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a
novel

Dream Girl Drama

*a
novel*

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Chapter One

When good things happened to Sig Gauthier, it never failed to surprise him.

But “good” wasn’t enough to describe the moment he met Chloe.

No word existed for that.

There was simply an understanding that his life would never be the same—and the life he’d led up to knowing Chloe became a collection of indistinct sounds and shapes, while the present became incredibly clear, like a window being defogged.

There she was.

Eight minutes earlier, he was on his way to the snobbiest goddamn section of Connecticut in existence. Darien held the title for wealthiest town in the state. Elite schools. Sprawling estates. Old money. In other words, not his vibe. Sig wasn’t exactly sure why he’d agreed to this dinner with his father and his latest love interest—also known as his richest sucker to date. Normally, he turned down invitations from Harvey Lerner, but after Sig looked up the affluent address, he’d driven the three hours from Boston out of sheer curiosity.

Was Harvey going to swindle this rich woman, too?

If so, it would be a pattern. Sig’s own mother claimed Harvey had drained the contents of their bank account and left while Sig was still a baby. Harvey claimed to have changed, that he wanted an authentic father-son relationship with Sig, but Sig never truly believed him. Every once in a while the deeply hidden need for a father-son bond reared its head and Sig agreed

to meet with Harvey—and he regretted it every single time. Tonight would be no different.

A rattle in the engine of his 1998 Chevy pickup made Sig sit up straighter.

“Ah, fuck.”

He’d heard that sound before. This wasn’t going to end well.

In fact, he had about a minute before the old banger he’d been driving since his college days sputtered to a stop. *Damn*. And only three minutes from his destination?

With a quick check of his blind spot, he started to pull over onto the shoulder of the tree-lined road, but a sign caught his attention up ahead. Country Club of Darien.

Sig snorted.

His red, dented-up truck was going to be more out of place in that parking lot than a priest in the penalty box, but he didn’t want to risk waiting for AAA on the side of the road. The sun was going down and there were too many blind curves. Someone could easily slam into him. Better to wait it out in a lot.

“Guess I’m going to miss caviar and gimlets in the conservatory,” he muttered, taking a right at the sign heralding the country club since 1957. As he slowed to a stop in an available spot on the farthest edge of the lot, he whistled long and low, observing the club through his rearview. It was something out of a movie. Flickering lanterns and sparkling fountains and white pillars. Tennis courts, valet parking, a golf course. Probably an underground cigar room.

Even the air tasted expensive.

In fact, Sig would be shocked if a parking attendant didn’t ask him to get his ratty ride away from these feats of German engineering asap. And they were welcome to try.

As a two-time NHL all-star, Sig wasn’t easy to move.

Once the Bearcats offered him a new contract, he’d probably be able to afford the most expensive car in this lot, just like the corporate lawyers and

trust fund babies drinking Macallan while overlooking the back nine—but he *still* wouldn't want one.

Sig unplugged his phone from the charger and looked down at the screen, cursing when he saw the dreaded empty battery icon. One percent? He'd had the damn thing plugged in the entire ride. Maybe he shouldn't be shocked that his frayed—and discontinued—cigarette lighter charger had finally stopped working, but it couldn't have picked a worse time.

The phone went ominously dark and Sig dropped his head back against the seat. "This is on you, man. You shouldn't have come." Without looking, he tossed his lifeless phone onto the passenger seat. "Should have stayed in Boston."

Didn't he know by now that bad shit happened near his father?

There was no choice but to walk into that mirage of wealth and ask to use the phone.

Or a charger. Just until he was able to put a call through to AAA.

Jesus, he couldn't think of anything worse than venturing into this playground for one percenters. Except maybe sniff testing everyone's gear after an overtime game. What other option did he have, though?

Blowing out a breath, Sig retrieved his phone and pushed open the driver's-side door, peeling his six-foot-two frame off the leather seat, stretching in the darkness while he considered the brightly lit club.

Just get it over with.

He kicked the door shut with a rusted shriek and started toward the valet, his footsteps loud on the asphalt. The two dudes in royal blue jackets watched him approach warily, but he knew instantly when one of them recognized him.

A hockey fan—thank God. That would work in his favor.

"Gentlemen." Sig greeted them with a nod. "Having a little car trouble and my phone just gasped its last breath. Do either one of you have a charger? Or a phone I could use?"

