

# Driving Me Wild

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A Novel

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## Chapter One: Aimee

The poor bastard was clueless, but Michael Blake had picked the wrong night to embarrass me. To be honest, I would eventually feel a prick of sympathy for him. How could he know he'd chosen the absolute worst time to hit me with long pent-up feelings?

That night, though, his miscalculation was not my problem.

My challenge as I sat there at Winthrop's, a fashionable Near North Side steak place with blazing-red tablecloths and mahogany, leather-lined booths, was how to deal with a nice guy who was tragically off base.

Mind you, I had enjoyed my several dates with Michael, an investor relations executive with Star Studio Technologies, a manufacturer of technology for music studios. We were old high school friends, if you use the term loosely. The type who have plenty of shared acquaintances and always speak when passing in the hallways, at football games, and the local malls.

That was about it, though. Michael was a handsome guy, relatively athletic, and just tall enough to be a point guard in the NBA, if he'd had the talent to match. Despite all this—and my patient efforts at seeing if this would change—my tone may tell you that we were just short on romantic chemistry.

Apparently, I had failed massively at communicating this reality. “Aimee, I want to set the record straight,” Michael said, his blue eyes shining respectfully as he self-consciously straightened his tie. “I’ve had strong feelings for you from the day we first met. Now that we’ve

reconnected after all these years, I really hope we're headed somewhere with this." He leaned forward as if planning to grasp my hands, then wisely tented his instead.

He cleared his throat quickly, the sound echoing amidst the relatively hushed crowd surrounding us. "Cards on the table, I'd like to upgrade our status. I'm not saying we we're ready to meet the parents or anything—"

I didn't make marketing director at ESPN by 25 without knowing how to sense a moment, and I knew this was mine. Pushing aside my anger at all men, I forced the warmest smile possible. "Michael, you are so sweet," I replied, patting his right hand. "I'm enjoying our friendship too." I wanted to be reassuring without being encouraging, but could already tell that I was off my game tonight, because suddenly I had nothing. I needed to shut this perfectly good man down, but I wasn't sure how to close. "Thanks for sharing that with me."

Truth be told, I cursed myself at the sight of Michael's reaction. Staring down at my hand atop his, he squinted in momentary confusion. Then, in a flash, his complexion lit up with patches of red. I had stepped all over this situation, but what could I do now? I leaned in a bit, my voice softening with guilt. "Michael, are you okay?"

He bolted upright in his seat, his gaze hardening. "Maybe I wasn't clear? Aimee, I've been infatuated with you for years, but I feel like I really know you now. I've got genuine feelings here. *I want to make you happy.*" The fire in his eyes and the red in his skin faded, but his posture didn't ease. "I feel like I just got patted on the head."

Now my own cheeks simmered as I dropped my head. "Michael, just let me—"

Maintaining eye contact, he cleared his throat. "Could you ever feel the way I do? Yes or no, please."

The point-blank question felt a little harsh, but I processed it with a deep breath. I was having a terrible week, but the guy sitting across from me wasn't some average asshole flipping out because I wouldn't sleep with him. I had known Michael for nearly two decades, and he'd been a perfect gentleman on our few dates (and yes, that was part of his problem). Even now, he hadn't proposed that we go back to his apartment and hook up; the guy seemed to be peddling a real relationship, something with a future.

I wanted to go easy on him; there was no reason we couldn't emerge from this debacle as friendly acquaintances, right? I stroked my newly shorn hairdo and tentatively met his stare. "I-I don't know what you want. I just thanked you for your honesty."

He shook his head slowly. "That tells me nothing. Just tell me, is this attraction one-way?"

I set my spine flush with the cushioned back of our booth, feeling pinned in by curious stares. "Michael, please, this is really not the time or place for this discussion. I'm just not ready for anything serious right now."

There was a look in Michael's eyes I hadn't seen before. "Oh, I know you haven't been serious with a man in a long time." He tapped the table anxiously, licked his lips. "I know I'm not the type of guy you usually fall for."

I cocked my head as if eager to soak up the wisdom embedded in that statement. "So my type is—what exactly?"

"We both know I'm a little 'safe' for your tastes. I'm nobody's bad boy. I won't sleep around on you, won't put my hands on you in anger, and wouldn't think of leaving when you most needed me. You know, all the things certain women find boring."

