


Electric IMPULSE



Love, Life & Sex

ANGEL HILSON

CHAPTER 1

Meeting Sebastian's Parents

Six Months Ago

Sunday Brunch (Seven Days Before Graduation)

It's a gorgeous, balmy Sunday, but I can't enjoy it. My nerves are getting to me. Meeting Sebastian's parents for the first time is causing serious anxiety. Oh God! I need air.

Reaching for the worn window knob reminds me how badly I need a new ride. I'm guaranteed a good upper arm workout each time I roll down one of these windows. A quick glance at my iPhone tells me time is not my friend today. Reaching across the seat, I frantically roll down the passenger side. With the task complete, I pull away from the curb with a jolt.

"Turn left in one-half mile," the iPhone navigates.

What if they don't like me? What if they don't think I'm good enough? What if I say something stupid? God, I hope they like me, because he's the one. I'm pretty sure of it . . . This is what girls my age do. We go to college, graduate, and get married.

"Damn!" I could use anything but a stop light right about now.

Listen, that's how this works. The timing is right. I've got the guy. It's the next logical step. Besides, I'm a full-fledged adult.

A glance in the mirror screams otherwise. The wide eyes of a bewildered little girl stare back at me.

Nope. I'm an adult. It's time to make some real adult decisions.

After carefully following your Sexless Six-Month Rule, and a year and a half of dating, things are getting serious. He's met your family. Now, you're meeting his. You've both exchanged keys. Soon you'll probably move in together, maybe even get a place on the east side by the lake . . .

Loud, aggressive honking brings my attention to the empty lane in front of me. In the rearview, the driver behind me is not too happy. Almost looks as if

he's somehow caught mad cow disease, what with his red, bulging eyes, foaming mouth, and erratic pointing finger.

"What's his problem?"

I look up in time to see the green light turning yellow. "I better move it!" My heart flutters lightly as I step on the gas and quickly pull off.

I can see us waking up together. A proposal is coming. I know it. This is gonna be a perfect happily ever after.

Moments later, I arrive at the restaurant and park around the corner instead of in the parking lot. A "vintage" beauty like this has no business on this side of town. Honestly, vintage is putting it nicely. I get out, slam the door and check to make sure it stays shut, then rush inside. A hostess leads me to an already occupied table. Sebastian, Mr. Duvall and Mrs. Duvall are waiting. I take my seat.

"Hello, it's so nice to finally meet you." I smile, probably flashing every tooth in my mouth. "I hope you weren't waiting long."

Sebastian introduces us. "Mother, Dad, this is Aria." He beams as he looks to his mother, seemingly awaiting her approval.

"We arrived a while ago." Mrs. Duvall informs me.

"Traffic. Sorry." I reply sheepishly.

Starting off with an apology . . . not a good start . . .

Sebastian laughs uncomfortably. "It hasn't been that long."

"Hmm," is all Mrs. Duvall says behind a tight-lipped expression.

That feels off.

"It's so nice of you to join us, Aria. We've heard good things." Mr. Duvall welcomes me with a warm smile and a handshake.

Mrs. Duvall gives me a once over. "Your hair . . . it's . . . uh . . . different. Very . . . unique."

Nice attempt at a compliment.

Reaching for my curly hair, I pat it for reassurance. "Yes, ma'am, it's natural." She grimaces at the word 'ma'am.'

Oh shit. Strike two.

". . . uh . . . a lot of girls are going the natural route." I nod. "It's actually very versatile. I can wear it straight when I choose to."

"Hmm," she replies. Her eyes fall on my apparel. "Wearing Sunday's best?" she asks with a patronizing smile.

"To meet you fine people, of course!" I smile back with sincerity.

"Really no need to go all out. It's just brunch," she replies indifferently.

"Dear, let's not give Aria a hard time." Mr. Duvall turns to me. "You look beautiful," he tells me with the all the affection of a doting father.

"Thank you," I murmur while looking down at my colorful floral print maxi dress. *How is this overdressed when she's wearing a cream boucle jacket, matching skirt, and rose blouse? Maybe it's too much color for her taste?*

Sebastian clears his throat, unbuttons the top button of his crisp white shirt with one hand, and changes the subject. "Aria should come to the barbecue next

weekend. Right, Dad?" He turns to me. "It's a casual get-together. A few friends and family." He nods.

"Oh, yes. You can meet the rest of the family. It's our first party of the summer. Great food. Good people. Always fun."

"That sounds exciting. I'll take you up on that." I smile at Mr. Duvall.

Mrs. Duvall assumes the spotlight again. "So, Aria, my son tells me you're getting a degree in English? What do you plan to do with a degree in that field?" She stirs cream into her coffee as she glares at me before taking a sip. "As you know, my Sebastian is getting his degree in business administration. A smart move if you ask me." A light-skinned, Creole woman with dark, wavy shoulder-length hair and cold gray eyes, Mrs. Duvall wears a stern, serious expression. She's intimidating to say the least and seems impossible to please.

