

The
BETRAYAL

of
NATALIE HARGROVE

L A U R E N K A T E



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The Betrayal of Natalie Hargrove

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FOR JASON,
CO-CONSPIRATOR

Prologue

Once upon a time, you knew nothing.

It wasn't your fault—you were just a kid. And growing up where you did, most people assumed that this was for the best. The longer it took a small town southern girl to catch on to the backward ways of her world, the better off everyone was.

Back then, your biggest worries were not getting caught stealing that pack of Juicy Fruit from the drugstore . . . oh, and making it out of elementary school with some semblance of a soul.

The danger was real. Remember that dress code? The mid-calf-length pleated pea-green skirts? Remember your troll . . . er, role models? Every last one of your teachers was of the dingy-slip-wearing, needs-to-Nair-her-mustache, hasn't-gotten-laid-in-your-lifetime variety. It took everything in you

to stay awake as year after year, they stood up at the board, rattling off the titillating trivia of your state.

South Carolina, you'd jotted. Eighth state to sign the Constitution. Home of the Palmetto tree, the golden wren, the yellow Jessamine, the saccharine social climber—oh wait, that one wasn't on the test (not yet, anyway).

If you were anything like Natalie Hargrove, you couldn't have cared less if you passed or failed that week's pop quiz. But what they don't tell you in Dixie is that one day down the line, something as benign as the South Carolina state tree just might be a matter of life and death.

CHAPTER *One*

SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES

*I*t was the biggest week of my life. It was ten minutes before the bell. I was perched outside the sophomore bathroom door, honing one of my very favorite skills. Oh, *eavesdropping* is *such* an ugly word! Especially when I make it look so good. Admit it: the decoy cell phone at my ear, the coolly absorbed look on my face—I had you convinced that I was just retrieving some private late-night message from Mike, or double-checking the pre-party details for Rex Freeman’s Mardi Gras soiree this weekend. Didn’t I?

But when were things at Palmetto High ever really what they seemed? Anyone with a pulse knew that the sophomore girls—a.k.a. the Bambies—were the go-to playthings of the senior boys. The few of us at this school lucky enough to be blessed with a brain had figured out by now that the Bambi

morning primp sessions were seriously ripe for eavesdropping. Bambi-bathroom-perching was merely precautionary, to keep oneself in the know.

Through the door, in between bursts of ominous-sounding thunder from the storm brewing outside, I made out some Bambi whining: “Can we discuss how unfair it is that this weather is so foul?” February in Charleston was particularly unpredictable. Black clouds had hovered all morning, threatening to open up at any moment and drown us.

“It’s like God wants our hair to pouf at the game tonight,” her Bambi friend agreed. “Hey—who took my concealer?”

“Honey,” a third Bambi drawled. “Next week’s church bells are too far away for you to be all godded up already. Pass the Citre Shine.”

Christ, these girls were a drag. If I wanted to get anything good out of them (read: whom the senior boys were rallying behind for next week’s long awaited Palmetto Court vote), I was going to have to go in there myself. I flipped my phone shut and gave my stage smile to the polyamorous thespians passing me in the hall. Then I sidled through the bathroom doorway.

Inside Bambiland, I raised my eyebrows, pursed my lips, and stepped into a cloud of orange-scented hairspray to butt my way in front of their mirror.

“Sophomores,” I said. “Move.”

After a chorus of *Hi Natalie’s*, and *Sorry Natalie’s*, the Bambies

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shut their mouths and stepped aside. All talk of the storm clouds and subsequent hair frizz seemed to be forgotten.

Even Kate Richards, sophomore ringleader and the least objectionable of the bunch, put down her curling iron to scooch over. Kate had earned her street cred with me during her freshmen haze last year when a senior handed her a pair of scissors and asked Kate to show her respect by sacrificing her waist-length locks. Half my class still hadn't gotten over Kate's great defiance when she stormed out of her own haze, but personally, I had to respect a girl with that much verve.