"Sig. Gauthier, right?" One of the young men approached with his hand extended and they shook. "I'm Benny. Oh man. What are you doing in

Darien?”

“Making a huge mistake, probably. About that charger . . .”

“There is a strict no phone policy while we’re on the clock. Everything is in my locker.” The poor kid looked sick about it. “Uh . . . crap. I don’t know what to do.” He took on a conspiratorial tone. “They won’t even let you use the bathroom if you’re not a member. Basically, you might as well be invisible.”

“How cool,” Sig deadpanned. “Maybe you could make the call for me?”

The guy visibly started to sweat. “I’m not supposed to leave my post, Mr. Gauthier—”

“Sig.”

“Holy shit, Sig. That goal against the Red Wings last week? I fucking—”

The other valet hissed at him. “Dude. Language.”

“Sorry.” Benny shifted from left to right in his immaculate white tennis shoes. “Could I get an autograph?”

“Sure.”

Sig rolled the stiffness out of his neck while the kid fumbled for a pen and an unused valet ticket, laughing in disbelief when Sig laid down a quick signature, before getting his mind back on the problem at hand. “Look, Benny. I’m just going to walk in. I’ll tell them you tried to stop me.”

“Badass,” whispered the hockey fan. “Exactly what I’d expect.”

“Nice meeting you, kid.” Sig was already jogging up the steps. Before he’d even opened the door, he locked eyes with the suited employee behind the reception desk, the man’s expression growing progressively pinched as Sig drew closer. This was going to be fun. “Hey, man. I need a charger or a phone. Your choice.”

The man gave a sudden broad smile. “I’ll just need to see your member ID.”

Sig grinned. “We both know I don’t have one.”

“Well, then I’m afraid I’ll have to go with option C. Neither.”

“Clever.” Sig propped his elbow on one of many white pillars in the lobby. “Look, I didn’t choose to break down outside your club, but here we are. One

phone call and I'll be on my way."

"I'm afraid I can't—"

"Oh, *there* you are!"

That was the first time he heard Chloe's voice. Eight minutes after his truck started to shit the bed. His bones just knew it had been eight minutes—he made a living keeping track of the clock without shifting focus from the game—and everything within that parameter of time had led him there. To the right place.

He just fucking *knew*.

Before he even turned around.

But when he *did* turn around? He almost got down on his knees, right in the middle of that lavish lobby. She was that damn . . . enthralling.

Yeah, fine, she was a hot blonde dressed in a pleated, white tennis skirt, which was apparently his newest and deepest fetish. Somehow, though, her looks were the least of what stopped his breath. How about: she fucking floated? Had to be his imagination, right? But that's how he registered her graceful movements. Even the way she blinked was elegant, those long eyelashes sweeping down to hide lively blue eyes, before gracing the world with them again. She had this magical fucking smile that made Sig feel like he'd been socked in the solar plexus.

Holy . . . holy shit.

Who is this?

"I've been looking everywhere for you." She laughed, laying a hand on Sig's arm and squeezing. "Play along," she mumbled out of the corner of her mouth.

Now, look. Sig was normally nimble enough to jump in on a gag without so much as a wink, but her touch made him drunk. Instantly. He couldn't have remembered his own address, much less play along, as she'd requested. Play along with what?

The blond goddess turned her amused smile on the front desk clerk who blushed bright red in response. "Hamish, you dear man! You found him. This is my childhood friend, Ivan. We were in diapers together. Can you

believe it? He wandered off, but *you* found him. Oh, thank goodness. I can't wait to tell the management how helpful you continue to be, Hamish."

Dude's chest was inflating like a balloon. "You're very welcome, Ms. Clifford, but—"

"I'm just going to take him to the lounge, my dear. I'll keep a better eye on him going forward." A sudden twinkle in her eye said she had a delicious secret. "Your hair looks even fuller lately, Hamish. I've been meaning to tell you that for ages."

"All thanks to the leave-in conditioner you recommended, Ms. Clifford—"

She pouted at Hamish, and Sig heard static snaps in his brain. "How many times have I begged you to call me Chloe?"

"Oh, I couldn't," Hamish blustered.

Sig tuned out.

Chloe. Chloe Clifford.

Perfect fit. Sort of whimsical, but classy as hell.

Her hand was still on his arm. The man had called her "miss," but Sig still checked for a ring, because something inside of him needed to be doubly sure. The appropriate finger was bare. Not her wrist, though. It had a string of diamonds around it—and he had a feeling they were equally real as the heart going end over end like a boomerang in his rib cage.