Inhaling the lemony scent of my lobster butter, I stared a hole through him. “We’re still talking about me, right?”

“Never mind,” he replied. Michael was stretching out his words now, the sincerity behind his earlier comments having left the building. He peered across the room, eyes locked on our waiter who was delivering another table’s check. “Guess we’re done here. I’ll handle the bill when it comes, of course. You need money for a cab?”

My entire body steamed, but I shrugged and began to gather my things. “Nope, got it covered.”

He reached into a jacket pocket. “No, let me handle it. Save your money for the next guy—”

That was when I turned into Cady Herron in *Mean Girls*, one of my favorite teen films from high school. One minute Michael sat there quipping about my taste in men, and the next a school bus crashed through the front entrance and mowed him down. I knew it wasn’t actually happening, but damn if envisioning it didn’t feel good.

Multiple aspects of my life were a train wreck, so I had arrived at Winthrop’s eager for a low-stakes night of fun conversation and relaxation with Michael. I had planned to open up some about new tensions on my job and about my “on-again, off-again” boyfriend (stressing the fact that we were presently “off-again” while omitting the pesky fact of his marital status).

I had even considered bringing Michael up to partial speed on the longest-running drama of my life: my distant relationship with my semi-famous novelist father. Dustin Fineman had impregnated my mother only to return to his wife and older children. Our relationship since had been defined by his absence and neglect, offset every few years by his guilty, arm’s length attempts to throw money at me.

For nearly a decade I had protected myself from the shame, fear and disappointment that went with interacting with the original bad boy in my life, and worse yet it was looking like I might need his help to offset my mother's recent financial problems. I'm not the type to share such issues with a wide circle of people, but I had built enough of a friendly rapport with Michael to consider opening up to him about it.

Well, never mind all that. His accusations pushed all of my buttons, and next thing I knew a blur of words passed between us as we each stood and jammed fingers toward the other. It must have been a sight: two twenty-something, fashionably dressed professionals shouting and spitting like kids on a schoolyard.

I did not have time for this.

My vision clear again, I stared back at Michael to see that, while he had no bus tire tracks on him, he *was* drenched in Merlot. Momentum carrying me forward, I didn't worry about how it had gotten there. "Like it's *my* fault nobody wants your boring ass!" Struggling into my black wrap, I slammed five twenties onto the table, grabbed my purse, and stormed past the flustered waiter.

Tears streamed down my face, but I wasn't sure why. Hustling past one table after another in the dimly lit dining room, my eyes riveted on the imposing mahogany front doors, I tried and failed to ignore all the laughter and the quips of the patrons Michael and I had amused.

I had nearly made it through the thicket of tables when an elegant woman in her sixties tapped my wrist as I passed her seat. I took a deep breath and shot her a look that probably said, "Watch it."

The woman nodded at her companion, a handsome but heavysset bearded gentleman whose suit fit like it had been tailored. “I’ve had a few dates end like that myself, dear,” she said, eyes twinkling. “That nice young man just doesn’t do it for you, does he?”

Frowning, I bit my lower lip. “Frankly, ma’am, no.” I braced for a lecture.

She slipped me a wink instead, then patted her date’s hand. “My husband Marlon didn’t know the meaning of commitment when I first met him,” she said. “I passed up many nice frogs waiting for my bad boy to become a prince, and he finally did.”

She chuckled at the embarrassed grin on her husband’s face, who was more into his smart phone than our conversation. “Don’t settle, dear. Women of your generation especially shouldn’t; you don’t need a man just to have one. If the nice boys don’t do it for you, hold out. Most of these boys grow into men.” She patted my elbow. “Be there when yours does.”

Unable to find words, I nodded respectfully at my newfound advisor before scooting out the main entrance. It was nice to feel supported, but her advice seemed a little off. While I technically preferred my boys bad, I knew them well enough to know that converts like Marlon were few and far between. I had long ago made peace with the fact that where men were concerned, I preferred excitement over security. I had spent many years building a life that provided the security I couldn’t trust a man to deliver.

What I had very much *not* made peace with was the notion of letting another man disrespect me. I had plenty of early life experience in that, and treating dating like a game instead of a search for love had been an effective form of protection. It was why I hadn’t stood for Michael’s attempts to lecture me.