Mr. Duvall, on the other hand, has kind eyes, smooth light brown skin and a salt-and-pepper colored beard and mustache. Wearing a black dress shirt and slacks, he looks very distinguished. "Now, now," he whispers, patting his wife's hand as if to rein her in.

She ignores him.

My heart races as Mrs. Duvall's unflinching glare bores into my forehead. I clear my throat. "I'm, excuse me, I'm a writer. I've interned at the corporate headquarters of Davidson and Blackwell, working in their marketing department. I plan to go into that field. But at heart, I'm really a novelist. I'm in love with the written word. Words are my life." I pray I'm making a good impression.

"Sounds like you're a hopeless romantic. Let's hope that pans out for you."

"Yes, Mother," Sebastian jumps in. "I recently read an article on the high demand for writers in numerous fields. With marketing, advertising, scientific and technical writing, there's plenty of opportunity. Aria made a good choice." He looks at me encouragingly and places his hand over mine. Now that I'm able to see them all together, it's clear who Sebastian favors. He's the spitting image of his mother, minus the sharp-edged demeanor.

"Well. I suppose. But a hopeless romantic won't get the job done. They're dreamers. And when you're dreaming, you're not doing. See, women like your dear grand-mère, paved the way for girls like Aria here, to choose such . . . light-hearted studies as say . . . English. As you know, your grand-mère was an aeronautical engineer. Serious work for a serious woman. And it paid a serious salary, even in that time."

"Mother!" Sebastian gives Mr. Duvall a telling glance. "Dad?"

"Excuse me." Heart pounding in my chest, I push away from the table and head straight to the ladies' room. *That woman has some nerve!*

When I return from the restroom, I wander by the hostess stand and ask for a dessert menu, trying to buy some time. Now to the impossible task of choosing just one dessert. Everyone knows sugar kills stress. Hesitation becomes dread as the seconds tick by. I know I have to rejoin the table. I just . . . really don't want to. Within earshot, I overhear Sebastian going back and forth with his mother as his father tries to quiet them.

“Shh.”

“What? My son deserves the best. And I can tell you right now, she’s not it! She’s beneath you.” Mrs. Duvall purses her lips together tightly. “She’s all wrong for you, Sebastian.”

“You just met her, Mother. How can you say that?”

“Listen, a mother just knows. Besides, didn’t you tell me she bought milk from a gas station?” She rolls her eyes in disgust. “How low is that? That should tell you everything you need to know.”

Is this woman serious?

“Mother.” Sebastian smiles at her. “Really? You’re nit-picking. It was something I noticed. Something I knew you’d never do. It means nothing.” He shrugs it off.

“That’s not the point, Sebastian. Any woman willing to buy milk from a gas station, of all places, is not a woman whose judgment you can trust. It’s uncouth. She’s uncouth. And not very bright if you ask me. She has a liberal arts degree, for Christ’s sake. If you’re going to go to school, make sure it’s worth the time and effort!” She leans over and loudly whispers, “Your grand-mère would be rolling over in her grave, right now!”

Sebastian sits there wearing the expression of a scolded child.

“Now, your one friend.”

“Mother—”

“What? It’s just a thought.” She grins as she teases her son.

What’s that about?

After thanking the hostess, I give her the dessert menu and return to the table, heart pounding, blood boiling, hoping against hope that what I thought I overheard was wrong. What about a friend? And gas station milk? Really?

Maybe she was talking about something or someone else.

She raises her eyebrow. “So, Sebastian tells me you like to buy milk from gas stations?”

She’s really bearing down on this one.

What kind of guy tells his mom something like that?

I glance at Sebastian. He immediately looks down at his hands.

I waver, trying to think of something intelligent to say, in my defense. My chest tightens as I laugh politely, breaking the silence. “Um. Sure. It happened.” I shrug. “But rest assured, I do all my shopping at the good old supermarket. Gotta love those, right?”

I’m drowning here.

This is clearly going to be an uphill battle.

The rest of the meal is awkward, at best.

CHAPTER 2

Who's That?

Six Months Ago

Friday Night (Two Days Before Graduation)

The crowd roars to life as DJ Lex ends the countdown on the current number one song. Drake's latest hit blasts through the sound system, making the clubbers go wild.

"You're leaving early tonight? Me too! What are you and that boy toy of yours, doing? Each other?" Sasha leans her head back and belts out an impish laugh, making me smirk at the thought.

Sasha Baxter and I met on campus last year, quite by accident. After receiving an email with a class schedule addressed to her, I went to the Office of Student Affairs to fix the mix-up. When I arrived, there she was, standing at the counter complaining that she'd received a class schedule with my name on it. We became fast friends after that and recently got jobs, working together at Club Lotus.

"We're going to a concert down at the Rave. Miguel is performing tonight. I'm so excited!" I rub my hands in anticipation.

