
PURE
SIN
A PRIVILEGE NOVEL

BY
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THE LIFE

This is the life.

Ariana Osgood sighed contentedly as she settled back into the strong arms of her boyfriend, Palmer Liriano, on a beautiful November morning. Outside the floor-to-ceiling windows at the Hill, the sky was a solid, bright blue, the trees along the banks of the Potomac a cheerful autumn *mélange* of oranges, reds, and golds. It was Friday, and after a long week of midterms and constant study groups, Palmer and Ariana had decided to spend their breakfast period in the junior and senior lounge, rather than the dining hall, so that they could snag some precious alone time. Ariana took a breath and relished the moment. This was what she had worked so hard for all these months—all these *years*. She was finally where she wanted to be. She had the prestigious school, the gorgeous boyfriend, the popular friends she was meant to have. But above all, she was free.

Free.

Ariana's skin tingled as the word passed through her mind, and she shivered slightly against Palmer's chest.

"You cold?" he asked, nuzzling her ear from behind. His early-morning voice was a pleasant, comforting rumble. "You can wear my jacket if you want."

Ariana nodded, then looked over her shoulder at him and touched her nose to his. Up close his green eyes were even more stunning, flecked with gold and blue. But even better was the way they shone when he looked at her. As if he couldn't believe how lucky he was to be with her. The most sought-after guy in school wanted *her*.

Palmer shrugged out of his navy blue Atherton-Pryce Hall blazer and held it open. Ariana slipped her arms into the sleeves. She wasn't cold, but she knew that walking around campus in his jacket would make her feel even more perfect, more secure. All the girls at APH would eye her with envy. It would solidify her as Palmer's girl. Everyone would know they were together. The thought made Ariana giggle with pleasure.

"What's so funny?" Palmer asked, placing his hands on her shoulders.

"Nothing. Just happy," Ariana said.

"Me too," Palmer replied, matter-of-factly.

"Nice, isn't it?" Ariana asked, tucking her short, auburn hair behind her ear.

He grinned. "Very."

He touched his lips to hers, and they were still locked in a deep kiss when several of their friends dropped into the chairs around them.

“Break it up, dudes. There are virgins present,” Landon Jacobs said, jerking his head toward Adam Lazzerri as he sat on the couch across from Ariana and Palmer.

Adam placed both hands over his heart, pretending to be wounded. “Maybe I haven’t hooked up on every continent like *some* people, but I do okay.”

Maria Stanzini groaned as she perched on the edge of the couch next to Landon. “Must our conversations always come back to Landon’s many conquests?” she asked, taking a sip of her double espresso. Her light blue APH-issue button-down was slightly rumpled, her gold and gray striped tie loose around her neck, but she still managed to look beautiful. Her light brown hair was back in a ponytail, with a few loose locks grazing her sharp cheekbones.

“What’re you guys doing here?” Palmer asked in an annoyed tone. Ariana smiled, loving that he valued his time with her so much that it made him forget his manners.

“Soomie ordered those awful runny eggs again,” Maria said, disgusted, sticking the tip of her tongue between her teeth. “I could *not* sit there a moment longer and watch her eat them.”

“So gross.” Adam shuddered.

“But if you guys are gonna nauseate me with talk of skeevy international hook-ups, I might as well just go back to my room,” Maria added, turning her knees away from Landon.

Ariana shot Maria a sympathetic glance. As the only person on campus who knew about Maria and Landon’s secret relationship—and as a person who’d just come out of the relationship closet with

her own secret boyfriend—Ariana felt Maria's pain. It couldn't be easy being the clandestine girlfriend of a worldwide popstar-playboy. Of course, the playboy thing was a fabrication for the benefit of the fans and the press. At least, Ariana hoped it was, for Maria's sake.

The guys began to question Landon about the girl he'd supposedly hooked up with in Australia over the summer, prompting Maria to break out her iPod. Ariana eyed Lexa and her boyfriend, Conrad Royce, as they joined the group. They had their arms wrapped around each other, and each toted a coffee in their free hand. Conrad whispered something in Lexa's ear. She tipped her face up to look at him and smiled, her long, dark hair tumbling down her back.

Perfection, Ariana thought. Lexa seemed happy and completely normal, which was a huge relief. Not many girls would have been able to hold it together after witnessing a friend kill another so-called friend in self-defense—and then help bury the body in her very own backyard. Luckily, Lexa was proving to be more resilient than most. In the past week, she hadn't mentioned that fateful night to Ariana once.

Which made it a lot easier for Ariana to focus on other things. Like scouring the papers for any mention of Kiran Hayes's disappearance, or of a body washing up on the shore of the Potomac. As of that morning's *Washington Post*, there was still no such news. Which was another reason Ariana felt so very relaxed.

"What's up, gents?" Jasper Montgomery asked, walking over and dropping onto the couch next to Ariana. The leg of Jasper's dark gray wool pants scratched up against the bare stretch of thigh beneath her plaid skirt. Instantly her skin began to itch, and she moved her leg away.

“Ugh. Another text,” Jasper muttered, looking at his cell. “I rue the day my mother figured out how to use modern technology.”

“What’s she bugging you about?” Adam asked Jasper.

“Travel plans for parents’ weekend,” Jasper replied, his thumbs moving rapidly over his keyboard. “She wants me to try out various hotel rooms this week and let them know which one they should stay in. She has a checklist for me. Quality of concierge service, promptness of room service, size of whirlpool bath . . .”

