

Stranger Sessions

TRUST FALL

TWO STRANGERS
ONE CAMERA
ALL THE SPICE

ARIANA ST. CLAIRE

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Trust Fall

Stranger Sessions

Ariana St. Claire

*Tilt-A-Whirl
Publishing*





For the dream chasers.

*Who still believe in the kind of love that sees our scars and
flaws as something beautiful. Especially the ones we hide so
well...*

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CHAPTER ONE

REID



“*K*ylie,” I hissed into my cellphone as I balanced a shipment box not so gently handed to me by the UPS guy. Who, coincidentally, was not Adam, our usual guy.

Adam had manners. This neanderthal? Not so much.

“I’m not getting into the whys, but there is no way in hell I’m doing,” I broke off with a glare at Not-Adam, who ignored me, and left me balancing my phone, two boxes of couture, and an older sister attempting to rope into some harebrained Valentine’s Day set up. “*That.*”

I swear I heard her eyes roll all the way from whatever racetrack the team she co-owned with her husband attended this weekend. In the background, the telltale sounds of the revving of engines signaled the start of testing. “How are the tires?”

“Oh, no you don’t. No avoiding the subject, Reid.”

“I’m not avoiding it. I’m evading.”

My big sister laughed incredulously. “Exactly. Last year sucked,” she said, softening her tone.

“Yeah, catching my fiance in bed with my best friend on Valentine’s Day was a real bummer,” I scoffed. “Kind of puts a damper on the whole hearts and flowers for me, even after ninth grade.”

“Kevin Riley was always dumbass. Dumping anyone in the lunchroom on Valentine’s Day qualifies as douche behavior. No wonder he’s still single.”

I narrowed my eyes as I delicately placed the boxes on the counter before turning to lock the door behind me. The lock on the door to my boutique slid into place with a click.

Jessa, my right-hand employee and confidant, wouldn't be in until closer to opening, but once I checked the tracking for the vintage couture pieces I scored online this morning, I raced over to the shop to intercept the packages.

No way I'd chance anyone stealing these precious beauties out from under me.

And it wasn't like I had anything else to do, or anyone waiting for me at home.

I wrinkled my nose as I slid the silver letter opener I snatched along the taped seam and slit the box open. Avoiding anything that may have shifted in shipping. Nothing like a careless slice to ruin a beautiful piece of vintage couture. "What, you looked him up?"

She snorted. "Of course I did. After last year's...incident, I needed to see if I needed to help Karma along with anyone else." A snicker escaped, before the telltale sound of a hand covering her phone as she discussed whatever race team owners discussed at these types of things. "And, Karma wants you to have a great Valentine's Day. That's all about you."

"Kylie! A photography session with-"

"A sexy complete stranger who you'll never have to see again in three weeks, in a controlled environment, and empowering as fuck is exactly what you need. Reid, you've been working nonstop. You need to do something for yourself."

"Except you're paying for a crazy, blind date with a stranger recorded for prosperity, *Kylie*."

"*REID!*"

Our silent treatment sisters' stand off continued for an eternity. Okay, maybe five seconds. "Fine," I huffed, knowing she'd never put me in a position that would endanger me. Embarrass me the tiniest bit? Definitely. "But if the guy's a

serial killer, it's on your conscience, and I'll haunt you into our next thousand lifetimes.”

“Deal. Enjoy your treasures, call you when we get back. Love you, sis.”

“Love you, too.”

Fuck. What the hell had she gotten me into?

CHAPTER TWO

REID



Exhausted after hours spent sorting the new pieces, which were beyond gorgeous and in even better condition than I'd hoped, I shoved the key into the door to my townhouse. My bag dropped to the floor with a soft thud as I released a sigh. I locked the deadbolt behind me, checking one last time the door was locked with a twist of the knob and a quick tug.

Five months ago, the boutique showed its first a profit. And even though I'd used some of the inheritance my grandmother left me last year, not losing money felt like validation of all the hard work I'd put in. Grandma Lena loved her townhouse, but she ordered me to make it my own in her will.

So, I lived in a construction zone for months, dreaming about a day without sawdust.

Which came last week.

The master bedroom became the sanctuary I'd always dreamed of. A third floor dormer converted into a place I hid myself away. Far from the rest of the world. Tucked away, safe. With my books, a reading nook that took up an entire alcove on the far side of the room, and an ensuite with a decadent walk-in shower and sunken oversized bathtub.

Perfect for rainy days filled with reading.

Not that I had those often.

The part of town I lived in was not an up and coming trendy area. Instead, it possessed an elegant grace reminding me of Grandma Lena at every turn. Within walking distance of my other dream, even if some days I still drove to give myself just a few more minutes of reading time spent in bed.

Magpie Dreams Boutique.

Kylie insisted on becoming my not so silent partner. Which I secretly loved, because her idea of partnership meant pairing up with her and Zac's foundation. Giving back to the community. Helping those who needed it.

Guaranteed, Grandma Lena was looking down, martini glass in hand. Cheering us on, wearing an amazing vintage couture dress.

And the inheritance?

Every dime I earned off the boutique, I donated half to the foundation, and the other half went right back into Magpie Dreams.

A year of nonstop, exhausting yet satisfying twelve hour days. After which I collapsed daily on my small twin sized bed on the second floor as soon as I walked through the heavy, darkly stained wooden doors.

And now, my soul thrilled at climbing the three flights of stairs to the top floor.

To my oversized bed, piled high with pillows I gleefully tossed on the floor or to the other side of the room. No one to complain about anything I loved. Least of he who shall never have his name pass my lips ever again.

Cheating fuck faced twat. He could have Alyssa, her fake boobs, bleached hair, and lying ass.

Beauty might be skin deep, but they deserved each other, and all their ugly underneath crap. And to think I almost considered selling this place after we were married.

Dodged a bullet with that asshole.

Too bad his parents cut him off once they found out his dick went into my best friend.

At their house.

During our engagement party.

And Alyssa, with all her high maintenance ways, would never marry “beneath her.” Eventually, he’d learn the grass isn’t always greener when she cut him off, too.

Silver lining? They were both out of my life.

On my way upstairs, I sipped from the glass of twist cap moscato, with half a can of, yes, lime White Claw and fresh sliced strawberries. Magpie Dreams signature cocktail.

The Decadent Angel.

In my defense, the glass could hold almost three quarters of a bottle of wine. Set for the night, and I wouldn’t have to trudge downstairs for a refill.

The townhouse came equipped with an honest to goodness elevator. Grandma Lena hated stairs. Never once used them, preferring the hum and posh lift, as she called it.

With a sigh, I stepped into the bathroom, flipping the switch. The small chandelier dripping with antique crystals cast rainbow prisms around the bathtub. Filling with hot water, the soft scent of the stress relief salts Jessa bought me for my birthday permeated the air.

I bent over to undo the buckles at my ankles and slipped off my heels. Deposited them next to the closet door. My clothes for the day, I tossed onto the ottoman, careful to not wrinkle the vintage pencil skirt. Hell if I trusted it to anyone but the cleaner my grandmother used for years and even then, tried to keep everything in pristine condition.

Turning off the tap, I eased into the decadent warmth. Tightness in my body I hadn’t let go of in forever eased from me in agonizing slowness. My first soak, and I was already blissfully happy. I reached for the book I placed on the bench next to the bathtub.

At least, I thought I had. Only to find the smooth wood surface of the bamboo shower bench bookless. My eyes searched, and found it on the counter next to the sink.

Where I had placed it before removing my makeup.

“Damn.”

If there was one thing I loved more than my bedroom and new ensuite, it was reading in a hot bath.

Especially my favorite late night kind of book. A girl needs her self care after a long day, after all.

Huffing out a sigh, I spotted my cell phone close enough at the edge of the bench that I could reach it and not have to get out of the soothing water.

Jessa, the smut loving bookworm she was, helped me run the boutique’s social media accounts last year following the *incident*. And insisted I needed my own account after we bonded over my favorite drink.

The Decadent Angel, of course.

We drank.

I ugly cried over the betrayal by the two fucking people that should’ve never even considered having their body parts do things they shouldn’t.

Stupid ex fiance and very ex-best friend.

Drunk, I created an account.

Which, in retrospect, drove more business to the boutique than the official store account.

Two message notifications on my social media account and one text. I sat up, shivering as the cool air hit my bare, wet skin. We’d had a new security system installed, and the cameras were going live tomorrow.

Fuck.

I hoped it wasn’t the store.

Jessa: Me, not sliding into your DMs at all like a side piece. Go check #meltmypanties NOW

I grinned, sinking back into the warmth, allowing the water to calm my nerves. Thank god it’s not about the boutique.

Gnawing on my lower lip, I carefully kept my hand high enough to keep my phone dry.

@JessaReadsSmut : REID. You need to hear this guy's voice. My favorite indie author just tagged his reel, and holy shit balls!!
#meltmypanties

@JessaReadsSmut : Seriously, he can call me #babygirl anytime. You have a praise kink. That test doesn't lie, my friend!! GO LISTEN!!!!

I cringed, remembering our 'book club' three months ago when we both binged every book in the Salacious Players Club series. And then, after our second (or was it third?) bottle of wine, found the author's post with the link of the kink test she takes for all her main characters.

And, yep, I might have daddy issues, which I've never denied. My sperm donor, and person paying a hefty alimony to my mother, never quite figured out how to be a parent to two little girls. Instead, he stuck his dick in his secretary. Who recorded it and tried to blackmail him.

See? I have a history of losers fucking me over.

He dropped the bomb to Mom on Valentine's Day, in front of Kylie and me. She promptly tossed him out on his ass, and while she kept the house and all the things she was 'accustomed' to, it hit me hard. I wasn't blind. He was a sorry excuse for a father. But he did always remember my birthday.

Ugh.

With a sigh, I clicked the link and settled back.

HOLY FUCK.

A black-and-white photo. Tattoos. Black lace. A man's hand. A woman's throat.

And the voice, dark and seductive? His words.

Shit.

My cheeks heated, a furious blush creeping along my skin. My thighs involuntarily tightened, and the deep voice growled

out a command. Ending it with *'baby girl, you know just how to take it, don't you?'*

I swore, my fucking inner slut screamed *yes, sir*.

Dirty little whore.

I scrolled through a few more posts, transfixed on the images paired with words I felt flow through my body.

My free hand slid beneath the surface of the water. The throbbing between my legs grew with each dirty word, and my fingers found my throbbing clit. The slickness had more to do with him than the water submerging me.

For the first time since in forever, an orgasm rippled through me in less than a minute. My phone dropped to the floor with a thud as my release traveled through my body.

The air brought a chill to my skin. Goosebumps from more than just the tepid temperature of the water danced along me, and I shivered from the hardest release I'd ever had on my own.

My bones quivered like jelly, and a slow smile spread across my face as I relaxed back into the water heaven. The tension, now absent from my body, was a constant companion. Now absent from its hold, my body and mind at ease, the room blurred as I allowed myself the luxury of my mind drifting. To things other than the stress of owning a small business.

Like getting off on the voice of a stranger my BFF sent me a link to late at night.

Did that count as virtual sex? Even if it was one-sided, *he* was there with me, his voice coaxing a reaction out of me that had me blissed out after like I'd just taken part in a marathon sex session.

But therein lied the problem.

I was better at solo fun times than playing well with others.

Tension for me wasn't just about the boutique. The mechanics of sex brought out anxiety I hid incredibly well from others.

Not that I didn't like sex.

I fucking loved it.

The connection.

Bodies communicating desires, sometimes with words, other times silently. The unbidden passion that came from sharing space, breath, and touch. Everything that led up to the actual act fucking made me crazy just thinking about it.

I craved it all. Every moment before, in between, during, and after.

I devoured every dirty, smutty, emotional take-my-heart-and-rip-it-out-before -putting-me-back-together book I could find.

Bookshelves adorned one wall from ceiling to floor. Filled with classics from Jane Eyre and Pride and Prejudice, to my favorite indie and fantasy authors.

Steam, spice, and words which made women burn over the years with an insatiable fire.