"I love Miguel! You're so lucky! You know his music is all about sex! Sounds like your night is gonna end well!"

"It just might!" I reply, grinning from ear to ear. I'm waiting for my drink orders to be filled when I spot a new face in my section. Pulling Sasha's attention away from the table she's wiping, I nudge her.

"Hey, who is that? Over there?"

"Who? The guy with the goatee, talking to Nick?"

"Yeah . . . him." My heart does a somersault.

"Oh. He's hot, right? Wish he was standing in my section." Sasha moves in close and whispers, in a gossipy tone. "He's the CEO of that huge real estate firm downtown." She snaps her fingers. "You know, the one that has that commercial on TV?"

I shake my head causing my curls to bounce. "I'm drawing a blank."

"Anyhow, he made Forbes "30 Under 30" list a couple of years ago. He's a real estate rock star. And sexy as hell, if I might add. He's the type of guy any girl would be happy to snag!" A naughty smile dances on Sasha's pretty face, and she returns to the task of clearing tables in her section.

"Rugged with a side of sexy," I say to no one, in particular.

Just then, my boss motions for me to join him. Niccolo Moretti never fails to make me think of a 1920s gangster. The ones with pinstripe suits and Tommy guns.

He yells over the music. "Hey sweetheart, come here for a sec. There's somebody I want you to meet."

I pat down my black crop top and mini skirt before walking across the club in my stilettos. My heart is about to leap out of my chest. I hope no one can tell. I force myself to project confidence in my stride. It's always been a good cover. "Hey Nick, what's going on?" I glance from Nick to Mr. Ruggedly Handsome.

Resting his chubby hand on the small of my back, Nick turns back to Ruggedly Handsome. "This is Aria. She's a doll. The best of the best, I tell ya. She'll be taking care of you tonight. Anything you need, there's nothing too small, just let her know." Nick turns to me. "Ain't that right, baby girl?"

"Yes, of course. Anything you need."

Ruggedly Handsome is a work of art. Being this close to him is dizzying. Up close, he's extraordinarily good looking and his clean, masculine scent invites me to come closer.

"Aria, this guy is a close friend of mine. He's the man to know if you ever want to make big moves. Trust me, you'll want to stay on his good side, he has real pull in high places. We go way back, so make sure you treat him like the best of the VIP. Cause that's what he is!" Nick smiles at Ruggedly Handsome.

I nod politely.

"Nick, I finally see your vision. Club Lotus." He lets the name percolate the air. "I like it. It's trendy. Sexy. Definitely hot. Everybody's talking about this place. You did good, man."

I'm thrown. He doesn't speak the way I expect. With a resume as impressive as his, I expected some arrogance. But he's nothing like that. Confident, yes. Cocky, no. At least not right now. I imagine he's the type that owns the boardroom while still having serious street cred. He successfully straddles the fine line between both worlds.

Why is that such a turn-on?

I get the sense that just below the surface there's a tornado of intensity. Something in me wants to descend into his depths.

His lean-yet-built physique makes that tailored charcoal gray suit look like candy wrapping. I'm more than sure that I'd love the hard candy underneath. I can tell he works out. Hard. With toned arms and broad shoulders that make me think he'd have no problem lifting a woman up onto a counter. His almond-shaped eyes and long lashes bless him with a hint of exoticism. Is he mixed? Black with Asian, maybe? That would explain his smooth, creamy light-brown complexion. His dark eyes, sharp nose, and chiseled features say sexy male model, all day long.

He's forcing my heart to work overtime.

He takes a moment to look around. Judging by the way his eyes come alive as he watches the dance floor, I can tell he appreciates the nightclub's ambiance.

My eyes follow his from the modern, all-white leather furniture, to the sleek white, wavy walls. Even the lighting which, right now, happens to bathe the entire club in hues of lavender and teal. This place is out of control. We're almost at capacity with a long line around the corner, while neighboring clubs are half empty. The music is banging. The atmosphere is alive with buzzing conversations. And everywhere you look, it's packed wall to wall with people dancing, on the white table tops, on the platforms that border the walls, and on the balcony that lines the second level. Everywhere I turn, there's laughter, smiling faces, kissing couples, and glasses going bottoms up. He's right. Club Lotus is sexy. Searing. White. Hot.

"Yeah, man," Nick says, startling me out my daze. "I get to run my own show now, thanks to your investment. No more working for some prick. We've been open for a few months now. And I couldn't be happier. Everything is going smoothly." He's all sunshine.

"Glad I got in early. They won't be able to touch you once this place takes off. And it looks like you're off to a helluva start." With one hand in his pocket, Mr. Ruggedly Handsome takes a sip of his drink.

Tuning in to the walkie-talkie on his hip, Nick excuses himself, leaving me alone with a man deemed to be one of the Midwest's most eligible bachelors.

Suddenly, I realize we're in two totally different worlds. He seems impossible to measure up to. What kind of woman can keep a guy like him? I feel like a tiny, inexperienced kitten in his presence. I have yet to find my place. I look down at my feet as I try to think of something clever to say. A wave of panic causes me to flush.

