



Cruel Love (Privilege)

By *Kate Brian*

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The Privilege series comes to an end with all the suspense, romance, drama and, wherever Ariana is concerned, murder you'd expect.

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Cruel Love (Privilege) By Kate Brian Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1175499 in Books
- Brand: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers
- Published on: 2011-06-07
- Released on: 2011-06-07
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.25" h x .60" w x 5.50" l, .40 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 218 pages

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Kate Brian is the author of the NY Times and USA Today best-selling *Private* series and its spin-off series, *Privilege*. She has also written many other books for teens including *Sweet 16* and *Megan Meade's Guide to the McGowan Boys*.

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Cruel Love

UNFAIR

All around Ariana Osgood, the sounds of the emergency room dimmed to a dull hum. The flashing red lights outside the thick-paned window faded in and out. An ancient coffee machine in the corner hissed as it gurgled hot brown liquid into a mug. A few droplets of fresh, red blood splattered the tiles as someone limped by. A child cried. A mother screamed. Someone, somewhere, begged for help. But Ariana was unaware. For her, time had stopped.

For her, there was nothing in the world but Reed Brennan.

She must die ... she must die ... she must die ...

The mantra pounded at the base of her skull like a drumbeat, a call to arms, a battle march.

She must die ... she must die ... she must die ...

Ariana focused on Reed's mouth. On her lips. The lying, back-stabbing, love-of-her-life-stealing lips, as they babbled away to a police officer. Spewing more lies, no doubt. Explaining things away. Claiming innocence. Poor, poor Reed. Always, always, *always* the victim. Steadily, the mantra grew faster.

She must die ... she must die ... she must—

There was a slam over by the admittance desk and suddenly the world zipped back into focus. Noise and color and light and pain crashed in on Ariana from all sides.

"... don't know what happened," Reed was saying. She hugged her scrawny arms around her scrawnier waist. "I thought she had a ride home. I was sure he was driving her home ..."

A tear slipped from Reed's eye and she swiped it away. Ariana tilted her head. It was amazing, really, how unchanged the girl was. Same bland, shapeless clothes, except, oddly, her coat appeared to be a bland Kenneth Cole number rather than a bland Old Navy. Same dirt-brown hair. Same off-putting angular features. Same dull brown eyes. She wasn't as tall as Ariana remembered. Certainly not as strong. In fact, Ariana was quite certain that if she walked over there right now, wrapped her fingers around Reed's skinny neck and squeezed, she could have her dead within a minute.

She must die ... she must die ... she must die ...

Ariana's fingers twitched at her sides. Her mouth began to water. This was it. Her opportunity. The moment she'd been anticipating for three long years. It would have been marvelous if she had been able to execute her original plan and shoved Reed off the roof of Billings House those many moons ago. It would have been dramatic and messy and best of all, done. But this ... this would be so much more poetic. She would look Reed in the eyes as she died. Watch the light and the life go out of her. Feel her agony, her desperation, her fear. She would witness the very moment that Reed recognized it was over—that Ariana had won. That she had finally, finally won.

She must die ... she must die ... she must die ...

"I should really call her roommate. She must be freaking out," Reed said.

She tugged a cell phone out of her pocket and began to turn. In half a second, she would be facing Ariana. Their eyes would meet. Ariana couldn't breathe.

"Ana. I need to talk to you."

Someone grabbed Ariana's arm. She looked up into the stricken, pale face of her soon-to-be-ex-boyfriend, Palmer Liriano. His green eyes were raw and his brown hair mussed, as if he'd run his hands over it and back a thousand times. Behind him, Soomie Ahn sobbed against Maria Stanzini's shoulder, her straight black hair sticking to the tears on her cheeks. Jasper Montgomery talked in low tones with Landon Jacobs and Adam Lazzetti, all of them looking fearful and gaunt. Tahira Al-Mahmood cried silently as her boyfriend, Rob Mellon, tried to console her. Everyone she knew was gathered around, looking out-of-place in their formalwear, elaborate hair, and carefully applied makeup as they whispered, blubbered, and prayed. Prayed for Lexa Greene, Ariana's best friend, who had tried to kill herself by jumping through the glass roof of the greenhouse at Maria's mansion.

And just like that, the drumbeat stopped. Ariana's world snapped back into focus. Her *real* world. The world in which she now lived. One that didn't include Reed Brennan. One that *couldn't* include her. Reed turned toward Ariana, and Ariana buried her face in Palmer's chest. She took in a few hopelessly broken breaths, squeezed her eyes shut, and closed her hand around her forearm.

Get it under control, Ariana. Get it under control.

She gripped her own arm as hard as she could, her fingernails digging into the skin.

"Ana? Ana? Are you okay?"

Palmer's strong hands closed over her shoulders. He pushed her back slightly so he could look into her eyes. Ariana blinked up at him. In her peripheral vision, she saw that Reed was gone. Maybe outside to make her call. Maybe to the bathroom. Maybe back to the Georgetown campus, where Ariana knew she currently lived. Whatever the case, for the moment, the danger was over.

Slowly, Ariana began to breathe again.