Wake up.

This is important.

She'd asked him to play along. For some reason, this woman had decided to save him and he was standing there like a lobotomized ape. "Uh, yeah." He cleared his throat hard, hitting Hamish with a look of chagrin. "Sorry, I forgot to mention I was Chloe's guest."

"My *guest*," she echoed, patting his arm. "Yes. An esteemed one."

"Ah, no need to flatter me, Chlo."

Her eyes sparkled a little brighter. With humor. "Oh, *that* old pet name. No one has called me that since—"

Sig snapped his fingers. "That long weekend we spent on the Sound."

Chloe sighed dreamily. "You were just learning to sail."

“And you ate *way* too many oysters.”

Their fake laughter was nearly identical.

Hamish had turned green. “Well.” He folded his hands very precisely on the front desk. “You certainly know your way to the lounge. Please excuse me if I didn’t treat your esteemed guest as I should have.”

“You’re excused, Hamish,” Sig said, winking at the other man.

Murder flashed briefly in Hamish’s eyes, but he hid it quickly. “Have an exceptional evening.”

“We shall, but only thanks to you, dear man,” Chloe said effusively, linking her arm through Sig’s and guiding him across the immaculate lobby, Sig leaving boot prints in the gray carpeting, his pulse hammering in his ears. Was he going somewhere he would be *alone* with this person? Was she always so trusting of strangers? “Well, I, for one, think that performance calls for a bottle of stolen champagne,” she whispered near his shoulder. “Don’t you? We can toast to our fake memories of the Sound while we wait for your phone to charge.”

“Make it a bottle of beer and I’m in.”

She squinted thoughtfully. “I don’t know where they keep the beer. I’ve only ever stolen champagne.”

“I’ll suffer through it, I guess.” She was leading him into a room full of couches and a full bar, soft music playing. A pool table lit by a chandelier. Holy high rollers. “What made you help me out like that, Chlo?”

“Well.” He already loved the way Chloe squared her shoulders, shimmying them up and down, as if settling in for story time. “I was leaving through the tennis courts, and I saw you being nice to the valet. Not enough people are nice to them, you know! And I knew Hamish was going to stonewall you, so I circled back and intervened.” She tilted her head curiously. “Why did that valet want your autograph? I couldn’t hear that part.”

“I’m a hockey player.”

She gasped. “A famous one?”

“Only to people who watch hockey, I suppose. To everyone else, I’m just crashing the country club.”

“You *were* crashing it, too.” She clucked her tongue in mock reproof. “Hamish has *never* been spoken to in such a manner.”

“He’ll live.”

A smile spread across her gorgeous mouth to reveal a perfect row of pearly whites. “You’re going to be fun to get drunk with, I think, Mister . . .”

“Gauthier. Sig Gauthier.”

She reared back slightly, nose crinkling. “Oh. That name *does* sound weirdly familiar. I must have heard it while flipping past *SportsCenter*.”

“Past it, huh? Not a sports fan?”

“Does tennis count?”

“Nah.”

She laughed, and he smiled enough to notice his facial muscles shifting. Stretching. Damn. Damn. Beautiful *and* fun *and* quick. He suddenly couldn’t care less if he made it to dinner tonight. He’d let his phone charge well past 100 percent, too. Just sitting there talking to this girl. Looking at her. There was something big and scary happening inside of his chest that he couldn’t name or explain. Only that he wanted, needed, to let it happen.

Somehow, he knew that she wasn’t a choice.

“We’ll sit here, since it’s the closest to an outlet.” Chloe indicated that he should take a seat on a leather couch the color of whiskey when it’s held up to the light. She rummaged in her purse a moment and took out a white phone charger, kneeling down to plug it into the wall and holding out her hand for his phone, giving him a riveting view of Chloe from behind. “You’ll be back up and running in no time.”

His gaze traveled up the backs of her thighs. “I don’t seem to be in a rush anymore.”

“Hmm. I bet.” She leaned sideways and lifted her chin to look over his shoulder. “I need to wait for the bartender to turn his back so I can steal our drinks.”

“Why don’t I just buy us some drinks?”

“Money doesn’t exchange hands here. That’s considered garish,” she explained matter-of-factly. “It’s all included in the membership fee.”

“Out of pure curiosity, about how much is that fee?”

“Oh. Huh.” She blinked. Frowned. “I have no idea.”