"I'm sorry, what's your name again, Miss?" His attention is fully on me now. His gaze pierces right through me. Those eyes tell me he's good at reading people. And that makes me want to run and hide.

“Um.” I gulp. “I’m, Aria.”

“Right. Aria?” He leans forward.

“Davenport.”

“Well, Aria Davenport...you’re a breath of fresh air. I’m Phoenix Prescott.” He extends his hand with a warm smile.

You are so charming. I reach out to greet him. *Play it cool.*

“It’s nice to finally get your name.” I tease with a smirk, trying to calm my frenzied heart. Poking at people has always served as a good way to distract my overactive mind. “You and Nick kept going on and on and on. I thought I’d never find out who you are. Jeez!”

His smile grows wide and seems to invite my playfulness. “Oh, so you’re curious about me?”

“Just a little.” I intentionally use the same gesture women use to describe a small dick. “I saw you talking to Nick for a while, I knew you had to be someone I should know. Plus, you know, you’re standing in my section. So . . . it’s basically my job to get to know you,” I say with a patronizing smile.

“Ow, ow. That hurts!” He laughs loudly. “That’s the only reason you wanted to know my name? Because it’s your job?”

I shrug. “That’s why.”

“I just met you and you’re already taking shots.” He steps back to look me up and down, as if re-assessing me. “I was wrong about you.”

“In what way?” I ask, honestly wanting to know.

“Never mind that. It’s good, so don’t worry about it. Tonight, will be fun.”

“Is that a threat or a challenge?”

“Take it how you like it, sweetheart.” He sips the last of his drink and smacks his lips together repeatedly.

He’s funny.

“I take it you want another?” I ask.

Nick returns. “Duty calls. Place can’t run itself. Aria, take care of my boy. Listen, Phoenix, relax. Start the weekend right and have a blast tonight. That’s what we’re here for!” He pats Phoenix on the back, then looks over at me. “You good, doll?”

I nod. “I’m good. Thanks, Nick.”

Nick disappears into the crowd, officially leaving me alone with Phoenix.

This time I don’t experience the jarring feeling of being unplugged from life support. After talking to him, I realize I can stand on my own in his presence. He’s not as intimidating as before, but he still has a powerful effect on me. And I don’t hate it.

We take a few steps towards an occupied VIP table and couch in my section. Phoenix motions to the men standing there. “These are my boys. This is Jackson Carter, but everyone calls him JC. My man! He’s saved my ass so many times” —Phoenix laughs— “we call him Black Jesus. He’s a straight miracle worker.”

“In the courtroom, that is.” JC laughs, shaking his head. “Hey gorgeous, how are you?” He shakes my hand.

“You ever in trouble, he’s your man,” Phoenix continues.

“I love your dreads. But dreads in a courtroom? In Milwaukee? Don’t get me wrong, you look amazing, but Milwaukee made it on a top ten list of one of the most segregated cities in America.”

JC flashes a look of surprise at Phoenix. “This one’s quick on her feet.” He sits his drink down and thinks for a second as he runs one of his hands down the buttons of his navy suit vest and tucks it into the pocket of his slacks. “There are some serious race issues that need to be addressed here. Can’t deny that. But you can’t bury your head in the sand. Gotta fight the good fight. From my experience, nothing beats being prepared.” JC replies triumphantly, palms facing up.

It’s almost like he’s saying, *Come to me my child.* He really does look like a modern-day black Jesus.

“Yep. His success rate is through the roof. This man is good at what he does. Wouldn’t be on my team if he wasn’t.” Phoenix pats JC on the back. “And this is Ryley Williams, but we call him Riz. This man is

the definition of cool and somebody you want on your team. He's plugged everywhere we go. Even has the key to Miami."

I raise my eyebrows in surprise. "Whoa! How'd you get that?"

"Believe it or not, football," Phoenix interjects.

"Hey, Lovely!" Riz pulls me into a suffocating bear hug.

"OK." I cough. "You're . . . a hugger." I cough. "That's nice." I wince under my breath. A few quick pats on his back and I slowly back away getting into my own space.

"Your ink! How many tats do you have? That must've taken years!" I find myself staring, tracing the intricate designs along his bronze forearms and neck with my eyes. I wonder how far they extend.

"You like these guns?" Riz smiles, pulling up the rolled sleeves of his dark blue dress shirt and flexing his muscular arms to show off his artwork.

Phoenix turns to the last man standing at the table. "And this is Nixon Reed. Not to be confused with that lying-ass, cheating president. This Nixon is actually trustworthy. We grew up on the same block. Been boys since we were boys." Phoenix playfully elbows Nixon.

"That's right." Nixon smiles as he runs his hand through his curly mohawk. Not a look all guys can pull off. He puts me in the mind of Odell Beckham, Jr. The most casual of the group, he sports a plain white T-shirt with black suit jacket and matching slacks. A glint of light catches my eye. It's his wedding band.