Curbside, I let a valet flag down a cab and tried not to dwell on my conversation with the well-meaning older woman. Was my Marlon, my Vin Diesel or my Kanye West really out there,

waiting to be tamed? Hugging myself in the evening's crisp, cool air, I wiped the question away.

Too much reflection would end with me joining a convent.

## Chapter Two: Michael

A dam burst inside me that night, the same dam that had obstructed some of my most selfish impulses. Ms. Aimee Chase bulldozed the entire thing that night at Winthrop's. Every last ounce of determination I once held to be "the good guy"—the type of man who encouraged his friends to treat their girlfriends the way they would want their sisters to be treated—evaporated in the face of Aimee's reaction to my words. She may as well have grabbed a carving knife, slit me open and watched the life drain out of me.

I guess Aimee thought her "thank you" reaction was a way of letting me down easy, but she didn't know she had picked the wrong night to be anything other than blunt. *Thanks for sharing that with me?* Processing her words and a gaze that good-natured nurses probably aim at terminal patients, my mind whirred, sputtered and spat.

*Thanks for sharing that with me?* It wasn't like we'd just kept in touch via a text or two around birthdays and Christmas; I had hit my AMEX mercilessly to hook her up at in-demand restaurants, symphonies and comedy clubs throughout the Windy City. In addition to the gas burned getting from my apartment in Printers Row to her overpriced place in Old Town, I always wound up paying through the nose for parking.

I had played things laid back, enduring two months of sexless friendship before laying my feelings for Aimee on the line. *Thanks for sharing that with me.* The words stabbed at every nerve in my brain. What the hell kind of response was that?

When I pressed her for a clear answer, the sudden arch of Aimee's back told me she wasn't expecting this. A woman that beautiful probably inadvertently stepped on a new heart

daily. I suppose that's why I never had the courage to approach her when we were classmates at Kenwood Academy.

When I challenged her initial response, her tepid words left me empty. It was the type of line I get from women all the time. *Your timing's bad, Michael.* If you're me, the woman says she needs a break from relationships right now. But if you're the typical bad boy loser who who's run around with everything in heels and treated them all like interchangeable one-night stands, you're golden.

I'm sure Aimee expected me to meekly accept her verbal pat on the head. She probably even figured the evening would end politely. When I made that last wise crack about her saving her money for the next loser she chose over me, her reaction was side-splitting. The shock to her system sent her jaw plunging toward her tastefully displayed cleavage. One of her eyeballs bulged for a sec, and I swear her short, stylish Jennifer Lawrence hairdo frayed and melted around the edges.

"Michael," she said, standing and gathering her things, "you clearly need an answer." She was trying to sound dispassionate, but her voice nearly shook with rage. "So here it is. You have all the packaging, but none of the chemistry."

"Thank you," I said, throwing my arms wide and not caring that it drew a few more stares from nearby diners. "Would it have killed you to say that, oh, six dates ago?"

"You're being ridiculous," Aimee replied as she turned away from me. "*You* invited me out tonight."

"Don't kid yourself," I said coolly. "You knew when you climbed into my car tonight how you felt about me." Standing to match her stance, I exited the booth but lingered in front of the table. "Based on your condescending reaction, I'm guessing I never had a shot with you."

She waved a hand. “Has it crossed your mind that I never really thought about it?”

“I’d have to call that flat-out rude,” I said. “I invested nearly three months in wooing you. You know how many other women I could have been pursuing all that time?”

She took a step toward the door, then whirled back to face me. “You’re a damn fool, do you know that?”

I chuckled. “You got that right, I am a fool. I’m a fool for thinking you had it in you to appreciate a good guy.”

That line got me an eyeful of her wine and a string of four letter words. Aimee had completely changed personalities now. “Like it’s *my* fault nobody wants your boring ass!” As she stormed off, I crossed my arms with satisfaction. My shedding of my Nice Guy ways had already begun—I was thinking like a bad boy. As long as she hadn’t exhausted her cash, she’d hail a cab and get home just fine. And if not, well, not my problem.

The first few minutes after Aimee stormed off into the cool night air, I was a little embarrassed by the stares and snickers of couples at the surrounding tables. When a clearly sloshed fifty-something guy in a checked blazer caught me staring, he stopped laughing long enough to shrug as if apologizing. “That was ugly, buddy. Guess you’re wakin’ up alone tomorrow.” As he slapped sloppy high fives with his drunken companions, I turned back to Aimee’s empty seat.