Okay, so she was *that* kind of rich. The kind where she didn’t even feel the probable six-figure deduction from her bank account on a yearly basis. Sig had money, but his star had significantly risen since he’d signed his initial contract with the Bearcats—and he’d definitely been undervalued on his way *into* the league. Hopefully soon, chances were that he could belong to this stuffy-ass club, if he so chose. But would he ever? Fuck no.

Right?

Sig had grown up dirt-poor, thanks to his father, but even now that he was financially comfortable, he still shunned the finer things. Didn’t want them and *definitely* didn’t need them. An hour ago, Sig wouldn’t have believed there was a woman alive who could convince him that a membership card to this place was worth the cash. But hell if he wasn’t considering the opposite now. Along with the bare legs that flashed as she sat down on the couch beside him, the hem skimming high, so blessedly high, before she tugged down the white pleats closer to her knees. Crossed her shiny thighs.

Sig swallowed a fist-sized knot. “All right, if drinks are included with a membership, why don’t you just go ask for a bottle of champagne?”

“It tastes better when it’s an ill-gotten gain.”

“You fit right in with the bankers who probably belong to this place.”

She flashed him a grin. “It’s not that I enjoy ripping anyone off. It’s just that . . .” She looked around the lounge and he could tell she’d seen it thousands of times before. “I just try and take some excitement wherever I can. My days are scheduled very meticulously. Early morning practice, followed by lunch with some acquaintance or another. More practice. Followed by tennis lessons—”

“You keep saying practice. Practice for what?”

“I play the harp. I’m a harpist.” She fluttered her fingers for emphasis, then proceeded to look at them as if they were foreign objects. “Let me ask you something. What is the point of being labeled a prodigy if I have to practice all the time? Doesn’t prodigy mean I just get to show up and be amazing?”

“Do you want me to call one of my harp prodigy friends and ask them for you?”

A laugh burst out of her, satisfying something very deep in his chest. “Are you a hockey prodigy?”

“God no, I had to work my ass off. *Now* I get to show up and be amazing.”

She huffed her lips up into a half smile. Those blue eyes ran laps around his face, like she wanted to see inside of his head. Or maybe surprised to find that he was unexpected to her. And he liked that. He liked being something unknown for her, the way she seemed to be for him. “I think I might like to watch you play hockey sometime, Mister Gauthier.”

“Come to Boston. I’ll let you watch me do whatever you want.”

For long moments, she simply stared at him, as if trying to categorize or figure him out but not being able to quite do so. Eventually, her gaze drifted down to his mouth and hung out there, slowly meandering back up to make eye contact. “Is it very forward and extremely soon if I say I’m attracted to you?” she whispered.

“I’m only pissed I didn’t get to say it first.” At some point, they’d gravitated closer together on the couch. Though it was hard to say who’d made the move, their thighs were now pressed together, bodies turned slightly, his head tipping down toward hers from above. “I think I might like to watch you play the harp, Miss Clifford.”

“Well, we’re just a couple of people wanting to watch each other do things, aren’t we?”

“Looks that way.”

“I have somewhere to be tonight.”

His right eye twitched. “You got a boyfriend, Chlo?”

She pursed her lips. “Would you steal me away if I did?”

This was no time to lie. “In a heartbeat.”

Her pupils dilated, lips parting on a quiet laugh.

Briefly, her attention ticked left. “The bartender just left to get ice. I’m going to make my move on that bottle of champagne, because I feel myself on the verge of making impulsive decisions.”

Sig quirked a brow. “And the champagne is going to stop you?”

“No,” she breathed, rising fluidly to her feet. “It’s going to help me make excuses for my behavior.”

Bemused and horny and frankly, in awe, he watched her butt twitch the whole damn way to the bar, his cock turning stiff as a mallet in his jeans. Sig wanted desperately for this to be a wild, cosmic attraction thing. A lightning strike of lust. Because these unknown feelings of kismet and possessiveness and fascination that she’d inspired in him so quickly were scary as shit.

But Chloe turned at the bar and gave him a look of conspiratorial mischief and winked. Then, slick as a cat burglar, she draped herself soundlessly over the bar, reached down, and landed on her feet again with a bottle in hand, sticking her tongue out and making the universal symbol for *rock on*. And his heart lodged permanently behind his jugular.

This was more than lust at first sight.

He didn’t have a name for the alternative yet.

But the night was young, right?

Chapter Two

Maybe I'm dreaming.