What's a married man doing in a club like this?

This club is like an adult playground, ripe with possibilities and potentials. Shouldn't he be home . . . with his wife!

"Nixon, huh?"

"How do you do?" He nods from behind his aviator shades and gives a casual salute. "Yeah, these bullet heads gave me that crazy nickname. My real name is Nick —"

"— But when Nick gets lit, Nick's on. Nixon!" Phoenix laughs gregariously. "He's quiet and keeps to himself now. Don't let him start drinking. It's over." Phoenix grins as he imitates the hand gestures of a boxing ref announcing to the crowd that an opponent is knocked out cold. Riz and JC join in, laughing and dapping each other.

"Hey, bruh, I'm no worse than you! You want to see somebody clown? Check him out after a few drinks! Don't make me tell her about the club last week!" Now Riz and JC side with Nixon, laughing wildly amongst themselves. They remind me of boys hanging out in high-school gym class. All jokes and wise cracks. I've always had the most fun around guys like that.

"And this is Aria. She'll be our gracious waitress tonight. But don't let her smart mouth fool you. She's a sweetheart deep down." Phoenix completes introductions.

How would he know?

"That's really sweet." After I've been anything but. "You look thirsty, what can I get you?"

"Let's start off with a bottle of Grey Goose and a bottle of Remy. White and brown, something for everybody, right?" Phoenix looks around, gaining consensus from the guys.

Standing at the bar waiting for my bottles, I load my tray with the essentials before picking it up. I balance it perfectly, carrying bottles of liquor, a few carafes of juice, a bucket of ice, drinking glasses, straws, and napkins. Rocking my four-inch black stilettos, I catwalk back and set the table. The display is beautiful when I'm done with it.

"Here you are, Mr. Prescott. Is there anything else I can get you?"

He nods in approval. "Call me Phoenix. I think that's everything. Nick was right, you're good."

"Well, I am here to please," I boast.

He pauses for a minute. "Good to know." Behind those intense dark eyes, he's calculating. I can just imagine what's captured his imagination.

In the VIP section one over from Phoenix, the hostess seats Lisa and her group. She's one of my favorite regulars. And it looks to be her birthday today. I head over to her table.

"Hey ladies! How are we doing tonight?"

"Hey Aria! It's my birthday!"

“I see, I see! Let’s celebrate in style!” I yell excitedly. I get the feeling I’m being watched, I glance back at Phoenix and catch him staring at me. He quickly looks away and starts talking to a girl standing near him.

“Yes, girl, yes! Bring me your biggest bottle of Patron, pineapple juice, and plenty of limes and salt.”

On hearing the word, *Patron*, the girls jump up and down with that ready-for-the-weekend excitement I’m so familiar with. A few drinks and they’ll be on top of the world. They look like a fun bunch to take over the town with.

“Gotcha. Be right back.” I make my way to the bar and put in my order.

Instead of waiting, I head to the DJ’s booth and request a birthday announcement and song choice for Lisa. I’ve heard DJ Lex is a jerk, and never agrees to anyone’s requests. Still, when he looks up from his DJ table, his expression softens. He welcomes me into his booth and to my surprise, agrees to make the announcement.

When I get back, my drinks are waiting at the bar. I quickly grab them and work my way around the crowd.

Phoenix is laughing with a new girl.

Why are you checking on him like that?

“Here you go, ladies!” Setting everything neatly on the table, I pass out the first round of shots.

“To one of the best chicks in my VIP! Happy Birthday Lisa! Bottoms up.”

Echoes of Happy Birthday resonate from the other girls and we all take our shots. People around us notice and cheer us on in celebration.

Phoenix takes notice and smirks. He motions for me to come over.

“OK, ladies. That one is on me. I had to get your night started right.”

“Yes, honey!” Lisa yells at top decibel.

The girls swarm the table, pouring their next round of drinks.

“Let me know if you need anything else.” As I walk away, the hostess seats several Green Bay Packers. I recognize most of them from the defensive line. She sits them in the empty section next to Lisa and the girls go batshit crazy with fangirl excitement. I find myself cracking up at the whole scene. They’re professional football players, they should be used to it by now.

I smile at Phoenix as I walk up to join him.

“You’re excellent at what you do. You know how to take care of people.” Phoenix pays me yet another compliment.

“I just love seeing people have a good time.”

“And I didn’t know you could drink on the job.” He looks amused.

“As long as it doesn’t get in the way of work.”

“Well, you gotta take a shot with me.” He pours two shots and hands me one.

“What are we drinking to?”

“To new homies.”

“Homies? Who says that anymore?” I poke at him.

Phoenix replies with a thick Cuban accent. “Me, that’s who.”

Immediately, I know. Yelling like I’m playing charades, I belt out, “*Scarface!*”

His smile grows wide. “You’re quick.”