I fucking loved my books.

But I never found that fire with a person.

Sure, I faked the hell out of it. None of my exes knew when they left or fell asleep after sex that I touched myself, fantasizing and bringing myself to orgasm.

And the Oscar goes to...

Allowing myself a few extra moments to savor the moment, I let out a long exhale as I reached for the towel on the warming rack next to the tub. Patting myself dry, the air causing a slight chill, but I honestly didn't care in the aftermath.

My phone glared up at me, as if expecting a high five of epic proportions for its role in my post orgasmic state.

I quirked a brow at it.

You! Girl. Le sigh. Thank you, BBFF Followed.

CHAPTER THREE

REID



“*M*elt factor 10? Or higher?” Jessa giggled from behind a display of turquoise and blue pieces she was putting together.

Avoiding her prying eyes, I pretended to be engrossed in finding a dress. The event I was styling Kylie and her ‘sphere of influence’, as she jokingly referred to the women associated with the open wheel racing series her team competed in. I called them pretty fucking amazing and begrudged the boutique for stealing all my attention and time. And not accepting invites from them.

“Reid! Come on, you can’t tell me you didn’t instantly want him to recite Bronte or,” she fanned her face, and wiggled her eyebrows for effect, “read some spice. Can you imagine him reading Prai-”

“*Jessa.*” I glanced over at Adam, who reappeared, delivering our latest treasures. He shot me a grin as he placed a thin box on the counter, then offered me his tablet for my Jane Hancock.

Adam crossed his heart. “Your secret’s safe with me, Reid.”

As he left, I couldn’t help but notice his eyes traveling along Jessa’s perky ass with a smirk. “What we should talk about is giving Adam a chance.”

She snorted. “If I did, and things got awkward, who could you trust to make sure the piece arrived nicely? Neanderthal

guy on the regular?” A shudder crossed her delicate features, and she wrinkled her nose.

“Or,” I hedged, hoping she would rise to the bait, but no such luck.

Raising a finger, she said, “One, nice try with the subject change. Two, why are you being so...” Her voice trailed off as her eyes narrowed. “Wait, did you slide into his DMs?” Eyes as round as saucers stared back at me.

“What? No!” There was no way in hell I’d be *that* girl. “Any girl who slides into DMs deserves the creepy rockstar trying to name his next child after them, while his gorgeous supermodel wife is *still pregnant* after her and whatever disease he passed along.”

The papers fell away as she opened the box, and a gasp escaped from her. “Reid!! Why didn’t you tell me you found the ‘92 Dolce?”

My eyes snapped to the vintage black corset dress reverently held in her fingertips. A soft moan on my lips, not unlike the one I uttered when I heard *his* voice last night or the first time. But this, the dress I’d been searching for in my size for three years?

No longer a fantasy, but a wet dream brought to life.

Jessa’s head jerked to the dressing rooms with a grin. Slipping the fabric onto my outstretched arms, she gave me a gentle shove in their direction. “Put it on. Now.”

Spinning on my heel, I thanked the stars I chose black fishnets with a flowing, thigh length purple number that was my comfort dress. And the knee high Chanel boots Grandma Lena gifted me for my twentieth birthday.

Giddy, I swiftly changed into the dress, saying a silent prayer that my ass wouldn’t offend any of the stitching along the seams of the dress. Unlike the first time I thought I’d found the dress I’d dreamed about, this one was in pristine condition. No holes, tears, or odd stains I shuddered to think about.

The strapless corset top held in everything I’d normally wear a strapless bra for, with enough support I could go

without. And, yes, the black fabric hugged my ass, which wasn't small, hitting just at mid-thigh. I felt sexy, confident, and paired with my fishnets and Chanel, and I loved it.

“Reid!!” Jessa quickly used my phone to snap a picture as I spun, my hair fanning about me. “I’m posting this right now. It’s-”

“Everything.”

“Um, you didn’t tell me Mr. Melt My Panties Voice was following you.”

“What?” I shot out my palm in a gimme motion.

“Well, it looks like you liked a few of his posts last night. Late last night.” She smirked. “So you *did* check him out.”

Snatching my phone from her, I scrolled and covered my mouth in embarrassment and horror. “Oh. My. God. I must’ve accidentally done it when I was-when I dropped it after-”

“When you were what? Reid, were you-”

“Jess!”

“Reid!!”

Why did everyone have to say my damn name so loud whenever I was utterly embarrassed and wanted to hide away from the world under my favorite fuzzy blanket and pretend to be swept away by Emer-

“Shit, Jessa, he messaged me!”

“Wait, what? Let me see.”

I spun, trying in vain to keep the phone out of her grip and failed miserably.

“Shut. The. Front. Door. He’s liked all you reels from the past two weeks, and the picture I just posted of you now. And says-”

“No!” I covered my face with my hands, mortified. “That I should probably take my fat ass off his feed?”

“Pshh...you’re a size ten, almost an eight, and fuck anyone who ever said that to you. Including he who shall not be

named.” She paused, and I peeked at her between my fingers. “He says ‘I’m over here silently crushing on you, and I probably shouldn’t.’ Holy hot daddy kink.”

“Daddy? Ew. Why?”

“Look.”

With one glance at the screen, I melted, either with utter horror...

Or the strongest lightning bolt of desire I’ve ever felt.

Looks like the kink test was right.

I did have a praise kink, followed by a bit of an age gap thing.

Not Daddy, though.

Um. No. Not going to utter those words in a sexual manner.

An utterly gorgeous, bearded, fifteen years older Marine veteran.

All the muscles.

Brown eyes, full lips. The hand tattoo.

Fuck. Me. Please.

And I just so happened to have liked the posts I did my self care to last night. Which were some of the sexiest, filthiest words I’ve heard outside of an audiobook read by Joe Arden and Maxine Mitchell.

His words. Shivers.

But he’s no longer a faceless fantasy.

And he’s sliding into my DMs.

Me.

Reid Perry, the girl who can only get off when she’s alone.



RUBBING my eyes as I rolled out of bed, I slammed the snooze button with a thwack and let out a groan.

Three hours of sleep. And now my alarm clock rudely woke me with a song I would rather never hear again.

But enough about me, and my dislike of Justin Bieber.

At least I'm wide awake now. Or as close as I can be after the last few nights.

The bouts of insomnia I suffered with for years returned with a vengeance, whether from running myself to the point of exhaustion and overthinking, or the knowledge my nights were now filled with cyberstalking a stranger.

And getting myself off while I did.

He was quickly becoming my favorite fix.

Addicted to his presence. His posts. His voice growling out filthy, decadent things laced with a sincerity I craved in my soul. Often followed by a dark chuckle, that slid along my spine. The faceless words my body reacted to with an intensity rivaling my favorite vibrator.

The night Jessa posted a picture of me in the Dolce, a DM showed up in my notifications. Cheeks heating, I opened it.

Over here, silently crushing on you.

Immediately followed by an apology. The kind you send after someone reads what you wrote, and you can't unsend your hastily typed confession. Saying he probably shouldn't act like a stalker, and DM a stranger. No matter how beautiful he found me.

I snorted, because isn't that exactly what social media was? A place where complete strangers follow each other, watch, never meeting but always having someone's eyes on them?

Long hours of finding the perfect dress for an anniversary, or an eclectic pairing for a girls night out kept me occupied enough that I wasn't checking my phone nonstop.

Thank you, Alexandra Anders. The fiancé' and boss of series champion Luc Rosetti was one of my favorite clients, and Kylie loved her, too. Win win.

The story I posted earlier in the afternoon between clients, laying on my back on the floor in the newest treasure I found, paired with another Bronte quote, but this was one of my favorites.

Jessa had the idea of sharing my favorite bits of poetry whenever we posted a particularly gorgeous find. Rarely did my size eight, sometimes ten, body work with the couture pieces. But this dress, like the Dolce, fit like a glove.

Off the shoulder, my signature look. Blood red.

Mid-size, my ass.

As if I were a car, to be rented and judged by how my curves fit into a parking space.

The rain slid along the windshield in rivulets, tracing a delicate design, reflecting onto my hand as I checked my messages in my car. The only sound, the rain falling, pinging on the roof, and my breathing.

A primal reaction. Because he commented on my story.

Bronte? It suits you. Beautiful.

Should I respond? The time stamp, seconds after the post went live, taunted me.

Whispering, tempting me. Imagining him waiting, watching, or was a random twist of fate?

I shoved it back into my bag before I did something reckless and drove home. Ignoring the heat pooling in between my thighs. Clenching them together as if I could stave off the fact I was turned on, horny as fuck, and still in my car.

The urge to respond with hurricane force even before I put the key into the lock on my door tickled at the back of my neck. The door opened, a comforting creak, in an empty house, and I stifled the itching in my fingers to pull out my phone as I clicked the deadbolt to its locked position.

It's a compulsion I don't want to deny.

Doubt slithered along my spine. I couldn't be the only girl he's chatting with. With the number throwing themselves at him in his comments, and following him, there's no way.

The desire, the need to be special to him filled me. To be the only one he whispered those dirty words, and submit to his will. To be taken care of, and surrender.

Belong to someone.

Licking my lower lip, my fingers typed out the words frantically, hit send before I changed my mind.

"If you ever looked at me once with what I know is in you, I would be your slave."

Bronte, though I hope by this afternoon's DM, he'd recognize the author. I didn't need to say it.

Like a thief stealing secrets and dreams in the night, I scrolled through his feed, listening to his gravel ridden words. Breaths, the dark and sensual laugh. One by one, until my core throbbed with need and want. Seconds or minutes, I couldn't tell. My body lost all sense of time.

So fucking aroused, I whimpered in need, the sound echoing in the emptiness.

In the middle of my kitchen, the only light from the small pendant light over the sink, I slid my hand under the waistband of the faux leather leggings I wore. The vintage off the shoulder top hid my actions like an illicit lover, shielding from view. And as my fingers brushed my clit, and the wetness pooling in my core grew, I stared at my screen as if it were a lifeline.

The post he made after sending those words?

Meeting in the dark, breathing in each other. Touching. Owning. Submitting. Letting go.

Coming undone.

Holy.

Fuck.

Shuddering, my head rolled back as my fingers circled myself, his words washing over me in waves. My fingers seeking entrance, the slickness in my throbbing core begging to be taken, owned. I imagined it was his fingers pumping in and out of my pussy, a rumble in his chest as he told me what a good girl I was. Praised the noises I made for him, while I whimpered with need. My readiness pleased him as he focused on my eyes, locked with his. Fingers inside me, taking me higher. In and out of my body, driving me to a frenzy.

His hand slipping around my throat as he controlled my responses, telling me I was his.

My orgasm crashed over me as I gasped for air. The intensity caused my legs to buckle underneath me, moans and whimpers falling from my lips as I imagined him. The gravel of his voice in my ear. His fingers. Filling and teasing me even as I shuddered my release.

Minutes later, my back against the cabinet, I snapped a photo of myself. Half hidden in the shadows, and posted it to my story. An obscured black-and-white image.

I definitely looked like I just came. Hard.

Shit.

Before I could click the three little dots to delete it, a notification popped up.

Baby girl, what are you doing to me?

Oh. My. God.

Eyes widening in realization at what I had done.

My fingers shook, even as my body hummed happily in the aftermath of my release. Buzzing with the need to delete the picture or respond. Torn in two directions.

Fight or flight.

Fuck or flee.

Hovering my finger above the screen, I pursed my lips, my breath coming out in a rush.

And took a trust fall.

I didn't mean to, but...

But what? You look like you were just thoroughly fucked against that counter, but you're alone, aren't you?

Busted.

Yes.

What were you doing, then, Angel? All alone in the dark?

I paused, my heart racing, my breath coming faster.

Listening to you.

It's a blessing and a curse how both of us can see when the other reads our messages. A blessing if you want to unsend before the other person reads it. A curse while you sit there, vulnerable as fuck as they see each and every word.

Shit. Did I go too far?