This morning, Kate knew—as they all knew—that it wasn't like a senior to primp on Bambi turf. In one fell swoop, she stacked her entire clique's cosmetic cases in the crook of her arm and cleared a space for me on the countertop. I winked my thanks and she winked back, tossing the curled portion of her now-famous honey-colored hair over one shoulder. Casually, I plunked down my own cosmetic case. I glanced in the mirror. My dark hair fell effortlessly around my shoulders, making my dark brown eyes shine. My skin was smooth and clear. But there was an annoying worry wrinkle right in the middle of my forehead. I took another breath and pulled out my eyelash curler.

Through the one eye not clamped by what Mike called my medieval torture device, I surveyed my effect on the now-silent scene.

“What’s the matter, girls?” I said, turning my back to Kate so she’d know I wasn’t implicating her. “Nat got your tongue?”

Steph Merritt, your basic sophomore born-again blonde, looked at her feet and stammered. “We were just talking about how much we love your Palmetto Court posters, Nat.”

“Were you?” I asked.

Steph’s button nose flared in alarm. Normally, I respected a little white lie—a girl had to do what a girl had to do—but today Steph’s faux flattery was as low rate as her dye job. Before I made my presence known, these girls had been totally consumed by their ratty hair and acne. If the guys they were banging had mentioned anything about how they were casting their votes, the Bambies were probably too stupid to remember. Yes, they were sleeping with the enemy, but at their age, one senior football player just blended right into the next.

I hated wasting time before the bell rang. By the time my mascara dried, I knew I was going to have to get my information elsewhere.

The junior class definitely wasn’t as tight with the senior guys as the Bambies were. Juniors were hot, but too new-agey for their own good, and they usually hung around in the low-country marshland with scruffy out-of-towner guys who drove minicampers stocked with all-you-could-puff vaporizers.

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Then again, strange things *had* been known to go on in their bathroom before school hours. There were rumors that the crème of their class had predicted when Lanie Dougherty would lose her virginity—down to the hour—and been right. And just last month, those very same juniors had been the first to know about the whole mortifying embezzlement scandal that got Principal Duncan fired and replaced with the temporary and painfully dweebish Principal Glass.

In the mirror behind me, Darla Duke stood picking at a large red zit in her T-zone. Believe me when I say that the Double D didn't just rub me the wrong way because her father was dating my mother. With her bacne, permanent brown nose, and all-too-visible cleavage, the girl was legitimately gross. When she caught me watching her zit-pick with my eyebrows raised in horror, the way a vegetarian might look at, say, pork gristle, she dropped her hands to her sides.

I popped open my Mary Kay compact and dabbed the pink pouf around my nose. "Don't worry, D," I said. "It might clear up by this afternoon."

The sophomores gasped. There was nothing polite about mentioning another girl's blemish, even in the privacy of the powder room.

I rolled my eyes. "I mean, the weather."

Outside, thunder rolled. Strands of weeping willows slapped the windows, and the sophomores whined and pulled on their

hair in unison. It was embarrassing, watching them all wig out over a few insignificant flyaways before a pep rally. How did they expect to cut it in two years when there were legitimate things to stress about? I sighed and pulled a bottle of my secret weapon hair gloss, courtesy of Mom, from my purple backpack. I didn't need to court votes from these girls, but around here, you could catch a lot of flies with really good hair products.

"Promise to share?" I asked the sophomores, waving the bottle in the air.

The Human Blemish held out her hands as if I'd just spun gold. "Oh my God, thank you," Darla blinked. "We'll each take just one spritz."

"Right," I said, heading for the door. "Don't go *too* crazy."

"Nat." Kate's throaty voice stood out among the other girls' chirps. She tugged on the strap of my bag. "Wait up."

"Talk to me." I turned around to straighten the collar of her white oxford shirt so that it lay smoothly under her pale-pink cashmere.

"Tracy Lampert wants to see you," she said, flashing the silver tongue ring she hardly ever let show on school grounds. "Junior bathroom," Kate directed. "Before the bell."