“I just saw that movie for the first time. It’s bad-ass. Vintage, but bad ass. We had our last movie night on campus. You know, you bring lawn chairs, drinks and snacks and camp out on the grass and watch movies and stuff. It’s one thing I’ll definitely miss.”

“So, you’re a college girl.” He moves in, standing so close, I don’t have to yell to be heard over music.

“Soon to be a graduate with an English degree, of all things.”

“Is that right? So, you have a way with words?”

“I graduate this Sunday. I’m freaking out about it. It’s coming so fast.”

“What? That’s in two days! Congrats, homie!”

I bust out laughing. “There goes that ‘homie’ again.”

He holds up his shot glass, “To new homies.”

“To new homies, bottoms up!”

Over the loud speakers, the DJ makes an announcement. “It’s your boy, DJ Lex, with a shout out from your girl and my girl, drop-dead gorgeous Aria! Happy Birthday Lisa! Stay young, stay sexy, and get that money! Hahaha. If you don’t mind, sweetheart, bring your fine behind to the DJ’s booth for a special song request.”

I stop by Lisa’s table. “How you ladies hanging?”

“We’re good!”

“Yes, honey, yes!”

“That’s what I want to hear. Lisa, you good?”

“Girl I couldn’t be better.” Lisa hangs off my shoulder, using me to keep her balance. Her words are slightly slurred. “I . . . gotta get . . . to the DJ’s booth.” She clumsily walks away.

I look for Phoenix. He has a way with people. There’s a captive audience surrounding him, hanging on his every word. Their eyes are glued to everything he does. I watch as he delights them, entertains them, and draws them in. People adore this man. I’m glad we met.

I walk through the rest of my section, taking orders, making sure my guests are all satisfied. Just as I find a moment to breathe, Sasha finds me on the floor and hooks her arm into mine.

“We got some things to talk about.” A sly grin forms on Sasha’s face. We sashay out of the main club area and duck into the back.

* * *

The Powder Room is like a backstage dressing room. There are several stations with mirrors that are surrounded with showbiz lights. The modern red, white, and black décor is energizing. I feel classy when I’m in this room. It was designed for celebrity guests and their entourage, but the staff uses it when it’s not booked.

“What’s your night looking like, girl?” I add a fresh layer of fire engine red lipstick to my lips as I look in the mirror.

“I’m making some money. Not as much as you, though. I see they seated the Green Bay Packers in your section. Make that money, girl! Tonight, is a bust for me, especially since I’m leaving early. Speaking of, did you bring the clothes I asked for?” Sasha taps her high heel, waiting impatiently.

“Sure did.” I hand her a bag. Inside is my orange and white “CRUSH” off-the-shoulder T-shirt, denim mini skirt, cork wedge tan sandals and my absolute favorite black, white, and orange plaid fedora.

She looks through the bag and pulls out the hat.

“Take care of it,” I admonish. “You know how much I love that hat. Sebastian got it for me on one of his trips to New York. You can’t find a hat like that anywhere around here.”

“I’m rocking the shit out of this!” Sasha brags as she tries the hat on and poses in the mirror with the “CRUSH” T-shirt. “You’ve got skills, Aria. How’s your T-shirt business going? You need to get me one of these!”

“All you gotta do is go to the website and order one. SassySavvyTees.com. Check me out.”

“OK!” She lifts her forefinger. “Once I catch up on tuition, I’ll buy a few T-shirts from you. So, what’s up with your real estate rock star? I see he’s all in your face.”

“Who? Phoenix?”

“Yeah, that guy.” Her smug little expression says it all.

“He’s cool. The night is flying by. He’s just fun to be around.”

“Yeah, fun to be around, my ass. He’s fine and he’s into you. And what about his boys. Oh, my God! They are fine as hell, all of them! When have you ever seen an entourage of guys that hot before?”

“Phoenix is fine, it’s true, and his homies are good-looking too. But once you get to know them, they’re just fun and chill as hell. Besides, no one compares to my Sebastian. I swear, he has me hook, line, and sinker.”

“Hmm. ‘Homies,’ huh? When did we start talking like that? And do you?” She asks provocatively.

“Do I what?”

“Do you swear?”

“Yes! Look, these guys are totally relatable, completely friendly, and positively harmless. You, my dear, would love them.” Trying to get her off my back is harder than I thought.

“Oh, would I?” Her question oozes sarcasm.

“Yes, you would! Anyways, girl.” I wave her off. “So, you’re leaving early, where you off to tonight?” I style my curly hair in the mirror.

“I’m not sure. Aaron said it’s a surprise. Apparently, it involves music and I’m gonna love it. I’ll tell you all about it later! Maybe tonight will be the night for us. I’m trying to stick to your Sexless Six-Month Rule, but how realistic is that?”

“It’s hard, but you gotta do it. It’s the only way to find out if a guy is serious about you. He’ll wait if he really likes you. Plus, you never know, he might even fall in love, like my Sebastian.” I smirk.