Fuck, he was typing. Then stopped. Started once again. The air cooled my skin as I pulled my knees into my chest. And stared at the screen, a humiliation sinking into my gut.

Fuck. He probably thinks I'm a stalker.

Cringe.

Creeper status high.

Fuck. Tell me more, baby girl.

Fuck is right.

Heart racing, I used the counter to pull myself up to stand on shaking legs. As I made my way to my bedroom, I decided

to take the elevator. After the orgasm of my life, my legs would never make it up two flights of stairs.

Moonlight filtered in, highlighting my bed, empty yet inviting.

My safe haven. Where I didn't have to pretend, disappointing a partner if they weren't fooled by my performance. Which only happened once, to my utter embarrassment. Drew knew right away that the explosion never happened. Now, Drew was one of my closest friends, and had a massive crush on Maddie, my sales associate. But she was in a relationship with the asshole of the century.

I want to. But...

But what, beautiful?

Fingers hovering, I scraped my teeth along my bottom lip. My bag dropped to the floor with a soft thud, and I stripped down to my bra and panties, and climbed on the bed. Head buried in my pillow I contemplated how to respond.

And went all in. Because we'd never meet, see each other in real life. And God, it would be so fucking wonderful to not lie. Even if he had girls messaging him all the time.

I'm sure you slide into DMs all the time, but...

Silence.

You're the first, Angel.

That smile, your eyes? I can't stop myself from looking at you. Thinking about you.

A smile stretched along my lips. Even if he was lying, it wouldn't matter.

Two strangers, online.

What could happen?

I touched myself. Imagined it was you.

I hit the arrow, and immediately, the urge to unsend hit me, but fuck it.

I was going to own it. Because my sexuality was nothing to be ashamed of.

But the response I had hoped for didn't come. Instead, he sent a voice message.

A deep growl, the voice that pushed me to my climax, rumbled. "Fuck, Angel. I love that I could give that to you. That my words did that, made you wet. Coming. For me."

As if my panties weren't already useless, I melted all over again.

CHAPTER FOUR

REID



The morning sun shone through the picture window, casting the boutique's logo in shadow across the floor and over the numerous boxes I sorted through after my coffee this morning.

“Good morning and welcome to the early hours of my life as a race team owner, part thirty two,” Kylie chuckled. Never one to miss our Wednesday check ins, I kept my phone close by this morning while I worked in the early morning hours.

And definitely not for any other reason.

“You love it,” I murmured, shifting around to open my laptop and check my emails. My eyes widened. “What the everloving hell, Kylie??? It's a *boudoir shoot*?”

I shoved the box I opened aside, after checking the vintage dress I ordered for Alex Anders, and sat crossed legged on the floor at Magpie Dreams. Glaring at my laptop that was still opened to the email from Cammie, the photographer for my Stranger Session in a few days.

With detailed instructions about the *lingerie* and mask that would be a part of my boudoir session.

“Fuck, Reid, don't scream into the phone,” she hissed, then laughed softly. The sounds of engines roaring past buzzed in the background. “Even the pit crew heard you that time. You deserve to celebrate yourself. You own enough lingerie, finding something won't be an issue.”

“With a *stranger*, Kyle. In lingerie!”

“A stranger you’ll meet for two hours, then never see again! You probably don’t even have to talk to each other. Sounds fucking hot to me, and just what you need. A Valentine’s Day full of hot, sexy moments, then *you* can walk away with your head held fucking high, baby sister.”

Damn. Kylie logic struck again. Best big sister. And no one knew me better. I confided in her about everything.

Well, almost everything. A few secrets I kept to myself.

Like my now almost nightly DMs with my online fantasy.

A sexy, tatted, Marine. Who loved talking dirty and knew the difference between just fucking and real intimacy. The kind two people connected with, explored wants, needs, and boundaries.

Even if I did all mine by myself, imagining he was there with me.

My fantasy life with an online mystery guy, hotter than anything I’d experienced in real life, consumed me. But, we weren’t much of a mystery, were we? Sure, most of my posts hid *most* of my face. All the parts were there, like a puzzle to be put together by someone who wanted to figure me out.

God, how I wanted it to be real. Even though it would never be. Could never be. I wasn’t sure I was even capable of anything beyond a late night fantasy.

And the two photos he posted hid nothing. Except for the lines along his eyes and set of his chin, which told me he was at least ten years, if not more, older than me. Not world weary, but he saw more than most of the men I dated. And it comforted me, made the moments I thought of him feel safe.

Even in the black and white images, the invisible scars he wore, invisible, yet so evident in the set of his eyes hit my heart. His dark hair streaked here and there with silver. He stole my breath, and I longed for the feel of his closely cropped beard along my thighs.

“Earth to Reid.”

Kylie's voice cut through my thoughts, and I shook my head in attempt to clear his face from my mind. "Sorry. Just trying to wrap my head around my sister torturing me like this, yet somehow being right. Like she always is," I added with begrudging affection. I huffed out a sigh. "Fine. But I swear, if the guy's a serial killer, I'm haunting you and Zac forever. You'll never get laid without wondering if I'm there, singing Grim Grinning Ghosts."

She sucked in a faked breath of shock. "You'd never do that to me! You were there when that damn cast member scared the shit out of me. I had nightmares for months."

I cackled. "Yep, so you'd better hope he's an absolute angel."

"A *hot, tattooed* fallen angel is more like it. Lucifer. Definite Lucifer vibes."

"Tattooed? How do you know that?"

She snorted. "I know what you like, sis. I took that damn quiz with you and Jessa when I showed up with the pizza, remember?"

Fuck. Yep, my sister knew my weird kink preferences. She always had, though.

Like I said, we shared just about everything.

"Well, damn, I finally get to style myself for a shoot."

"Buy the strappy black set from Honey Birdette you've been eyeing! Please, for me. One click it!"

"KYLIE!"

Her laughter continued as I hung up on her. I rubbed my temple, strangely excited about the prospect of getting all sexy with a stranger, then going home to get myself off.

My type of night. Me, wine, and no one else in the room.



BELLS CLANGED as the front door opened fifteen minutes after I turned the lock, and in rushed Maddie, one of two part time employees that helped me run Magpie Dreams.

“Mads, the Highland party is coming in thirty minutes and we-” I whipped around, prepped and loaded to unleash my best mom/stern boss’ voice, but stopped short when I spotted the slightly purple bruise on her cheek. Covered hastily by foundation, yet still visible underneath. Especially when paired with tears threatening to spill down her cheeks. “What happened? Oh my god, are you okay?”

She sniffled, nodding. “I’m fine. It’s just been a crazy morning. I would’ve been here sooner, but AJ needed something, then I,” she stuttered, avoiding eye contact. “Fell trying to get down a mug from the top shelf of my cupboard. You should never move something you use all the time so high.”

Fuck. The lie slipped easily off her tongue. Like she had done it so many times before.

I recognized, from experience, though, how talking about it now would just lead to the world caving in on her. We shared a silent moment that sat heavy in the air. I reached over and squeezed her hand gently. “Well, it’s a good thing I spent the morning pulling the pieces. Because I just can’t help myself.” I smoothed my black pencil skirt and fixed my off the shoulder blood red fitted sweater.

Maddie hung her head, her shoulders sagging. As if she had been preparing for something she experienced on a daily basis at home to happen here.

God, I hated him.

Looping my arm through the petite blonde’s, I whispered. “I actually have some new concealer I’ve been dying to try out for my shoot, just in case I have to cover my tat or something. And, that baby blue dress you’ve had your eye on came in, but it’s been hemmed, so I can’t use it today. I think you should wear it today, and we’ll post it on the page. Maybe someone will like it. If they don’t, I think you should have it. As a six-month anniversary present.”

“Reid-”

“I got you, Mads. No worries.”

Her chin wavered. “Thank you.”

I pulled her in for a quick hug. “We all have days. It’s how you pick yourself up that counts. No matter how long it takes, or who helps you.”

Fucking asshole. If I ever saw AJ in the rain on my way home, he’d better jump onto someone’s lawn.

Fifteen minutes later, one dress, and a quick touch up, the only signs of Maddie’s traumatic morning were the red eyes from holding in her tears.

Women were wonderful at hiding our pain. But, if the right person looks hard enough, they’ll see straight through to her soul. The scars. The secrets we keep held tight so that we never have to face them in the light of day.

“I love it, Reid. Are you sure it’s-”

“Absolutely. Way too short for Elena, and besides, that color is all yours. I insist. Everyone gets a present on their anniversary.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Oh yes,” I nodded solemnly. “Who do you think started the tradition?” A giggle escaped her, and though she still wasn’t alright, my heart stopped the frantic beating for the first time since I saw the stricken look in her eyes.

A look I remembered all too well when I looked in the mirror that night. And still do some days when the memories can’t be chased away...



AMID A GAGGLE of a giggling group of women, happily sipping Magpie Dreams’ signature drink from stemless wine glasses, I stepped into the back dressing area to check

messages, and make sure Kylie sent no more surprises my way. Like a male stripper.

Though, with this group, it might be the perfect end to a fun day of happy clients gushing and happily posting about their time and money on social media.

Tagging #MagpieDreams.

Elena even complimented Maddie on her outfit, and the sweet blush on her cheeks warmed my heart. The fucker probably told her how useless she was or some shit.

Fingers gliding along the notifications, one confirming my Stranger Session in two days and another from my mother about the brunch she expected Kylie and me to attend in three, and one from him.

Thinking of you Angel. I fucking love your smile.

Had I posted earlier, partially obscuring my face underneath my side swept bangs? Russian Red lipstick, smiling, over the slouched shoulder of my red sweater?

Abso-fucking-lutely.

Hoping he'd see.

Had I also resisted the urge to check to see if he saw it? Barely.

Like an addict fiending for my next fix.

And like any addict, I gave in to my drug of choice. The stranger I felt I knew more intimately than any other man ever in my life. His voice. His words.

Growling. Demanding.

Satisfied. As if he meant them for me, and only me.

They undid me, sank deep into my soul. And made my pussy so fucking wet and aching, I couldn't wait for a date with my favorite toy as soon as I left for the night.

The toy I charged once already this week it was getting so much use.

The cat-and-mouse game we played by posting back and forth better than any drug induced rush. Not that I had ever done any drugs beyond the pain meds my dentist prescribed last year when he yanked my wisdom teeth out.

Better than dark chocolate lava cake, topped with raspberries, and fresh whipped cream.

Fuck. Maybe a tie. Dark chocolate always won my heart
But this man?

He might convince me to give it up. Unless I could have my cake, and lick it, too.

I greedily checked, needing that instant rush only he can give me.

This time, it's a voice message.

“*Fuck, Angel. The way I need to touch you right now. Feel your body tremble beneath my fingertips. Those eyes gazing up at me. Imagining my hands caressing your throat. Owning you. Your smile lighting up your face as you surrender to me.*”

His rumbling timbre shot straight to my pussy, and fuck, more than anything, I needed to touch myself. Ease the tension building in my body, his words lighting me up, my clit swollen. Knowing how wet I am, and how easy it would be to get myself off in the dressing room, with everyone outside, totally unaware.

Of how much he undid me with just his words.

I'm lost to him. Utterly and completely.

Clenching my thighs together, I bit my lip and stole a glance through the door, making sure no one noticed I'd stepped away. But Maddie gathered the discarded pieces, carefully placing them on the velvet settee. Her manner lighter, smile genuine. The day had chased away any of the

trauma from her earlier. It would come back, but for now, the peace and joy on her face warmed me.

I carefully locked the door, my heart racing.

Was I really going to do this?

Yes.

Yes, I was. My sexuality was mine to do with whatever I wanted.

No one would steal that choice from me ever again.

He let me own all those broken pieces again. Gave me permission to feel, let the thought of what a man could be, do to me, own me and revel in the pleasure of words. Thoughts. Demands.

And I would submit to anything he asked of me because of it.

The barest of touches as my thighs rubbed together, the friction I so desperately craved not nearly within reach, and I responded to his words.

You don't know what you do to me.

His response was immediate. Typed out as if he's been waiting.