Hmm . . . Tracy Lampert was the self-appointed junior-class guru. She held perpetual court in their bathroom, to the point where some wondered if she ever went to class.

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“That’s convenient,” I said, wondering briefly about the odds. Tracy and I were cool, but I couldn’t remember the last time we’d sought out each other’s company—simultaneously. “I was on my way up there, anyway,” I said, shrugging goodbye to the rest of the Bambies. “Later, girls.”

As I slipped up the stairs toward Tracy’s Den of Zen, I was surprised to see how suddenly inundated the halls were with my running mates’ Palmetto Ball Court posters. Taking all of them in, I started to laugh—not just because someone had convinced June Rattler to blow up a red-faced, puffy-cheeked photo of herself honking on a tuba for her Palmetto Princess Poster, though that was pretty hilarious—and vaguely disturbing. No, I started laughing because in a weird way, it felt good to realize that I wasn’t the only one consumed by thoughts of the crown.

Here’s how crazy Palmetto is about its Ball: For one month every year, hippies forget their vows to reduce their carbon imprint and sit around their bonfires high as kites, making just as many glittery posters as the rest of us. Tramps start wearing underwear and going back to church to grease the moral judges who make the final call. Former-Princesses-turned-parents habitually bribe the school with donations of new library wings to ensure their own children’s royal legacies. Even the boys go on celery-hot-sauce diets to drop a few pounds before their campaign photo shoots.

Yes, the guys take it that seriously, too. Unless, of course, we're talking about my boyfriend. I love him, okay? I do. Mike and I are undoubtedly the school's most-likely-to-succeed couple. All I'm saying is if everyone in the world could get away with caring about certain things as little as Mike does . . . well, there just might not be a Palmetto Court Campaign at all.

And the campaign is only the beginning! After the ballots are cast and the winners announced, the real reign of Palmetto Prince and Princess begins. "Royalty" at Palmetto means you're a cross between ambassador of goodwill and highest-ranking socialite. Basically: You've arrived.

To celebrate, the whole school throws you a massive week-long party. First, there's the country club coronation—to which the Prince and Princess arrive by a glittering horse and carriage. Then there's the Jessamine Day—where all the girls sport their glorified state-flower corsages. There's the famous "Path to Palmetto" video, widely distributed, and known to have gotten more than a few former Royals into their choice of Ivy Leagues. Finally, of course, there's the Ball.

"Gimme a countdown to the Ball—go!" Rex Freeman's voice rang out through the hall. Rex, with his buzzed red hair and biceps always bulging through his rolled up T-shirt sleeves, was way more laid-back than he looked at the moment. Usually, he was only a taskmaster when it came to getting the

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right number of kegs to his parties. But from the panicked expression of his lanky sophomore assistant, Rex was taking his job as Campaign Commissioner pretty seriously this year.

“Did I stutter?” he barked at the kid. “I asked you how many days.”

“Guh . . . fifteen,” the boy twittered, backing against his locker.

“And how many posters per Prince are allowed on the walls fifteen days out?” Rex barked.

As the sophomore flipped frantically through a stapled packet of rules and regulations, Rex looked up and grinned at me.

“I assume your poster count is in compliance ma’am,” he joked, putting on his hick Carolina officer-of-the-law voice and giving my shoulder a squeeze.

“Oh, you know I play by the rules, officer,” I quipped back, matching his southern accent with my best damsel-in-distress.

“That’s more than I can say for your boyfriend,” Rex winced, looking down at his biceps. “I might need a witch doctor after Mike’s tackle today.”

I groaned and popped a piece of Juicy Fruit in my mouth. Rex and Mike had been tight since they accidentally tied their shoelaces together back in second grade, so I was used to them horsing around. But this week was no time to get a stupid football injury!