It’s like we’re twelve-year-old girls, swapping secrets in the school bathroom between classes. The only difference is we’re ten years older and the secrets are R-rated.

“Well, all I know is that with something like that you better be careful. Love is a crazy thing. No matter what you do, don’t try to tame it, because it will tame you. Don’t try making plans because everything will go off course. And don’t try to control it, because it will run you, demanding you move on its time. All you can do with Love is go along for the ride. That’s it. You’ve been warned. So, play nice!” Sasha warns. She wags her finger at me before giving me a hug and heading out.

CHAPTER 3

He Said What?!?

Six Months Ago

Friday Night (Two Days Before Graduation)

I look up to see Phoenix waving for me to come over.

“Hey, where you been, sweetheart? The well is running dry.” Phoenix holds up an empty glass and clanks the ice.

“Sorry about that. I took a break for a little while. Let’s re-up.”

“I’ll take two more bottles. Grey Goose and Remy.”

I quickly return with drinks in tow.

“Who’s that girl you were with? She works here too, huh? Looks just like you.”

I refill his drink. “Yeah, people say that. That’s Sasha.”

“At first, I couldn’t tell who was who, but the hair gave it away. You’re curly, she’s straight.”

I detect a slur in his words. “Crazy right?” I reach for a coil of my hair to wrap my finger around.

“Time for another shot!” Phoenix happily and drunkenly points to the ceiling.

“OK! Another shot it is.” I concede.

“What are we toasting?” The grin plastered on his face is comical.

He’s cute.

I find myself giggling. “Well in one hour, I’ll be off duty. A free woman! I’m so happy I can taste it.”

“What? You’re leaving me?” His grin turns to a frown. He genuinely looks hurt.

Why is he wearing his heart on his sleeve, like that?

“I’m leaving because I’m off work. Don’t make this about you.” I playfully pretend to slap his arm.

He snaps out of his funk and smiles again. “Alright. Alright! To Aria being a free woman, a free agent, and getting the man of her choosing.”

Free agent? Man of my choosing, huh?

We take our shot.

He sets his shot glass down on table and rests his hands gently on my waist. He looks me in the eye, almost daring me. “Now, give me a kiss.”

Now, I’m the one that’s drunk. Being in such close proximity with this god of a man as he demands a kiss from me, throws me off guard. “What? I don’t kiss my customers.”

“Give me a kiss. Come on.” He moves in closer.

I push him back, pressing my hand against his chest. It’s confirmed, he definitely works out. “No. I’ll give you a hug cause you’re hella cool.”

He leans in. “I want a kiss.”

Against my better judgment, my lips throb. “No, I’ll give you a peck on the cheek and leave lipstick marks. Make sure all the ladies know you’re a playboy.”

“That’s not what I asked for.” He steps even closer, bridging the gap between us.

Blood courses through my veins at a feverish pace.

“Give me a kiss. Right here.” He taps his lips while staring into my eyes. “On the lips.”

Knowing I could get lost in those eyes, I back up. “No!”

“Bitch!”

“Bitch?” *That...kinda hurt.*

“Yeah, Bitch! I’m rich!” He swings his hips around in a drunken celebration. Then he jumps onto the white leather couch in his VIP section. Standing above a crowd of people around his table, he pours shots and gives daps like he’s the man. My jaw drops to the ground. He pulls out a huge wad of cash from his pants and tosses bills towards the crowd like it’s nothing, making it rain. Money falls to the ground all around him. There are five, ten, twenty, fifty, even one-hundred-dollar bills. And it’s like catnip to a kitten. People scream. Gold diggers run from the other side of the club, diving in to see what they can get. It’s total pandemonium.

I stand there, not believing my eyes. This can’t be the same guy I met earlier tonight. Fucking drunk-ass bastard!



An hour later, Nick is at the bar emptying the registers, leaving only enough cash to make change. He does this a few times on busy nights like Friday.

“Hey Nick, I’m outta here. My shift is done.” I yell over the bar.

“Oh, Ari! Hey! I wanted to talk to you about that. Gigi called in. I don’t have anyone to cover VIP. I’m sorry, doll, but I need you to stay.” He continues counting bills.

“This is not happening. I have a date tonight. Tickets to a show I’ll probably never see again. I’m leaving. Right now, Nick!”

He stops counting. “Aria, sweetheart. Please, I need you. What am I supposed to do? I don’t have anyone to cover my VIPs. We’re building a reputation here! How would it look if our service starts slipping now? We need to keep building momentum. It’s a crucial time.”

I feel a headache coming on and rubbing my temples isn’t cutting it. “Oh my God. I can’t believe I’m letting you talk me out of a concert with Miguel!” That “Exit” sign looks so good right now. If only! I huff. “Alright,” I tell him, immediately regretting the decision.

“What?” Nick’s eyes light up.