Oh, Angel. I know. How wet you are. How badly you want to touch yourself for me right now. Give me your release. How badly I want you to show me, but I will never ask you for anything you aren't willing to give of yourself. Never.

FUCK. A moan escaped from my parted lips, wanton, as if I'm on the edge of a precipice. I'm both terrified and so fucking turned on at the thought of being discovered, but more by him knowing I want to make myself come.

Shit, Reid, chill before someone comes to see what the hell you're doing alone in the dressing room.

I caught my reflection in the mirror. Lips parted, face flushed, chest heaving. Eyes hooded. Like I needed to get

fucked.

Needed? Wanted is more like it.

What would you tell me to do right now?

Out on the boutique floor, I heard the girls still giggling and laughing, with no sign of it letting up.

Show me, Angel. Give me a glimpse of what I'm doing to you.

I wet my lips, slowly sliding the pencil skirt up, revealing the garter belt I wore. Angling my camera, my hand following the silky nylons from my knee to my inner thigh. My head dropped back, my gasp audible as I snapped a picture. Face obscured, head canted to the side, my dark hair hiding everything but my mouth.

Just a tease. Because as much as I wanted to touch myself and play this game for us, I couldn't.

But, fuck the fantasy of it, the mere thought enough for me to fight off my orgasm as my fingers brushed the wetness soaking my panties.

Fuck, Angel. You're so beautiful. I can see how soaked you are. Need to taste you. Smell you. Lick you. Hold you down while you beg for me to take you.

Oh. My. God.

I wanted it. All of it.

Every filthy, demanding part.

And I barely understood what my fantasy looked like.

He knew me, what I needed, wanted.

Things I never thought I'd want again.

Dragging in a few calming breaths, I smoothed my skirt and ran a hand over my tousled curls. Good thing the just fucked looked was something that was in and I wore well. If Kylie were here, she'd call me on my bluff.

I'm so lost.



IT STARTED with a line or two now and then in high school. I'd doodle whenever I'd finish my work early, which was often, and soon turned into words. Sentences.

My love for poetry, Bronte, and a little Byron. Though the overtly sexual nature of it all had escaped me early on. Naively, I'd thought myself sophisticated.

My parents divorced, Kylie left for college, and my high school boyfriend came out to me all on Valentine's Day. Enough pent up emotional trauma, I'd longed to start over after the aftermath.

To find who I was. Then I found Kylie's stash of romance novels in her closet when I raided it while she was away. Though, they weren't the type of romantic I'd assumed they'd be.

Forbidden, yet filled with a passion and things I'd not understood.

The trust, submission. Strength in the details.

Not wanting to label anything, I quickly piled the shoe boxes and purses back into place, and kept my snooping a secret.

My first year of college, I started writing in a journal, which quickly turned into two, then three. Seven penned tomes later, I'd amassed a collection of handwritten favorites copied studiously late at night, and originals I'd kept secret from everyone.

Sophomore year, everything changed.

I signed up for a theater studies class, intrigued and loving the thought of my father having a fit over his youngest daughter "slumming" it with a bunch of thespians. My tiny circle of friends suddenly became something I looked forward to being around, instead of fake people I had to impress.

No more pretending, perfect manners, or smiles.

But not every fairytale has a happy ending.

My fingers ran along the spine of the last one I had written in, four years ago. A week before my 21st birthday.

The day my life changed, though no one ever guessed how or why.

Some secrets were best kept to protect your heart.

Scars covered with smiles and makeup. Always being on the move, so no one glimpsed the pain I hid from the world.

The girl on the go, with a huge smile on her face. The go-getter, taking on projects. My love of all things vintage went from words and writing, to couture and clothing.

Grandma Lena guessed, though she never said a word to me when she shared her treasures. The dresses, cigar pants. Jewelry. Her passion. But she sensed something different about me after that year. And when I went to her to help me tell my parents I was dropping out of college six months before I graduated early. All the money my father had shelled out for nothing.

I refused to go back.

She nodded when I told her, gripped my hands fiercely in hers, and asked me if I'd help her with a dream. To open a boutique, featuring vintage pieces and up-and-coming unknown yet amazing designers.

Little did I realize *I* was the dream she had.

My happiness and independence.

And I'd never have to depend on a man for anything ever again.

Not for financial stability. Or sexual gratification.

I would own it all. For myself.

But tonight, in front of me on my oversized bed, sat a brand new journal. The night sky scattered on its cover, a pair of angel wings translucent and barely visible.

The night after I sent him the picture of me, wanton and utterly turned on, I'd confessed my love for writing poetry when he'd asked me about what made my heart soar.

Words. They can make us cry, laugh. Dream. Fight. Become unbelievably undone, and realize what we love in this world. I miss poetry. Putting pen to paper, filling pages with prose or thoughts. I haven't written in a long time.

Why, Angel?

I bit my lip, scared to tell him anything. Yet deep down secure in the knowledge he'd never judge me or push.

Someone stole them from me.

Take them back, sweetheart.

This morning, a package arrived at Magpie Dreams with our usual Friday delivery of find.

A simple black box, addressed to the owner of Magpie Dreams. Precise handwriting, no return address. And inside, the journal, my favorite gel pens, and a pieces of my favorite dark chocolate.

"Take them back, Angel. I believe in you. The dark chocolate is so that I can imagine what your mouth tastes like. Before I encircle your throat and show you how fucking proud I am that you did."

Damn.

My hands trembled as I lifted the journal out of the box, with Jessa peeking over my shoulder.

“Oh, that’s beautiful, Reid,” she breathed, fingers tracing the cover. “Who sent it?”

“Not sure. There’s no return address.” Truth. “Maybe a promotional box or something.”

“I think you should keep it. It reminds me of you. And,” she said as she picked up the pens, “these are your favorite pens. The ones you hoard like a crazy cat lady.”

I scoffed. “Please, would a crazy cat lady rock this?” I gestured at the strappy vintage black body con peekaboo dress and thigh-high boots.

Jessa sighed dramatically, sizing me up. “If only you weren’t my best friend, as well as my best book friend forever. And I like dick way too much.” With a wink, she tossed the package of pens back at me.

Catching them, I hid a secret smile, not wanting to share him with anyone else. Granted, I confessed to Jessa we’d messaged. And about the time I’d gotten myself off since I couldn’t hide my reaction the next morning. She didn’t know I’d shared intimate details and thoughts with him.

And that I understood more about the Marine whose wife divorced him because life with him was too much. For her. The things he needed from her. The life of a veteran newly out of the service, and trying to adjust and find his way in the civilian world after witnessing sights none of us could ever comprehend.

Though our experiences were different, I saw him because I recognized the signs of my scars. Different, yet under the surface. Ever present.

Especially in the middle of the night.

Write your words, Angel. Take them back. I know you can.

Curled up, hair piled up in a haphazard bun, I let myself feel. Put pen to paper, and wrote whatever words I wanted. And I didn’t care. Good, bad, or even if I made sense.

An endless stream of ink stained pages, streaked with tears, anger, grief, and all the pent-up emotions I'd forced myself to keep to myself. All the things I suppressed to save face. Appear strong.

Furiously, my hand flew across the page. Letter after letter as the tears fell. Blurred shapes danced before my eyes, but I didn't stop. I couldn't.

I needed to show us both I could take this back.

He made me want to, and to recognize I could. This was mine, and no one would steal it away from me again. Not my father. Not my piece a shit fiance or Kevin Riley, my high school douchebag ex-boyfriend. But most of all, from the night *he* stole the last of my light.

My Stranger gave it all back to me. Gifted me with myself again. Pushed me because he believed in me.

His eyes.

His soul.

He sees my flaws, and makes them beautiful.

I crave his touch.

Taste.

Breath.

Nothing else matters. He saved my soul...

I woke three hours later, pen still gripped in my hand. Lighter, yet still with each scar intact.

And I would bear them proudly.

*I want to go walking in the rain
with you, late at night. The stars our
only guide.*

*Your bated breath touching my
neck, eyes calming my soul.*

Deeply.

Madly.

Absolutely.

*I want to feel your hand in mine,
the rough and gentle pull as I long
for them to encircle me, and command
my being.*

To be tasted, and teased.

And never be let go...again.

Spent, emotionally and physically, I clutched the journal to my chest. Treasured its weight. A long-lost part I thought I'd never get back.

Leaning onto my side, I grabbed my phone from where it must've fallen to the floor when I passed out. I held up the journal, opening it to the page with my words for him against my chest. I snapped a selfie and sent it, before I could change my mind.

Thank you for giving me back...myself.

Seconds later, his voice, deep, dark, and full of the things I craved constantly now, sent shivers down my spine. Straight to my core. Heated and wanton.

Angel, you've taken back your wings. And it's fucking gorgeous.

I hung my head, cheeks flushed. Not with embarrassment this time, but with pleasure that I pleased him.

And by healing a part of me, he now owned it. It was mine to give freely. The thought of being his, of his hands owning every inch of me, my life's breath in his mouth as he claimed whatever he wanted of me collided with the afterglow of my release. I suppressed so much emotion for so many years.

God, I wanted him here with me.

Telling me how good I did. Whispering in my ear. His hands caressing my face as he gazed down at me. The smile he would reward me with, giving me what I needed from him.

The ache grew until I couldn't sit still any longer.

His voice growled at me through the tiny speaker, clear and true. Rough, hewn smoke and bourbon. Dark fantasies and decadent desires.

“When I say that, it isn't just because you're beautiful. It's your smile. The way I know you hold a piece of yourself from everyone else that you save just for me. The flush of your cheeks, heating with thoughts of how much your body craves this. Your lips parting as your breath escapes, desperate to linger with mine. The way you tilt your head back, instinctively understanding how much I love the thought of your throat in my hands. To see you wear them as a necklace. Eyes gazing up at me. Touching, holding you there, Angel. God, I want to. So fucking bad. To hear the noises you make just for me. Savoring every whimper, every gasp. The way you touch your clit, making yourself come for me. It's mine.

And fuck if I don't wish I was there with you to see you come undone, touch you. Feel how soaked you are. Because your pussy? It's mine, too. Take what you need, sweetheart. For me. For you."

God, this man.

And he left no room for doubt. He was unlike anyone I'd ever met.

My fingers slipped under the black lace, fingers dipping into my wet core. I sucked in a breath, the tension so close I could already feel myself coming. I rode my fingers, pretending they were his. His intense, dark eyes owned me.

Hand at my throat, the other fucking my pussy.

His breath, harsh, against my skin as he took his pleasure watching me come undone because he demanded it of my body.

And I would give in to it willingly.

I hissed in a breath as my inner walls tightened, moans escaping in desperate gasps.

I threw my head back. Wave after wave rocked my body so hard I almost wished it would stop. It was too much and not enough at the same time. It terrified me, this response to someone I had never met.

But my soul recognized his, and as the final shudders racked my body, the tears fell uncontrolled down my cheeks.

Holy shit.

I recorded myself getting off.

And sent it to him.

Good girl.

CHAPTER FIVE

REID



S tars glittered in the sky when I woke up two days later, restless energy coursing through my veins.

The Strange Session Kylie surprised me with was happening today, and of course I couldn't sleep.

This time, it wasn't because of the nightmares that had plagued me.

It was because I was looking forward to owning another moment. Doing something for me. Taking back one more piece of myself, I thought I lost.

With a grin, I grabbed the journal from next to my bed, and one of my favorite pens. I propped my head on my hand, and wrote word after word for another hour.

Blissed.

Towel wrapped around my hair, I stepped out of the shower and wiped the mirror with one hand. Barely recognizing the eyes staring at me, I let a smile, genuine after so long, play across my lips.

No pep talks about the day racing through my head.

Giving myself permission to just be and enjoy this day.

My day.

A loud clambering of footfalls up the stairs told me Jessa and Kylie had arrived, both wanting to give me their opinions on my final choices for the shoot.

“Reid, I swear, I’ve figured out why your ass is so fucking fabulous. Third-floor bedroom. Stairs What. The. Fuck?” Kylie huffed, as she stormed into my space with a grin.