Usually, I love Mike's carefree-yet-successful way of going about high school—he definitely balanced me out. But Mike's place on the Court should have been just as much of a shoo-in as mine this year. It would be, too, if he'd just put in the tiniest bit of effort—well, and if it weren't for Justin Balmer.

I leaned over to tap the packet Rex's lackey was still fumbling through. "If I were you, I'd keep an eye on J.B.'s poster count," I said before continuing down the hall.

Of all the posters plastered on the wall, Justin's was the one I knew I'd be most unnerved by—so I'd made myself promise to avoid it. I was this close to reaching the junior bathroom safely when I came face to face with J.B.'s cardboard incarnation and stopped dead in my tracks.

In the picture, Justin stood tan and shirtless on one of his boats in his father's marina down near Folly Beach. And okay, it wasn't an entirely unattractive photo. In fact, the intense look in his deep-green eyes almost made me stumble forward. When I leaned in for a closer look, I realized I knew that boat. I'd once spent an endless evening on it back when . . . well, back when things were different.

Justin Balmer, the poster read, a Prince eighteen years in the making.

Please, more like eighteen years in the faking. I'd learned the hard way that J.B. was so much less than the sum of his cottillioned parts. You'd be hard-pressed to find a bigger

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sham—and at Palmetto, that was saying something. I squinted at the picture, wondering which Bambi skank had taken it, and when.

“I thought you gave up idol worship.” It was Justin, leaning against the wall and smirking at me with those same green eyes. He smelled the way he always did—Kiehl’s aftershave and freshly cut grass.

I gestured at the poster, unimpressed. “I was just checking to see whether that was a smudge or a giant mole on your chest,” I said. “Have you put on some weight?”

“Cute cover up, Nat,” he said in a low voice. “But I think we already know all about each other’s secret charming imperfections.” His hand grazed the small of my back, just inside the waist of my jeans.

I shoved him back against the locker, then quickly spun around to check for witnesses. I did not want anyone seeing me sweat Justin Balmer in plain sight. Luckily, the only person in the hallway was bespectacled Ari Ang, who scurried by carrying a beaker full of something green.

“I didn’t see anything,” the Anger pleaded, covering his large-frame glasses with his beaker. “I’m just on my way to chemistry. . . .” His voice trailed off, and I turned back around to face Justin.

Once, we might have laughed about the Anger’s perpetual beaker handling. Now I wanted to spit my new piece of Juicy

Fruit in J.B.'s face. But I made myself swallow the bilious instinct. I forced a smile.

"Aww," I cooed. "It's cute that you still think your—what was your phrase—charming imperfections are secret." I let my eyes pause deliberately on his crotch before spitting out my gum, tearing off a piece of Justin's poster, and wadding the yellow sphere inside it. "Don't worry," I went on, "my lips were sealed. But if you ever want to really check in with yourself, try hacking into the Bambi blog about you—and maybe stop slutting yourself out quite so much. Those girls are merciless. See ya."

"Nat," he grabbed my wrist, forcing me to look him in the eye. "Come on."

"Come on what?"

"Can't a guy change?" he asked so quietly I had to lean in to hear.

I hung there, knowing the answer like I knew my own name: no. But I couldn't make myself respond. Finally, I settled for whipping my hand away and ducking inside the junior bathroom. I leaned against the back of the door, working to catch my breath. I wondered if Justin was still standing on the other side. I wondered if there was anything I could do to rattle him.

"Hey Tracy," I said, refixing a smile on my face when I saw the juniors in their shamanistic circle.

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Tracy Lampert rose from her royal-blue beanbag chair in the corner of the bathroom. Her long black braids swung forward when she moved in to give me a hug. Usually, I'm the first to go off about how a girl could hardly step away to check her voicemail in Charleston without getting a hug on her return, but after my hallway tumble with Justin, I didn't mind a little bit of affection, even from the pseudo-psychic Lampert.

"You okay, Nat?" Tracy asked. Even though her signature sapphire-tinted glasses hid her eyes, it was almost like her voice was squinting at me. "Your energy orb is very present. Which can be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on—"

"I'm fine," I told Tracy.