Dabbing at the wet spots on my suit jacket with a napkin, I felt my embarrassment morph into liberation. Thanks to Aimee’s rejection, at least I knew where I stood with her. To her credit, she had tried to break it to me with a more gentle touch than my boss, Maxwell Walker, had.

Just last week Maxwell, Star Studio’s VP of Investor Relations, had taken me out for my annual performance review lunch. A British graduate of Oxford and Yale, Maxwell was a

cerebral but hard-partying guy who had plucked me three years earlier from a run-of-the-mill analyst role in our corporate finance department. Based on my prior boss's recommendations, I was hired on to help more effectively explain the company's financial performance, critique the financial forecasts provided to our CFO and help build presentations for investor conferences.

As tended to be the case with these review lunches, Maxwell forced me to endure veiled references to the latest Star Studio sales hottie he was bedding for nearly fifteen minutes. Then and only then did he crack open the thick, scroll-like pages of the four-star restaurant's menu and get around to me. After praising me for meeting all of his expectations and insisting we raise our wine glasses in a toast, his smile evaporated into thin air. "Now Michael, I don't want to give you the wrong impression. I value our camaraderie too much."

*Shit.* More than anything, his use of my proper name told me I wouldn't like what was coming.

Maxwell had drummed the table absentmindedly, though he rigorously maintained eye contact. "You are a doer, Michael. I can assign just about any project to you—the most thorny analytical exercise, clean-up of a completely bollixed presentation or narrative, you name it—and you get it done, and well. That's why you earned your promotion last year."

I nodded, sensing the unsheathing of a knife.

Maxwell smoothly waved away the approaching waiter, then leaned forward. "I am about to file yet another glowing review on you, and you deserve it. But, Michael, we're hitting a saturation point here. Kyle is coming on strong, and has shocked me this year with his ability to cold-call sell-side analysts and investors. He's a damn miracle worker."

I nodded, unable to deny the abilities of Kyle, whom I had advocated for when Maxwell needed someone to replace me in my initial role. Kyle was a tee-totaling evangelical Christian, married at twenty-six with three children. The guy didn't drink alcohol and had probably only

had sex when making his babies, but he was charming as hell. I envisioned him someday opening a highly successful chain of Chik-Fil-A-type restaurants that closed on Sundays and politely declined to hire homosexuals.

The upshot of the review: Maxwell was preparing to promote Kyle above me and transfer me back into the Corporate Finance group. “I have to be honest here, Mike. What I’m seeing from Kyle, this guy could take my job some day. I mean, hopefully not here.” A wink. “It would be irresponsible of me not to grab onto this rare talent and develop him.”

I felt like he’d blasted me in the chest, wanted nothing more than to tell Maxwell to go violently violate himself, but I remained stubbornly upright in my seat. “Maxwell, what if I saw myself advancing further in Investor Relations?”

His answer turned him into an adult on the Peanuts cartoons—the rest of his words hit my ears as nothing more than, “Wah-wah, wah, wah, wah-wah-wah.” Something about how I should be grateful that I’d be two levels higher when I transferred back into the Finance group, how we were now on the same page and my expectations had been fairly defined.

When I asked him flat out why he didn’t think I could go any higher in IR, he was brutally honest. “Look, Michael, you’re a great internal resource. Taking the next step as a VP-in-waiting, well, it requires a trait or two that I’ve not yet observed in you.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Killer instinct,” Maxwell said, rubbing his chin. “You lack it. Sitting in my chair requires a certain brazen quality.” He turned up a palm, motioning toward me in poorly veiled pity. “You, you’re just too damned nice.”

It was an ugly truth placed squarely in my face: I wasn’t man enough for the women I wanted, nor for the employers whose favor I sought. After years spent in denial, I was going to

do something about it. Planting the mental seeds of a battle plan, I settled back into my seat and asked the waiter to bring the molten lava cakes Aimee and I had ordered.

“Sir,” the waiter asked with a furrowed brow, “you still want me to bring *both* desserts?”  
Guess he didn’t think Aimee was coming back.

“My good man,” I said as I stuffed a twenty into his hand, “bring them both, along with a bottle of your house wine.” When he brought them, I savored each bite of the cakes, washing them down with a glass of the wine before sharing the bottle with two nearby tables.

Dessert never tasted so good.