She nodded shakily. "Sorry. I just ... I got dizzy there for a second ... thinking about all the ... the blood," she improvised.

“Okay. You’re all right now?” Palmer asked, his tone all business.

Ariana looked down at her arm. She was bleeding. Her fingernails had broken the skin. She covered up the wounds with her palm, trying not to wince, and nodded again.

“Anything new about Lexa?” she asked.

Palmer shook his head. “No.” Keeping his hands on her shoulders, he ducked his chin to look her in the eye. “Ana, you’ve been spending more time with her than anyone. Did you have any idea that she was thinking about ... about doing *this*?”

“No,” Ariana said. “I mean, we all know she’s been acting a little off lately, but ...”

Lexa had been acting more than a little off. Ever since Ariana had murdered Kaitlynn Nottingham in front of Lexa, she hadn’t been herself. She’d gone completely OCD and was prone to sudden, unexpected freak-outs and breakdowns. For the past few nights, Ariana had been feeding the girl Valium to help her sleep, and it seemed to have been working, but that evening Jasper had said something about knowing Ariana and Lexa’s secret, and Lexa had assumed the worst—wrongly. Before Ariana could tell Lexa they were safe, Lexa came crashing through the glass ceiling.

“But if you knew something, you would have told someone, right?” Palmer demanded, his eyes intense. “You know you’re supposed to tell someone? You’re supposed to get the person help.”

Ariana stared up at him, trying to process his words—his patronizing tone. “Palmer ... if I’d thought Lexa was going to kill herself, of course I would have done something.”

“I mean, you’re supposed to be her best friend, right? You’re supposed to know these things,” Palmer’s voice grew louder with each word. “Or maybe you guys weren’t as close as you were always claiming to be.”

Ariana’s face was on fire. All her friends turned to stare.

“Palmer, please. Calm down. You’re just upset,” Ariana said.

“Of course I’m upset,” Palmer said, bringing his fist to his mouth. “Lexa’s in there clinging to life and you’re telling me there was nothing you could do to stop it.”

“Palmer, that’s enough,” Jasper said, putting a hand on Palmer’s shoulder from behind. “This is not Ana’s fault.”

“Get off me, man,” Palmer said, swiping Jasper’s arm away and starting to pace like a rabid animal. “All I know is, Ana and Lexa have spent every minute of every hour together for the past two weeks. How many times have you broken dates with me because you just had to hang out with your BFF?” he said sarcastically. “Well you couldn’t have been such great friends if you’d let her go off and do something like this!”

“Palmer, stop!” Maria gasped.

Suddenly, Palmer froze. He looked around at the gaping faces of his friends, as if realizing for the first time that they were there. Then he looked at Ariana. Her eyes burned with unshed tears and her chest heaved

beneath her huge diamond necklace. Who the hell did he think he was? She was the one whose best friend was inches from death. He was supposed to be consoling her, not accusing her.

I should have broken up with you before the party, she thought, clenching her teeth. I should have done it days ago.

But she had been afraid. Afraid of losing her It-Girl status on the Atherton-Pryce Hall campus. So now, here she was, getting publicly berated on one of the worst nights of her life. One more nudge and she was going to lose it. She could feel it in her hot, trembling veins.

“Screw you, Palmer,” Ariana said through her teeth.

His brow knit. “What?”

“We’re over,” she snapped.

Everyone stared at Palmer. Ariana could see all the hurt and pain and confusion whirling in his eyes and, for once, had absolutely no idea what he was going to do next. Suddenly, he grabbed his overcoat off his chair and stood up straight.

“Fine,” he said. “If that’s what you really want, then fine. We’re broken up.”

He gave her a sidelong glance and Ariana was certain there was something else he wanted to say, but he thought the better of it, cleared his throat, and walked out of the emergency room.

Ariana looked at Jasper, her true love, and just like that, the tears spilled over. He moved toward her like he was going to take her in his arms, but Maria and Soomie got there first. Which was just as well. No one knew that she and Jasper had been seeing each other behind Palmer’s back, and now didn’t seem like the right time to get into *that* drama.

“He doesn’t really blame you,” Soomie said, holding Ariana’s hands as Maria brushed her hair back from her tear-stained face. “He’s just freaking out like the rest of us.”

“Yeah, but he’s the only one who felt the need to go accusing Ana,” Maria said sarcastically. “Men are bastards,” she said under her breath.

Ariana rested her head on Maria’s shoulder.

“You know this isn’t your fault, right?” Soomie said, squeezing Ariana’s hands. “None of us saw this coming. None of us.”

Ariana nodded. “I know,” she said, her voice thick.

But I should have. I should have seen what was happening, she thought. And now Lexa’s in there dying because of me.

She glanced over at the police officers who had taken Reed Brennan’s statement about whatever she had been blubbering about. She breathed in and out, trying to get the tears under control. Trying to make sense of everything that had happened. How was it possible that the one person in the world she would have liked to

see dead had just walked out the door, and the one person in the world she would have liked to see live was practically dead in the next room?

Sometimes, life was just so unfair.

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