She raised her eyebrows but dropped the subject.

"Sit down," she cooed. "Have some tea."

Tracy poured a steaming mug of chai from a hot pot on the windowsill, and her two cohorts Liza Arnold and Portia Stead sat down on the beanbag flanking her sides. Portia whipped her long hair up into a massive blonde bun, and Liza closed her eyes meditatively. I stifled a laugh, thinking that by the time these girls were seniors, they'd be so over this phase that they'd look back and laugh at themselves. But for now, I was in their court, so I just plopped down among them on the final beanbag in the ring.

"So," Tracy said, giving strange weight to the word. "How's life?"

I cocked my head. “Life’s good,” I said. “But why don’t we talk about why you called me in here?”

Liza opened her eyes, coming out of meditation. She glanced at her watch, then at Tracy. “Just tell her. The bell’s about to ring.”

I lifted my chin. “Tell me what?”

“Okay, I’ll just cut to the chase,” Tracy said. Her voice changed and let in a rare hint of her natural southern twang, which made the bindi between her eyes look halfway ridiculous. “My sister-in-law is one of the ballot counters for the Ball this year,” she said. “She told me this thing about Justin Balmer last night. Now I know you guys have a history—”

I held up a hand. “We *don’t* have a history—”

“Whatever,” Tracy said. “It’s obvious you and Mike are really happy; I’m just saying that I thought you should know there’s buzz about J.B. this year.”

I could feel the blood rising to my face. Even though Palmetto Court was technically a student-driven vote, everyone knew that behind the scenes, the righteous right-wing school board kept a hawk eye on the ballot boxes to ensure that no one “unsavory” ended up with the crown.

I should have known J.B. would do something to secure a leg up with the ballot counters. What had he done? Bribed the judges? Not that I hadn’t thought about it myself . . .

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“Okay, which wrinkly ballot counter is that asshole screwing?” I blurted.

The juniors gasped, and Tracy covered her mouth to stifle a laugh. “No, sweetie, you misunderstood. The judges aren’t exactly buzzing about J.B. in a good way.” She tucked a braid behind her ear. “Between you and me, someone’s trying to keep him off the Court. Some bad blood from last summer—I don’t know the details. I was just telling you because—”

I could breathe again. I almost wanted to kiss Tracy.

“Because you knew I was worried about Mike,” I said finishing her sentence.

“Exactly,” Tracy nodded. “Nothing’s certain, of course, but I figured I owed it to you to pass along the word. Your poker face isn’t half bad. Still, I hate to see a pretty girl give herself premature worry lines when I can do something to help.”

“Does Justin know someone has it in for him?” I asked, trying to smooth out my forehead without looking too obvious.

But before Tracy could answer, an apocalyptic crash of thunder boomed outside. All the girls crowded around the window to get a look.

“Oh my God!” Liza cried, gazing out at what was quickly turning into a full-fledged hailstorm. “We left the banners in the parking lot. They’re tempera paint! They’ll melt!”

Instantly, the junior bathroom mobilized. I guess hippies

couldn't always be at peace with the weather. All the girls started scrambling to get their massage oil back in their hemp bags so they could save their junior-spirit banners from the elements.

On her way out the door, Tracy cupped my elbow.

"J.B. doesn't know a thing," she said. "Probably best if we keep it that way—know what I mean?"

Then she and her friends scattered, taking their tempest outside. The only sign of life in the empty bathroom was the swinging door that led out to the hallway—the swinging door with J.B.'s face plastered on it.

Can't a guy change?

The question still rang in my ears. But I'd heard that one too many times before. So I stood before the half-ripped poster and ran my hand over his face, the way they do in the movies to close the eyes of the dead.

Then, glancing around the empty hallway, I snatched it off the door, folded it neatly in half, and dropped it in the junior-class recycling bin. I wasn't so far away from my own junior year that I'd forgotten how to voodoo.