“Alright, alright, before I change my mind! I’ll stay. But you owe me big time. I’m sacrificing a night with Sebastian and Miguel. That’s a threesome any girl would kill for. Do you understand the magnitude of this?”

“Yeah. I get it.” He shakes his head. “You and every other twenty-something,” he mumbles to himself. “Here ya go.” He hands me a fist full of bills. “See, doll, I got you covered.” He zings me with his show-biz smile.

My expression softens. “Thank you, Nick. Oh, and one other thing. We have a royally fucked up customer in my section. You know your brother from another mother, Phoenix? Please take care of him before I do. He called me a bitch because I wouldn’t kiss him on the lips.”

He shakes his head. “I’ll take care of that knucklehead. Let me talk to him.”

“Can you close out his tab? Cause I want nothing to do with him!”

“Sure thing.”

“Good.” Now all I have to do is give Sebastian the bad news. I reach for my iPhone, but the screen is blank, battery must have died.

Could this night get any better?

I lean over the bar to get the bartender’s attention. “Money! Can you pass me the phone?”

As gorgeous as any girl in the club, with large dark eyes, to-die-for cheekbones and full pouty lips, Marvin “Money” Richardson’s makeup is perfection. And his low-cut platinum blonde pixie looks amazing against his tawny beige skin. He’s the only bartender I know who can serve drinks at record speed, all with a full gel set of claws.

“Honey, what you need?” He yells across the bar as he shakes then quickly pours two martinis. His regulars are fiercely loyal, waiting in line to get a drink, a wise crack, and a smile from him.

I cup my hands around my mouth, forming a make-shift megaphone. “The phone, Money. Pass me the phone.”

He rests his hand on his hip, still looking confused.

I pretend to use an air phone. Finally, he passes me the phone.

“Thanks, girl.”

“I got you!” He blows me a kiss.

I give him a wink. “You know you’re killing it, tonight.”

“Cause I slay!” He leans his head to the side dramatically. “You’re not too bad yourself!” He turns and looks at the woman standing in front of him at the bar and asks, “Now what can I do for you, pretty lady?”

Her eyes light up. “Can I have the Money drink special?”

“Oh, honey! That’s only for my baddest bitches!” He looks her up and down, staring at her for a moment. “And you just made the list!”

Her grin grows into a full-blown smile.

I walk away for a little privacy. Dialing Sebastian’s number is easy, but now it’s time for the hard part. I have to let him down easy. There’s no answer. I call again. Still no answer. “Pick up the phone!” I dial one more time. This time I’m leaving a message.

“Hey! It’s me. I really wish you would’ve answered the phone. This would’ve sounded so much better coming from me versus hearing it on voicemail. Here goes. I know we had plans tonight and believe me I was so looking forward to it. But, my co-worker called in and Nick desperately needs me to stay. There’s no one here to cover VIPs. It’s just me. I’m so, so sorry, but I won’t be able to get off early like I planned. I promise I’ll make it up to you. Please, please, please don’t be mad at me.”

A sick feeling travels through me briefly, but I shake it off and get back to work. The drinks can’t serve themselves.

CHAPTER 4

Meeting Sebastian's Family

Six Months Ago

Saturday (The Day Before Graduation)

The meeting with Sebastian's parents was hard enough. Hopefully the rest of the family is friendlier.

I pull up into the Duvalls' posh neighborhood. Their street is lined with cars. How am I supposed to find a place to park? In the driveway sits an Audi, a Mercedes, a BMW, and a Range Rover.

Who are these people?

Not one to compete, I bust a U-turn and take my nineteen-year-old rust bucket of an Oldsmobile around the corner to park. Even though I'd literally die if anyone saw me getting in or out of this trap in this neighborhood, I have to admit this car gets the job done. With some strong-arming and finagling, I manage to get the driver's door open. As soon as I'm out, I step away, putting a little distance between myself and the car door. Taking a deep breath, I leap forward, thrusting my weight onto the creaky door. It's the only way to get the door to stay shut.

The barbecue started over an hour ago. And nerves or not, I'm still groggy from the all-nighter I pulled at the club. The anxiety alone should be enough to zing me awake. But I'm fried. Last night was the worst. That guy in my VIP section. Cringy!

Somebody please, before I meet these wonderful people, hook me up to the nearest caffeine IV drip. I'll take it straight into my fattest vein, coffee grounds and all.

I straighten out my hair and outfit as I hurriedly walk towards the Duvalls' house. Their home is gorgeous. And huge. At two stories high, it's all brick, has immaculately sculpted landscaping, and an oversized oak door with the family crest carved into the wood.

Who does that?

What if they want to discuss family history? I don't know much, beyond my great-grandmother on my mother's side. And the only thing I know about my father's side of the family is that it exists.

Sebastian did not tell me it would be like this. "Just a casual barbeque with a few close friends and family," he said.

There are more than a "few" people here, and now, after seeing all these fancy luxury cars, I'm not so sure about the "casual" part either.

My heart pumps ferociously.

Here goes.