Jessa followed behind, her enormous bag slung over a shoulder.

“Show me the choices, sis.” She plopped onto the chaise we spent hours as kids, listening to Grandma Lena’s stories. The wild parties, the dresses, the sparkling lights and beautiful people. And of granddad, who passed when we were young.

“Hello, to you, too. And yes, it is a beautiful morning! No, I haven’t had breakfast yet. Or coffee.”

“Pshaw, you put a freaking coffee bar up here. Don’t give me that I need my coffee line. I know you. Now, grab your fancy mug, whatever it is this week, and let’s get this party started! And good morning, my beautiful, sexy, about to meet a stranger and get freaky little sister!”

“I will *not* be getting *freaky* with anyone, thank you very much. And fine, I do have coffee made. But I haven’t even put the sugar in yet, for fuck’s sake.”

“Even I won’t deny you your caffeine this early,” Jessa teased as she headed to the small coffee bar next to my reading nook.

A girl had her needs.

Coffee, vibrator, dark chocolate...

Especially when she had to depend on herself to fulfill them when others had failed so miserably.

Well, at least one of those *needs* had help now. In the form of a sexy Marine. Who was fifteen years older than me, and made me wet with just a few words.

Listen, inner slut, down girl. This is a big day, alright?

Who was I kidding?

My inner slut became an outer slut with how many times I’d gotten off on the sexy, bearded Marine I messaged every night for the last three weeks.

Except for last night. I hinted about a big meeting today, and told him I needed to go to bed early.

With a grateful smile, I wrapped my hands around the mug Jessa handed me as she passed a second to Kylie. As she made herself one, Jessa cocked her head. “Did the HB set get here? You never answered my text.” She chuckled. “But I figured you and the tatted hottie we’re having extracurricular time again.”

“Wait, what? Tatted who? Are you dating someone and keeping it from me?”

“Kylie, don’t be ridiculous. I am not seeing anyone. And yes, Jessa, and it’s gorgeous.”

“Then what the hell is your partner in crime talking about? Spill.”

With a sigh, I sat the mug down on the nightstand, glaring at Jessa who just smirked. I stuck my tongue out at her, then turned to Kylie. Hands on my hips, I straightened my shoulders. “I’ve been kinda talking with someone online. But it’s nothing.”

“Nothing? Kylie, Reid is totally giving herself an orgasm over the guy at least three times a week, that I can tell for almost a month now. And he’s a gorgeous Marine, all growly looking and a perfect match for her praise kink-”

“Jessa!”

“Reid, what the hell? I’m your sister! You can’t keep this from me!! It’s against the laws of nature!”

“There isn’t much to tell, and I didn’t want to bug you, with Zac’s recovery and everything.”

Kylie pushed off the chaise and grabbed my hands. “You let me worry about his recovery. You’re my sister, and I need to hear everything. Spill. Now.” She tugged me down next to her. “But Cliff’s Notes for now, because we’re here to get all sexy for your *stranger*,” she added with a giggle.

Jessa handed me my coffee off the nightstand, bless her soul, and I gave Kylie the basics, leaving out how often we

were messaging. Or the fact I was getting off like it was my job now.

And my journal.

When I finished, she fanned herself. “Damn. And here I was all worried about you. But you’re having more O’s than newlyweds.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “All solo.”

“Um, is it sexting, then? What do you call it when you are on social media?”

“Creepy yet oh so sexy. And he’s fifteen years older than she is.”

“SHUT THE FRONT DOOR. You’re having social media jollies with an age gap twist? And he’s a tattooed Marine vet? Fuck,” she moaned. “It’s like that kink quiz delivered your fantasy on a platter.”

“Oh my god, I haven’t even spoken to the guy, not really. And I don’t even know his real name. His social media is all sexy or something-”

“Kinky, is more like it,” Jessa chirped.

“Like, voice overs?” Her brow wrinkled. Then she clapped her hands, gleefully squirming like an over excited three-year-old. “Tell me he does that whole fuuuuuuuuck thing. Because that’s my kink right now. Growl that in my ear, and I’m done.”

“He’s better. Trust me. He growls, and the laugh? It’s like the devil decided it was time for a house call, and you have no choice but to surrender. It’s fucking panty melting,” Jessa interjected.

“No *shit*?”

“I solemnly swear I’m up to no good,” she crossed her heart.

“Ugh, I still think Snape was way too sexy and I appreciate the real reason it was called Slytherin.” They both dissolved into a fit of giggles.

“You are sick and twisted.” They both pouted as I continued. “And I love that about you. Not voice overs. Just... words. But can we just focus on today? Nervous enough as it is over here.”

“Nice subject change. I’ll let it slide for now, sis,” she added. “But don’t you dare think for a moment this conversation’s over. You’ll just have to come over for coffee tomorrow, visit with your niece and nephew before they run off to the zoo with their friends. And spill all the delicious details about everything.”

“Deal,” I agreed, knowing Kylie wouldn’t let it go unless I did. Plus, I missed Alice and Pryce. “But tell me if this is too much.” I picked up the strappy set I ordered from Honey Birdette, a luxury lingerie line from Australia. The delicate straps on the bra crossed and connected in a grid pattern, and the garter belt/cincher was all thin, belt-like straps and delicate gold buckles. The moment I spotted the set online, I had to have it for the shoot. Especially when paired with my dream vintage D&G corset dress I finally hunted down after almost a year.

“Oooh,” Jessa cooed, her blue eyes widening as she reached out to touch the waist cincher. “Fuck. Telling you, if-”

“Yes, Jessa, we know all about how you would date Reid if you didn’t love dick so much.” Kylie threw up her hands and playfully shoved Jessa out of the way. “Reid Taylor Perry, I thought you weren’t interested in sexy stranger time! Freaking hot!” She grabbed the set, holding it up to my frame. “I pity whoever this guy is, because he’s going to be a puddle.”



SCARLETT RED MASK IN PLACE, my eyes smoked and full of a confidence I didn’t feel, I stood outside the door to the studio. A tremble slid along my body, anxious and overthinking every little detail.

Ella, the photographer’s assistant and beauty wizard, grinned. “Reid, you’re stunning. Just breathe, and if, at any

time, you get uncomfortable, tell me you'd like a seltzer, and it stops."

And now I'm at the point in my life using safe words, but not in a fun way.

Forcing my knee to stop shaking, I nodded, licking my lips, careful to not smear the black liquid lip color Ella applied. At first, I tried to stop her, but she only grinned at me.

"Trust me. It's all a fantasy in some ways. In others, it's not. If you don't like it, we change it. But," she winked, tossing her bright blue hair over her shoulder with a glance at the door where my stranger waited. "And he's going to love it. Let yourself be in the moment. Don't think, just feel." Returning her gaze to my face as she touched up and tousled curls cascading down the front of the D&G, she wrinkled her nose with a smile. "This might be the sexiest ensemble I've seen yet. And I've seen plenty."

The strappy top of the bra from Honey Birdette peaked out atop the vintage strapless corset dress, straps delicate on my shoulders. The effect was sexy, edgy, and full of the naughty thoughts I'd been having for weeks now.

Even if this was only for a few hours, I'd imagined my Stranger a million times.

In my mind? Tall, cropped beard, tattoos. Muscles for days. Even down to the veins in his forearms.

The gruff expression.

Warm brown eyes, sparkling and filled with dark promises and places I longed to find myself in.

She stepped aside, and I caught my image in the mirror.

The woman staring back at me was full of confidence, self assured. And in control of her life. Her body. Her mind. And it wasn't a mask any longer that I wore to appear strong or in control when I was spiraling. Pieces remained, here and there.

But, now?

"I'll lead you in, and place you so you're back to back. I'll remind you to tell me if you'd like anything during the shoot.

There's really no protocol. She'll tell you when to turn, but the slow burn and just being there for a few moments is something you should melt into. It's a moment full of possibilities. Accept it."

The woman in the reflection, ready to take whatever the next three hours dealt her.

I nodded. "I'm ready."

CHAPTER SIX

REID



Squaring my shoulders, I closed my eyes as Ella took my hand and led me into the room.

“Coast is clear. Keep walking.”

The heat suddenly at my back electric, Ella’s cool fingertips gently positioning us. My bare shoulder brushed along fabric, heated with his warmth, and a small gasp left my lips. Every nerve in my body lit up. My breath quickened, and not from wanting to flee.

I wanted to stay here forever.

Rightness washed over me like a comforting fire, and instinctively, my fingers sought his. He towered over me, the difference in our height utterly matched. Wide shoulders, but it was the way he held himself still behind me. As if he experienced the same pull I had the moments our backs touched, even through his crisp shirt.

At the skin to skin contact, my stranger let out a growl.

My head dropped back at the sound. Falling against his back. Muscles flexing, and desire coursed through my veins. The nerves of my body fired, tingling, and the rough calluses on his fingers elicited shivers from me as he gently ran them along my palm.

Fuck.

Who knew just touching someone’s hand turned me on?

Thanks to my online activities, I discovered things beyond the simple act of sex itself which turned me on.

Brushing fingertips?

Check.

Breathing back to back, bodies pressed against each other, sight unseen, sensations stealing my common sense. Rubbed the front of my foot along the back of my calf because I crave any type of friction to ease the tension building in me. His body steadying mine, safe and secure. He wouldn't let me fall.

My body trusted him as if we knew each other our entire lives. My soul recognized his.

He hissed a curse, and I used the heel of my black stiletto to touch him. God, his presence overwhelmed me, even without knowing what he looked like.

Again, his hands grazed mine.

Fingers entwined, his thumb caressing the back of my hand with soothing strokes. My lips parted on an involuntary sigh, which must have pleased him. The rumble I felt at my back from him made my already soaked panties even more useless.

There was no one else in the room for me as he gently tugged my hand in silent inquiry. Stealing myself, I realized this moment would change everything I thought I knew about myself. I nodded against his back.

Slowly we turned, faces mere inches away, breath mingling. Brown eyes, heated with desire, fierce and darkening.

Holy. *Shit.*

One side of his mouth tilted up. "Owen."

My stranger?

Him.

My eyes raked down his body, but we were so close I only reached his chest before his finger tipped my chin up. He quirked a brow.

"Reid." I breathed his scent, and my eyes fluttered in ecstasy. Leather. Pine. Chilled air. Male.

My thighs trembled, and I fought to stay upright as he commanded my attention with his eyes.

“Nice to meet you, Reid.” Gravelly, rough. Rife with all the things late at night. Yet harder than I had expected.

Oh, my God.

He didn't recognize me.

His eyes told me he was interested, or at least, liked the idea of the situation we found ourselves in.

Then he leaned down and whispered in my ear. “Shh, I won't bite. Promise.” Each word tickled the outer shell of my ear. “Unless you ask me to.”

Heat pooled in my core. I shut my eyes and nodded.

Wait, what the hell was I doing?

The person I am, the person who I was? Same. The woman staring into his eyes? She didn't know how, but he's made them one.

I'm a stranger to him...

Something sparked in his eyes as he lifted my hand, narrowing, then a satisfied smile spread across his face. Pleased with my response. I squirmed under his scrutiny.

I'm desperate for him to say something, anything. Let me know whatever I'm feeling, I'm not alone in it.

“This is your show, Reid. If you stay just like this, or if you want to go further. It's all in your hands.” Cammie, the photographer, said in low and calming tone.

Behind me, Ella whistled under her breath. But I only had eyes for him.

“You lead, I follow,” he said huskily as he brushed his nose along mine. Hand slipping lower, along my neck, encircling my throat for an all too brief moment. Landing on the expanse of exposed skin, his fingers traced along the straps peeking out, a devilish smirk appearing on his face.

His dark hair peppered here and there with gray, a sexy contrast to his closely cropped beard. The beautiful lines telling a story around his eyes. He was a masterpiece, carved out by his life experiences. Devastating, pushing me to the edge of reason.

He was asking my permission.

To touch me, to breathe me in. To take whatever he wanted. In the safety of this space we shared because of a twist of fate.