“Staying in hotels all week sounds like a good deal to me,” Landon said. He tossed a bit of croissant in the air, leaned back, and caught it in his mouth. When he sat up again, his long brown bangs fell perfectly over his right eye. “I’ll do it if you won’t.”

He ever so slightly nudged Maria’s foot with his own, clearly thinking of some alone time for the two of them. Maria pushed her light brown ponytail over her shoulder and edged farther away from him.

“I don’t know, Landon,” Ariana said. “We might be otherwise occupied this week.”

Adam, Landon, Jasper, and Ariana exchanged glances. They were four of the five candidates who were up for initiation in Stone and Grave, an exclusive secret society on campus. They had just gotten through hell week, so initiation had to be right around the corner. The question was when, exactly, would it take place? Lexa was the president of their chapter, so she clearly knew the answer to that question, as did Palmer, who was her number two, and Conrad, who was the guys’ pledge educator. Even Maria was probably aware. Only the newbies had no clue what to expect.

“So, Adam, are your parents coming to parents’ weekend?” Palmer asked, deftly changing the subject. “It’d be great to see them.”

“Yup. They’re making it their one vacation this year.” As one of the few scholarship students at Atherton-Pryce, Adam was the only person in their group whose family didn’t own villas and condos and pieds-à-terre around the globe. “They’re gonna do the whole monument and museum thing while they’re out here. What about you?”

“Of course,” Palmer said. “My dad loves being here, and it’s a great photo op for a congressperson,” he joked. “Right, Lex?”

Lexa blinked. “Oh, yeah. My mom and Senator Greene will be here, smiling for the cameras. I can’t remember the last time they were at the Foxhall Road house.”

“Are we still having brunch at your place that Sunday, Lex?” Maria asked.

Lexa glanced briefly at Ariana. Ariana knew what she was thinking: It would be the first time she and Ariana had been back to the house since Kaitlynn’s death. Of course, as far as their friends were concerned, Lillian Oswald, née Kaitlynn Nottingham, had simply left school, unable to handle the workload.

Ariana waited for Lexa to flinch, but she just smiled. “Of course!” Lexa said brightly. “You all received your invites, right? My mother has a new chef, and she’s just dying to trot him out.”

As everyone discussed the menu, Ariana let herself relax. She was looking for problems where there were none. After all she’d been through in the past few years, no one could blame her for that.

“I just asked my mom, and she says they’d be delighted,” Jasper

said, tilting his phone. “Of course, she’ll probably text back again to make sure you have enough guest towels to accommodate her. You guys are really going to *love* her,” he added facetiously.

Ariana and the others laughed.

“I was kind of looking forward to meeting Lillian’s family,” Palmer said. “After how cagey she was about who they are. Kind of sucks that she bailed.”

Ariana glanced at Lexa, who looked back at her furtively.

“Yes, well, if you can’t handle the pressure of APH, I guess you shouldn’t be at APH,” Ariana said blithely. “I can’t wait to meet Maria’s parents. They look so glam in all your pictures.”

“You won’t be disappointed,” Lexa put in, shooting Ariana a grateful look. “They *define* glam.”

“They do have their moments,” Maria said with a modest smile. “Personally, I’d like to meet Ana’s infamous grandmother. I’ve never known anyone who had to check in with home as often as you do, A.”

Ariana lifted one shoulder, pretending the every-other-day phone calls to Briana Leigh Covington’s grandmother were just a matter of course, rather than sheer torture.

“She’s just trying to honor my dad by looking out for me,” she said. “But unfortunately, you won’t get to meet her. She’s too frail to travel.”

Thank goodness, Ariana added silently. Because if she ever did show up on this campus, she’d notice that I am not, in fact, her granddaughter.

The real Briana Leigh Covington had been cremated in Ariana’s name several months back, after Ariana had drowned her in order to

steal her identity. Ariana swallowed hard, resolving not to think about it. That part of her life was behind her. All the unpleasantness. All the death. All of it. From now on, there was no need for any of it. She was really, truly Briana Leigh Covington. And no one would ever know otherwise.

“That sucks,” Palmer said, giving her a squeeze. “I was looking forward to grilling her about your toddler years.”

“Now *that* would have been interesting,” Jasper added with a smirk.

“Yeah, so not going to happen,” Ariana deadpanned.

The others laughed as the bell rang, signaling the end of the breakfast period.

“Do you want your jacket back?” Ariana asked Palmer.

“Keep it,” he said. “It’s kinda sexy, you wearing my clothes.”

Then he pulled Ariana to him and kissed her. Ariana’s eyes fluttered closed as she sunk into him, the rest of the world completely fading away. Palmer slipped his hand up her arm and over her shoulder until he was cupping her cheek. Ariana heard everyone else file out of the room, but still she couldn’t pull herself away. Then an empty paper cup suddenly hit her in the head.

“Hey!” Palmer protested with a laugh.

“I told you! Virgins are present!” Landon protested, throwing his hands out.

“Yeah, come on, sluts. We’re going to be late for class,” Conrad put in with a laugh.

Palmer shrugged and reached for both of Ariana’s hands, hoisting

her off the couch. She had to step over Jasper's feet to get around the table. He was the only one of their group who hadn't moved. Ariana glanced back at him as they headed for the door, expecting to find him still furiously texting, but he wasn't.

Instead he was looking directly at her. And he had a smirk on his handsome face that was completely unreadable.

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