She'd taken a line drive tennis ball to the forehead and the paramedics were loading her onto a stretcher right now. She wasn't *really* sitting in the lounge with the most casually intense man she'd ever met in her life. It was all an illusion.

But when she sat back down beside him and the cool, ultrasmooth leather kissed the backs of her thighs and he draped his arm along the back of the couch behind her, the warm shiver that snaked all the way down to her toes was very real.

Who was this man?

He'd made it known that he was interested in her, like *really* interested—and he did it without making her uncomfortable, which was not easy. At all. Especially considering his size. And his *presence*. His rough-edged charisma took up the entire room, let alone the couch. When she'd watched him stride confidently toward the valet earlier and stop to acknowledge his fan, he'd literally frozen Chloe in her tracks. Sig had accepted those compliments from the valet without any false humility, just an air of security. In himself, his abilities, who he was.

This man had grown into himself.

Had only the tiniest speck of self-doubt. She'd glimpsed it in his eyes when he looked around at the lavish lounge. When he'd registered the luxury of the leather as he sat down. That touch of humility had been so small she

almost missed it, but there was something extremely attractive about it. The fact that this self-assured person seemed to find her equally compelling . . . it made her feel awake. And secure.

Excited.

Also, *my goodness*, he was a smoke show.

Something about the way he wore a T-shirt suggested he took it off multiple times a day. In his bedroom, in the locker room, prior to collapsing into sleep at midnight. Clothed was not his natural state. A shirt was a formality. He was six feet, some odd inches of athletically honed muscle, thick in some places, trim in others, and there was a hint of cockiness about him that tended to turn her off in other men, but not this one.

Perhaps because, unlike the men of her acquaintance, he'd earned it himself?

Without removing his attention from her, Sig took the bottle from her hands, unwound the wire from the neck, and popped the cork. Barely a sound escaped because he muffled it with his, wow, gigantic hands. Then, tossing a casual look toward the bar, he tipped the bottle to her lips, his golden brown gaze fastened to her mouth while she took the first sip. Two sips, three. She kept going because she enjoyed him quenching her thirst, the way he swallowed hard while looking at her throat.

Seriously, what in the Connecticut heck was happening here?

Her toes were curled in her sneakers, her thighs flexing involuntarily.

A pulse tick-tick-ticked at the base of her neck, in her wrists, in her chest—and it accelerated the longer they stared at each other.

Finally, he took the bottle from her lips and brought it to his own, gulping deeply and wincing at the taste.

“Not a fan?” Chloe asked, laughing.

“There’s no flavor,” he grunted. “It’s just a bunch of carbonation.”

“The bubbles are what make it a celebration.”

He reached forward, setting the bottle down on the low pink-quartz table in front of them, before leaning back into his manspread. “You let me know when you want more.”

Chloe dug the fingers of her right hand into the leather couch cushion, hoping to distract the rest of her body from the sudden onslaught of giddy heat. *You let me know when you want more.* She had no right liking that so much—the assumption that he would oversee her consumption of the drink. She didn’t need him to do that. But she . . . wanted him to?

Simply put, his honest brand of arrogance turned her on.

This was not the typical brand of trouble she looked for at the country club.

No, she specialized in . . . stolen liquor.

Playing harmless pranks.

Going topless in the spa.

Sig screamed Big Problem . . . and yet she continued to sit there, growing more and more fascinated as champagne bubbles zipped around her head and his heat surrounded her. “Do you like living in Boston? Is that where you grew up?”

“No, I’m from Minnesota. Just outside Minneapolis. Went to college in Michigan. But Boston has been home for six years. It’s . . . yeah, I guess I consider it my home now.”

“What is it like?”

“Depends on the neighborhood, but it’s loud and busy. Congested. Kind of messy at times. But it’s got a lot of heart. The *most* heart, actually.” He thought for a second. “On a Sunday afternoon, when there’s a game on, the whole place kind of hums. Everyone’s got a little bit of a buzz on, and you can walk down the street and hear whistles and cheers going off on everyone’s televisions. Laughter. It’s a good town. I love it.”

Chloe’s heart raced, as it often did when she thought about leaving home, fleeing the sheltered bubble of Darien, and experiencing an entirely new world. How scary it would be, but how rewarding at the same time. In fact, she’d been thinking of it to the point of distraction lately. “You make it sound magical.”

Sig studied her face. “It is. You’d fit right in.”

“Really?”