When his hand reached deftly for the zipper along my side, I stilled, holding my breath.

“Breathe, baby girl,” he murmured. “If this is what you want, I need you to tell me. I won’t do anything you don’t want.”

Fuck, consent was sexy. Especially when he asked for it from me.

No.

Not him.

Owen.

His name was Owen.

And God, I wanted to say it out loud, to feel it roll off my tongue, but I couldn’t. Terrified to break the spell, I simply whispered, “Yes.”

“Good girl.” The praise rumbled through his chest, and warmth spread throughout my overstimulated body.

The sound of Owen lowering the zipper of the vintage dress echoed in my ears, along with the labored rhythm of our breathing. Satin gave way to the cool air, hitting my heated skin. Helpless against the onslaught, I placed my hands on his shoulders as he knelt down to help me step out of the dress.

Demeanor commanding yet gentle, he captured my gaze. Firmly holding me in place. He stood and carefully placed it on a nearby chair. I glanced at the bed, topped with a white

comforter, but he led me by my hand, stopping in front of a mirror.

“I’m going to show you just how fucking gorgeous you are.”

My eyes shut against the onslaught of emotions. A fervent wish drowned my thoughts and fears. The instinct to respond pounded through my veins.

Angel.

To hear the endearment from Owen, here and now.

The gravel of his voice. Not from my phone, but from his lips.

But he didn’t.

I heard more than felt him move away from me, the hiss of appreciation shooting straight to my clit. Aroused and utterly unsure of where this was going, I found that any inhibitions I had stripped from me as soon as I saw who my Stranger was.

The air shifted, and I understood, even if he didn’t recognize me, that this man would take care of me. Nothing would make him attempt to step over any line I drew.

Because that’s who Owen was.

The Marine who protected, cherished, and loved, even to his own detriment. His scars, like mine, weren’t visible. Hidden under layers, they shaped and formed him into the man now standing behind me.

I shivered as he placed his hands on my shoulders, then ran them down my arms. “Open your eyes.”

The command simple, gentle, and firm.

And I did as I was told.

My lips parted as I stared at the image we made.

Black straps framing, marking, and coloring my flushed body. His chest, strong and stripped of the black shirt that tantalized me when we were back to back. He stepped closer, enveloping me with his presence. Bare and whole.

I've never been delicate, my curves always painfully obvious. But, in front of this man, the hard planes of his body, I was.

He stole my gaze with his own. I watched, unable to tear my eyes away, as his hand trailed down my arm once more. To touch the cincher at my waist, up from my belly in a delicious and torture path. Destroyed me in the most delicious way.

“Fuck,” he growled. “You are everything, Reid. *Never* let anyone tell you any differently.”

Suddenly my head jerked back, the pain twinged with pleasure as his other hand snaked along my neck, into my hair, owning me.

Moaning, I arched against him. My arousal coated my panties, and I was so close to coming, standing before him, that I whimpered. Wetness pooled between my thighs, and I bit my lower lip. Eyes rolling back, as a breathless giggle escaped from my mouth.

Pressure on my neck as his hand snaked along my skin, finding purchase. “Your throat was made to wear my hand. And that little smile of yours tells me you love it. Don't you, Angel?”

Oh, god, yes!

My thoughts tumbled, and he spun me. Eyes fierce, he held me exactly where he wanted me. Lost and found in the same breath.

Delirious with desire.

Seconds before his mouth crashed into mine, my mind recognized something, but as he took what he wanted and everything I gave him, I forgot to care.



HOURS LATER, I carefully packed my rolling suitcase. The vintage dress and waist cinching garter belt folded neatly. The stockings Owen ripped, but I kept them anyway.

A souvenir for the time the man I had been sexting for three weeks couldn't even remember who I was as I stood practically naked in front of him.

As soon as the allotted time was up, we hugged, bodies pressed against one another. Still clad in the scrappy lingerie set, a thigh high had a run from where Owen had torn it with his teeth as he laid one on the bed.

I longed for the hardness of his body against mine. Heated, bare skin touching for an all too brief moment. His scent clung to me like a lover's caress. Ella led me back to the room I dressed in earlier with a grin.

"Reid, you rocked it. I've never seen two people with such chemistry." She squeezed my shoulder. "Give yourself a few minutes, and I'll be right outside if you need anything."

After making sure I had left nothing behind, I slung my purse over my shoulder, preparing to face Owen and thank him for being such a gentleman.

But, when I walked out of the room, only to find Cammie.

Focused on her laptop, she glanced up when I spun to make sure I hadn't missed him. As if he was hiding under the bed or behind the curtain billowing in the wind from the open window.

Stop being silly, Reid, I chided myself. Men his size barely fit on a king size bed, let alone under it. He left you because he did not know who you were.

"These are beautiful, Reid! I can't wait for you to see the final edits. I'll get them to you this weekend. And then you can tell me which ones you want to have in the book or as a print," Cammie smiled.

I thanked her, and left, tossing my bag in the back seat, before plugging my phone into the charger. I sat there for a few minutes, my mind wandering back to the way Owen looked at me. The urge to touch him strong, but I held back, terrified that if I touched him, he would disappear.

And he had.

With a flick of my fingertip, I picked my favorite playlist, and started the engine. Bass and lyrics that did not help my pent up sexual frustration or anger at being so forgettable rushed through me. My phone vibrated, but I ignored it as I made my way home.

But at the next stoplight, the insistent buzz pissed me off. Growling at it, I picked it up, making sure the light was still red.

Angel. Your panties are soaked. Aren't they?

Fuck, I wanted to touch your pussy, dip my fingers into your sweetness. Taste you.

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

Then, a nuclear bomb went off in my head.

Owen called me *Angel*.

Right before he kissed me.

Take them off for me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

REID



The light changed, and headlights reflected off the rearview mirror. I hit the gas, and drove as rain fell down. Windshield wipers hummed in a consistent rhythm, lights danced off the droplets falling in front of my eyes. Sliding down the glass like tears.

At the next light, I checked my phone with a slick of my thumb.

And send me a picture.

Lost to him from the moment Jessa tagged the post with his voice for me.

Helpless. Belonging.

And like any good girl, I did as I was told. Shimmying onto my hip, I slid my panties down my thighs, carefully taking one leg out at a time.

No easy task while stopped at a light, but, fuck, it was hot, obeying his order.

I may have been a good girl, but there was no way I was letting him get away with ignoring who we were to each other.

Especially since the fucker knew I touched myself and gotten off at least a dozen times just at the thought of him, his voice.

His words.

I looped them around the stick shift and sent him his picture.

Oh, Angel. You're going to pay for that.

I threw the car into park in front of my townhouse, not bothering to grab my bag. The minute I climbed out, his body crashed into mine, taking.

Strong hands found the places burning and demanding attention.

Growling in my ear, Owen murmured, "Pretending to be your stranger was one hell of a turn on, Angel. But all I could think about was the fucking dirty things I wanted to do to this body. Mark you. Bend you over, and spank your ass\ until my handprint never left your flawless skin. Make you kneel before me, wearing my hand around your throat while you gaze up at me. Pleasing me. Knowing it turned you on, and taking care of you by giving you every filthy thing you crave, baby girl."

"Oh my god," I gasped, my arousal dripping down, making my thighs damp, I was so turned on.

"Oh my god, what?"

"Owen?"

A dark chuckle. "Try again, Angel."

"Oh my god...sir."

"Good girl."

Dominant and demanding, he yanked up my dress. His fingers sought my drenched pussy. Rough and deliberate, he sank two thick fingers inside me, and I gasped at the sweet intrusion.

I was so wet, he easily added a third, pumping in and out of me as the heel of his palm ground against my clit. With a deliberate slowness, he encircled the front of my throat with his other hand. When he applied the slightest pressure, I fell apart, in the middle of the street, back pressed up against my car.

He swallowed my helpless moans, stealing my breath and giving me pleasure. Body owned, my mind followed unconditionally. Coming all over his hand as he gently increased the pressure on my throat.

Rain soaked our bodies. Only his arms kept me from sliding onto the ground as he expertly played my body.

Fuck.

He locked me into place as I rode the wave of the orgasm he wrought from me. Knees buckling, he swept me into his arms. Strong arms cradling me against his chest. “Shhh, Angel. I’m going to get you dried off. Then I’m going to show you every fucking dirty thing that went through my mind when I saw you walk through that door this afternoon.”

“Owen?” My voice sounded foreign to my ears. Husky and wanton.

“Yes, Angel?”

“My keys are still in my car.”

He chuckled. “Actually, they’re in my pocket.” Nose to nose, sliding along the tip, he whispered into my mouth. “I grabbed them when you were coming on my hand so you wouldn’t drop them. I didn’t want you to fall unless I could catch you, Angel.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

OWEN



When Reid walked through the door into the studio, it was like a sucker punch to my gut.

A fucking vision, my fantasy brought to life.

Because before that moment, I wanted to be anywhere but there. I angled myself at the last minute so I could see the ‘stranger’ when she walked in the room.

My buddy talked me into doing the Stranger Sessions shoot, pushing me out of my comfort zone, thinking it might be something I’d enjoy.

Which I definitely fucking would’ve before her. The nights and conversations we’d had over DMs changed everything. She had embedded herself under my skin. Even as I tried to fight it.

There was something about her, from the very first moment I caught of her eyes, hidden by her thick mass of hair, that drew me in. I wanted to make her see what I saw. Make her realize who she could be. My Angel.

My ex-wife would never believe I felt anything for anyone beyond myself, no doubt. She never understood the way I wanted to love her.

And it turned part of me cold. Years of being shut out, until the day came when it all fell apart.

I almost pulled out of the session with Cammie at the last minute.

A fucked up part of me felt like I was cheating on Reid with a stranger. The girl I couldn't get out of my fucking mind.

The first moment she liked something of mine, Reid intrigued me. I'd only clicked on her profile because it wasn't like the others. No overblown, sexualized profile picture with empty eyes, filled with desperation.

Young, a light in her eyes, hiding depths I doubt any man had the balls to explore.

She was like someone finally gave me permission to breathe. A smile chipping away at my frozen walls, waves of dark hair covering her stunning face.

The eyes she hid behind, her story not meant for the rest of the world.

God, I wanted more.

Like an idiot, I sent her *the* message, then apologized for it when I should've hit *unsend*.

But she sucked me into her orbit, and fuck if I didn't want to get closer. Feel her warmth, touch her. Body and soul.

God. Creeper status achieved.

She was too young. Innocent. Not yet marred by the world and it's fucked up shit.

Too young for a man like me. Broken, and not meant for anyone that beautiful. Innocent. My demons would destroy her.

But then she responded to my DM.

One message turned into two.

Three.

I couldn't stop.

And every time, I told myself it was the last. That she deserved someone closer to her own age, who would show her the world, and treat her the way she deserved.

Not the way I wanted to. The dirty, filthy things I craved from her.

God, her eyes.

I pictured her on her knees in front of me, staring up, utter adoration and submission in them.

Then, like a teenager who just discovered he had a dick, I jerked off.

Thinking of her lips around my cock, telling her how good she took all of me. Eyes watering, her perfect make up ruined by how I fucked her mouth. The sounds she made, how wet her pussy would be.

But I kept that all to myself.

And fuck, I wanted to learn about her.

The moments I caught sadness in her eyes that no one else I bet took the time to notice.

Who hurt her. Broke her. Made her have to be strong on the outside because she had to survive.

The more we messaged, with every DM, the more I realized she hid her secrets just as I hid mine.

But, the difference between us?

She still had that spark, of believing in the good in the world. Me? I understood how fucked up life could get. I hadn't given up on the world, but I saw it for what it was.

Late at night, she reached out, liking.

Saving my posts.

A silent way to show she thought of me. Because, fuck, I did the same thing.

When I should be working.

The posts, words, they were a side distraction, a way to get out all the things running through my head.

To let go of the past.

Reid undid all of that. All I could think of was now. Her.

Like some deranged stalker, I used my day job skills to find out what her name was. She didn't deserve to be some

nameless fantasy.

