed. Then he dropped his hands, as if resolved, and looked at me. The emotion was gone. In its place was an expressionless wall.

"I have to stay with Ivy," he said firmly. "I have to know she's okay. She's going to need . . . someone."

My heart contracted painfully, and I allowed myself one moment of selfishness. One. *But what about me?* I thought. And then I let it go. Because he was right. Ivy needed him more than I did. Yes, I had been through a lot this semester. We both had. Cheyenne's murder, our breakup, my falling-out with Noelle, and the constant feeling that someone was stalking me. All the heartache and paranoia had been because of Sabine. It had all been part of her little "torture Reed for hurting Ariana" plan.

I wished that Josh and I could have talked through all of this right then. That we could have sat together and figured out what it all meant. But at that moment, it all meant nothing. Because he cared for Ivy and, as much pain as I was in, Ivy needed him more.

I glanced over my shoulder toward the waiting room. I saw Noelle hovering, watching me expectantly. We hadn't even had a conversation yet. Hadn't cleared the air after our massive breakup and her kicking

me out of Billings. But she had made a peace offering—she'd invited me to the party tonight—and after everything we'd been through in the past few hours, I knew that things were going to go back to normal between us. At least I hoped they were. She was all I had now.

"I guess I should go tell them what's going on," I said slowly.

The last thing I wanted to do was leave him, but I had to. Standing in front of Josh and not being able to touch him was going to kill me.

"Okay," he replied, his eyes wet.

"Okay," I repeated, somehow getting the word past the lump in my throat.

I turned and started down the hall, my footsteps heavy. A few doors down, I paused and looked over my shoulder. He was still standing there, watching me. Watching me walk away from him. "Keep me posted, okay? On how she's doing."

"I promise."

So there it was. Good-bye. I was going to be strong. I was not going to pine and whine and wish. I was going to be good. For me, for Josh, and for Ivy. That was my promise to myself.