She walked out, looking like a fucking wet dream. Straps crisscrossing her pale skin under a corset dress, barely covering her round ass, hugging her curves. It was all I could do not rip that sexy as fuck dress off her body and see the marks they left on her skin.

And fuck me. Her body. My hands twitched with the need to touch, mark, claim every fucking part.

The red mask she wore as part of the session only added to her beauty, her eyes wide as she spun. The minute our hands brushed, my dick stood at attention. Hard and straining against the metal zipper. My dick was going to have its very own zipper mark.

The girl I jerked off to in my depraved fantasies, here.

Mine.

There was no fucking way I was going to ruin this experience for her.

I didn't acknowledge her as my Angel by my words, but my actions told her body.

She trembled, even before she turned around.

The attraction between so fucking palpable I could smell her arousal.

Then, those eyes. Wide. Like a forest at dusk.

Her lips painted sinful and black.

Gone.

I would own her. She was mine.

Her body angled toward mine, submitting as she melted when my hands caressed her skin. I fucking loved that she had curves, her body strong, and every man's fantasy brought to life.

Fuck that.

She was my fantasy brought to life. For tonight, I'd make her mine.

Knowing exactly what my Angel needed.

I carried her up the stairs to her door, using her key and kicking it open. Closing it with my foot, I rasped. "Bedroom?"

"Third floor," she whispered, eyes locked on mine.

I smirked, giving her a look.

She swallowed. "Sir."

Fuck me.

This girl was perfect for me. For one night, I was going to show her how far she could fucking fly.

Then I'd walk away, so she could be the amazing woman for someone closer to her own age. Who wouldn't break her.

CHAPTER NINE

REID



Head still spinning from Owen giving me my first non-self clicked orgasm, my emotions jumbled in my head. Relieved he recognized me, but slightly pissed he didn't acknowledge it.

Secure in his arms, the scale tilted to relief.

If that was post Reid-gets-off-with-someone-else situation, I'd ride it out.

Soaked to the bone, I fought a shiver as he carried me up the three flights of stairs as if I weighed nothing.

Which I most definitely did. I scowled inwardly at that damn phrase.

Mid-size? Fuck, just call me a Camry, FFS.

I groaned, and Owen glanced down at me, brows drawn together. "Shh, Angel, I'll get you warmed up."

"I-" The words refused to come. No way I was sharing my inner thoughts. Instead, I buried my nose in his chest, thoughts calming. Breathing in the intoxicating scent of his skin. I never wanted him to put me down.

Safe. Protected. Cherished.

He made me feel everything I'd longed for my entire life.

A dream I never dared to think out loud. And the way he handled me?

Holy. Hell.

The evidence under my panty-less dress, thankfully hidden by the fact we were both soaked through after our little incident against my car.

Check public sex act off my list.

And sex with a stranger.

Because if his dick trying to break free of the pants clinging to his muscular frame was any indication, we were in for a long night.

Bypassing the bed, he carried me to the bathroom, grabbing a towel from the shelf next to the shower. He turned the knob for the hot water on full blast with one hand, propping me on his thigh. The friction caused me to squirm, and he chuckled darkly. “Soon, Angel. I promise.”

“Owen?” I whispered, avoiding his eyes.

He didn’t correct me this time, reading my emotions like an open book. Rubbing my arms while the water warmed up, he nodded once. “Yes?”

I licked my lips, uncertainty flooding my veins.

Embarrassed to reveal my secret.

He peeled the rain soaked dress from my body, hissing in a breath as he ran his fingers along where the imprints from the strappy waist cincher marked my skin from being worn for so long. “Do these hurt?”

Silently I shook my head.

“Angel,” he murmured in a low, calming tone, wrapping the towel around me once again. “You can tell me anything. I’ll *never* hold anything against you.” Rough and gravelly, his words calmed me.

“I’ve never, I mean, other than when...” I stalled, finding the words hard to say.

Fuck it.

I shut my eyes, then opened them and looked directly into his. He strengthened me. Reminded me who I was. And I

wanted him to have this. “I’ve never been able to have an orgasm with anyone. Ever.”

He drew his brows together. “Never?”

I shook my head, hiding a shy grin. Cheeks heating though I fucking felt proud and loved that *he* had my first. “I mean, I’ve had sex. But never had *that* happen. Unless I do it myself, and without an audience. Yes, I’m twenty-five and you just gave me my first non solo big O,” I teased in an attempt to divert his intense focus from me.

“Twenty-four,” Owen muttered, stripping off his shirt and checking the temperature of the water. “Get in, Angel.”

“What?”

“Your birthday isn’t for two more weeks,” he explained in a low tone, stripping the towel and pulling me into his bare chest and reaching behind my body to unclasp my bra. “Fuck. These marks on your skin are so beautiful, Reid.”

As he stepped out of his pants, wearing the same black boxer briefs from earlier, he tugged me into the shower after him. I was utterly naked, bared before him.

Yet I’d never felt so safe.

“Is this okay?”

“How do you know when my birthday is?”

“Reid, are you okay with this right now?” he placed his hands on my shoulders, looking deep into my eyes.

I wrinkled my brow, confused, until I noticed he didn’t take all of his clothes off.

Realization dawned on me.

My lips lifted, recalling a midnight back and forth a few nights ago. Sure, being told what to do was hot, but consent beforehand was sexy. “Yes, I am.”

He answered me with a bruising kiss. Stealing my breath. Our bodies met under the spray of hot water. Yanking me into him, he growled. “Oh, no, Angel. I’m the only one who gets to ruin your makeup tonight. Any. Way. I. Want.”

I whimpered into his mouth, each word warming my body more than the cascading water sliding along my skin.

The need to touch him coursed through me, to feel the hard planes of his chest, to trace the tattoos on his skin. Lick the veins along his forearms.

And god, I wanted his cock more than anything.

The water molded his briefs to every part of him in a way that left very little to the imagination.

And I imagined so much over the weeks.

Owen's cock matched the rest of him. Wide, big, and demanding. My mouth watered at the thought of tasting him.

My fantasy from earlier rushed through me, and I nearly came apart. I'd never wanted anyone in my mouth before, though I'd done it out of obligation after mediocre attempts my partners made at getting me off.

But Owen?

I wanted to get on my knees and worship his cock, show him I could take all of him.

"Angel, the way you're looking at me? Your eyes? They say more than your words ever could. And I'm going to give you exactly what you need." He turned off the water, then spun me around and ordered in a gruff tone. "Hands on the wall."

Oh fuck.

"Good girl."

I stilled, the steam in the room surrounding us. I arched my back, the heat of his perusal like dripping honey along my body.

My arousal evident and dripping down on my inner thighs.

His hands ran down my back, to my waist.

Then my ass.

Squeezing with an appreciative sound.

“When I stood behind you, all I could think about was how perfect your ass would look after I spanked it. My handprint marking it. The contrast of your skin. Pale. Red after I marked it. After that stunt you pulled with your panties?” He leaned in and growled in my ear. “Mine.”

“Oh god,” I whimpered.

A sharp stinging on my ass startled me as he delivered a smack to my right cheek. “Try again, Angel.”

My ass pushed towards him, needing more. “Oh, sir.”

Another sharp smack, heating my ass, the sting of pain edging to pleasure eliciting a squeal from me. Again.

My clit throbbed, eyes watered. My legs parted further, and he took full advantage of my position, delivering two more blows in quick succession.

“You are gorgeous, Reid. Wearing my marks on your ass.” Gently, with a reverence I hadn’t expected, yet not surprised at hearing. He led me out of the shower, stripping out of his wet briefs, and wrapped me in another towel, deftly drying my body.

My nipples puckered as he ran the towel over them. When I hissed out a breath, he did again, purposefully using the material with skill. Assured, and made me moan with each tortuous stroke. “You like that, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

The towel slid down my body, and I pushed into it as he neared my clit, seeking any kind of pressure.

“Soon, Angel. I promise.”

Carefully, he dried my body, careful to avoid contact with my center, and fuck, I wanted his touch so bad, I was on the verge of begging. But I remained still.

My eyes dropped to his enormous erection. Smacking his belly, and oh-so-hard. The tip leaked pre-cum, and I wanted to lick it, taste it.

His cock should come with a warning sign above it.

This dick may tear you apart, but you'll love every second.

Shit, now jealousy reared its head ugly head. Aroused as fuck, I wanted to make sure no other woman touched him except me.

Ever.

Licking my lips, I glanced at the shelf where my last towel sat. "Let me dry you off. Please?" The need to show him how much I loved his body, his treatment of me.

He nodded, silent. He watched my every movement with a hooded gaze.

I used the opportunity to explore him, a smile curving along my lips. "I thought about how you'd feel, touching you, the strength of your body." My eyes caught his hooded gaze. "But you're nothing like I imagined, Owen. You're better. Real. Solid, and so damn sexy." Dropping the towel, I used my fingertips to outline one of his tattoos on his chest.

An eagle. Wings. Words. The skin under the gorgeous design wasn't smooth.

I opened my mouth to ask, but he answered before I could speak.

"Stabbed while deployed. Hurt like hell." His gaze darkened, and for a moment he left me, but just as quickly came back. "Enough talk. I need to fuck you. Taste you." He leaned in, his nose sliding along mine, just as he had earlier. "Fuck your mouth. Ruin your makeup."

I squealed as he scooped me up and carried me to the floor by foot of the bed.

Setting me on my feet, he encircled my throat with his right hand.

"Fuck, Angel. The way you smile when you wear my hand around your throat is ethereal. Sexy. And my undoing." Using his other hand, he pushed me down to my knees, hand gathering my hair in his fist. "Open. Slowly, you can take it."

My mouth opened of its volition, and the first taste of him hit my tongue caused me to moan in ecstasy. Salty and all

male. Power.

I relaxed my jaw and glanced up. Owen hissed, and I took him further down, eyes watering from the fullness invading my mouth.

Fuck, I needed him.

This.

“Fuck,” he groaned. “So good, Angel. So. Fucking. Good. Your lips around my cock? Perfection. Take more, all the way.” He thrust into my mouth, and my pussy tightened.

My eyes rolled, and I couldn’t help myself as the tears rolled down my cheeks. The noises he made while taking my mouth fed the part of me wanting to please him, to hear his reaction. The other part of me loved that I undid him and reduced him to this state.

“Put the last of that black lipstick on me, Angel. I’m going to push all the way in. Need to hear you choke on my cock.” He paused, waiting for my response.

I stared into his darkened gaze and blinked once.

Without warning, he shoved his cock down my throat, and I squirmed, hands on his thighs, the sheer size of him too much.

But God, he felt so good, even as I warred with myself. Letting him use me, while I wanted it so badly.

His steely grip offered no choice, to resist, and he drove his cock deep down my throat. I gagged, my nose touching his pelvis. Holding me there a few seconds longer, he swept the teasers along my cheeks.

“So fucking good, Angel. My good girl.”

My pussy clenched, and the release coated my thighs as my second orgasm of the night tore through my body.

He pulled out of my mouth with a grunt of approval, pulling me up and shoving me onto my hands and knees on the bed. His fingers slid into my pussy easily, and I looked over my shoulder to see him licking my wetness from his fingers.

“You taste better than I imagined, Reid. So much better. Stay,” he ordered. “I’m getting a condom.”

I buried my head in the comforter, the noises of the foil wrapper as it crinkled loud. My harsh breath filled the room. The sudden smack of skin as he spanked me once again. Fingers gripped the sheets. “Now, I’m going to fuck you hard, enjoying my marks on your ass. This is your last chance, Angel. Yes or no?”

Spreading my knees and parting my legs farther, my pussy on full display for him, I whimpered, “Yes, sir.”

He drove into my wetness with a punishing thrust, taking me from behind like a man possessed.

The obscene sounds of flesh slapping flesh, his grunts, my whimpers echoing in my ears.

“You are so fucking wet. You take my cock like a greedy little slut, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” I cried out, yelping when he spanked the already sensitive flesh of my ass cheek once again.

“Fuuuuckkk,” Owen roared, slamming into me so hard, he shoved me further up the bed. Once more, twice, three times, and stars flashed before my eyes. Coming with him, I almost blacked out. All over his cock. Grinning like a fool as I came down from the best fucking sex of my life.

“Owen?” I asked, basking in his weight on top of me.

“Hmm?”

“I think you ruined my makeup,” I giggled, and he barked out a laugh, rolling over with me in his arms.



THE NEXT MORNING, there was a note by my bedside, and another journal. Angel wings, fierce and proudly displayed. Like a warrior. Over a black and white tattoo of a single rose in full bloom.

“I’m so fucking in awe of you, Angel. Keep flying.”

Tears pricked my eyes.

It felt like goodbye.

And we barely said hello.

CHAPTER TEN

OWEN



“*B*ryson, tell him I’ll be back in the office in a few hours. Delayed flight. Send a message to Kate, and let her know I’ll be a few hours late.”

“Really? It was on time-”

“Don’t give me shit, Bryson, just relay the damn messages.” I hung up before he responded, not giving a shit. I had a fucking headache, and all I fucking wanted was to turn the rental car around. Grab my Angel, and do more dirty things to her delicious twenty-four-year-old body. See her sleepy, satisfied smile.

But I didn’t.

She deserved someone closer to her age. Hell, I shouldn’t have followed her to her place after the shoot. As soon as I knew it was her, I should’ve made some dumbass excuse and left.

Fuck. Me.

My only thought the moment I caught sight of her?

Take care of her, hold her in my arms.

Give her the fantasy she expected. A Stranger Session.

Build her confidence. And ruin her for other men.

Fuck if anyone else would touch her before I could.

Her scars, her past all laid out there, in her eyes. I recognized it. Saw it.

The need to heal her. Make her whole. And then, I walked away. For good.

Before I destroyed her with my demons.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

OWEN



Two months later...

“Earth to Owen,” Bryson muttered in to my ear.

Shit.

“I’m here, tell me,” I barked, not bothering to apologize, because I didn’t give a fuck. My mood had slowly deteriorated over the past two months.

Ever since I walked out Reid’s door, and left the one thing I fucking wanted. Naked, spent, and her body bearing my marks.

I did the right thing. Or at least that’s what I kept telling myself.

The day after I left, she messaged me. Twice. It took all my will power not to respond, because fuck if I couldn’t see the hurt and betrayal in her eyes.

When her posts became less frequent, but she still saved mine, it gutted me. One late night, after she hadn’t posted in three days, she finally posted blurred picture of her face, with a quote written across it.

*Dried tears, broken heart. You’re still here, yet
my heart doesn’t beat. It’s waiting for you to
remind it to...but you won’t.*

FUCK. *Angel*. Her tears were real, even if I didn't see them, feel them...taste them.

Her tears were *mine*.

My fingers twitched, and before I could help myself, I messaged her.

You deserve better than me. Someone who can give you what you deserve in this life.

Then I turned my phone off, and threw it at the wall in my apartment. Where the damn screen shattered, rendering it useless.

Even one night without my phone killed me. The need to check on her, to see if she posted anything, burned in me.

I'd been reduced to a creepy stalker. And that included checking in on her, making sure she was taking care of herself.

Which she wasn't. And it pissed me off.

I was the reason why she looked miserable as fuck. Her runs, not happening. Fuck, and even though she looked gorgeous in the photos Bryson pulled off the cameras linked to the security system it just so happened one of the subsidiaries Spencer owned.

And I ran on a day to day basis.

What were the chances?

Fucking social media.

When my demons became too much, I needed an outlet. And there were worst things I could've done, but after countless sleepless nights, I'd made an account.

Spencer pushed me on the issue, and fuck if he wasn't right. The job isolated me, and it wasn't ideal, but it gave me an outlet.

And now, my phone was my lifeline to her. The girl I could never have.

Finding release in one night stands no longer held any appeal. It had been over a year since I had any kind of

relationship.

Well, the kind of relationship I needed, at any rate.

Our one night together two months ago was burned into my memory, and damned if I didn't play it over in my head every night. Jerking off, thinking of her eyes, her body.

The fucking way she gave me her trust, blind, eyes wide and body willing.

My marks on her ass. My dick hardened instantly, remembering her response. How beautiful she wore the marks of my ownership.

Except she wasn't mine to keep.

No fucking way I'd bring her into my world, standing in the way of her becoming the amazing person she was meant to be. The one I saw whenever I looked into her eyes. Her smile.

Not the one she wore when she knew everyone was looking, but the one in the quiet moments. Nose wrinkled. Fuck, my hand twitched to touch her. Own her.

Those smiles were few and far between now.

And I like a dirty old man, I watched over her. But fuck. If I couldn't have all of here at least I'd make sure she was safe.

The only way I could allow myself.

Bryson's insistent chatter brought me back to the present, and I asked with scowl. "What do you need from me, Bryson?"

"I know you're not due back for three days, but Spencer has concerns about the link up, and-"

"Fine." I cut him, off glancing at my watch. "I'll be back in a few hours. Let him know he owes me one, Bryson."

"Will do."

"I'd offer you a a drink, but you look like shit," Spencer drawled as I pushed open the door to his office.

"Thanks, asshole."

My best friend of twenty years eyed me up and down.
“Owen-“

I cut him off before he could give me another lecture about my love life. “I know you’re trying to help, but it won’t fucking work. Just tell me what was so damn urgent I needed to cut my trip short.”

He sighed, then gestured to the chair. “The link to system needs the fire wall checked. There were a few anomalies the past few nights.”

Shit.

My head fell forward, and I raked a hand through my hair.
“No anomaly.”

“You haven’t even looked at the data,” he muttered, head buried in his monitor. When I didn’t say anything, his gaze shot to my face. “Jesus, Owen. You didn’t.”

I couldn’t fucking meet his eyes, so I stared at the patterns in the wood floor. “I didn’t use my log in, or any of the ways that could’ve been traced. The only reason it tripped is-“

“Because the system picked up the same faint trace every fucking night. Shit, Owen, how long have you been spying on this girl?”

The silence stretched out. Impossible and tenuous.

“Owen?”

Finally, I glanced up. “Two months. I used the back entrance we built in. With the pass key I encrypted.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

The thud as he shut his laptop was followed by a sigh.
“Just call her. It’s not-“

“Not going there, Spence. You know why.”

“She’s not like-“

“No shit. But that doesn’t change the reason why I can’t.”

Getting caught with my hand in the cookie jar was bad enough, but Spencer knew why I walked away. Even if he didn't agree with my reasons.

Love wasn't enough. The truth was, I didn't know if I was capable of that type of love anymore.

Set someone free, and see if they came back?

Not built that way. I need to have her, completely. And once she was mine, there was no way in hell I'd ever let her go.

Reid deserved more than someone who wanted to possess her, to mark her body as mine, make her light shine so fucking bright no one would ever dim it again.

Because she was mine.

Mine.

God, I liked how that sounded way too much.

Which was exactly why I needed to stay away from her.

Then why the fuck was I stalking her anyway I could without actually seeing her?

CHAPTER TWELVE

REID



“*L*ast client has left the building,” Jessa teased in her best announcer impression.

Two days after the charity fashion show for Kylie’s foundation, Magpie’s schedule blew up. That was a month and a half ago.

And things were only getting busier.

I lifted my head from my arms, and kicked off the heels I wore. Exhausted, but feeling like maybe things were going to be okay for the first time in months.

Or may be I was starting to believe the lies I told the rest of the world. My heart still missed *him*, no matter how many times I begged it to stop.

“Go ahead and leave. I’ll lock up and take care of everything.”

“Reid, you’ve been running yourself ragged for months now. Let me close up. Go. Home. Take a bubble bath. Get out your favorite toy. And forget Mr. Marine vet sex god with a dozen dependable orgasms.”

After the most explosive night of sex a girl could ever dream of, Owen ghosted me the next morning.

Never to be heard of since. One hand written note.

No more DMs. Likes.

Nothing.

Though his posts left me wondering. Sexy, dark, and sad as fuck.

Of course, his hoards of female and utterly desperate followers ate up every second.

I wanted to scratch their eyes out.

Jealous. Yes. But they were so cringe, I didn't give a fuck.

Then I'd hit myself with the thought I wasn't the only one in his DMs. He was a sexy as fuck, sensual, gorgeous, bearded and tatted wet dream Marine.

Girls probably sent him the female version of dick pics all day long.

Tit pics. And worse, if the comments were any sign.

Only one message in three long months.

You deserve better than me. Someone who can give you what you deserve in this life.

What if what I want is you?

Nothing. He read it, and started to respond. I watched for half an hour as he typed, stopped, started again.

Then it all stopped, and my heart broke.

Radio silence.

Maddie breezed out of the back dressing area. "All clear. I put the new pieces in the steam closet, the lowest setting with the cool down on." She gnawed on her lip. "Are you ok if I get going? AJ has a gig, and he really wants me to be there."

I nodded, keeping my expression blank. Three days ago, she showed up with a busted lip and more than a few bruises on her arms. Hidden under a long-sleeved jean jacket. "Do you need a ride, or company?" I offered, thinking I could act as a buffer between them. Or run him over with my car. Accidentally on purpose.

"No, I'll be fine." Maddie grabbed her bag from behind the bench next to the counter area. Just as she reached for the

door, it flung open, slamming against the wall with a loud bang.

“I fucking told you, Maddie, be there at seven. It’s fucking 6:50, and you aren’t even ready! What the fuck? I thought you understood what I expect from you?” AJ yelled in her face, spit flying from his mouth, yanking her so hard her head looked like a bobble head.

Jessa shot behind the counter, grabbing the phone to call the police, as he shook her like a rag doll.

“Let her go, and get the fuck out.” I said loudly, stepping toward them. He released her with a savage jerk and turned on me.

“Who the fuck do you think you are, bitch? You’re the one filling her head with all that shit. Trying to get her to leave me. Not happening. Back the fuck off.” He shoved me, and I fell onto the glass coffee table. My elbow hit the chaise as the top shattered.

All at once, the world exploded before my eyes as a large form barreled into the store, knocking down AJ and pinning him to the floor in matter of seconds. Maddie screamed, and Jessa rushed to my side, kneeling and checking for injuries.

It took only seconds, but the scuffle ended with Owen restraining Maddie’s POS boyfriend. Arm wrenched up as he howled in pain. “You don’t fucking touch a lady, you worthless piece of shit.”

His eyes found me, wild, dangerous, and full of fear.

“Angel, are you okay?”

Before I opened my mouth, two police officers stormed in, and all hell broke loose once again. Owen raised his hands and slowly stood, a boot on AJ’s back.

“He helped us, officer,” Jessa explained. She helped me to my feet, and miraculously, I escaped with barely a scratch. My favorite red sweater did not. Owen stepped toward me, but the officer stopped him.

“Hold on, let’s all stay where we are and get this mess straightened out.” His partner cuffed AJ, dragging him to his feet. “Are you ladies ok? Miss?”

His voice barely registered as my eyes soaked in the man who had haunted my dreams. I nodded. Another police woman arrived, and as they took our statements, Owen stayed. Silent. Waiting.

The store cleared an hour later, Jessa with Maddie in tow. Telling her under no circumstances would she be staying at her house when she had a spare bed all ready for her.

And then there were two.

Silence, stretching.

“You left.” My voice caught, heart in my throat.

Owen dropped his head, world weary, tense.

Everything I wanted. Needed. Craved. But my heart didn’t know what to think.

“I know, Angel. Talking to you all those nights? You were like a light in my darkness. Fuck. Stopping was never an option. You were in my thoughts even when I didn’t realize you were. But, fuck I don’t know how to love anyone anymore.” He sighed, raking his hand through his hair, messed up from the evening’s events. “Angel, you are still young. You’ll find new experiences I’ve already had. I couldn’t take that away from you.”

“Why did you come back, then?”

“I had to see you one more time. The perfection of your smile. Tell you face to face. You deserve more. I’m...broken. Scarred. Not what you need.” His fingers traced my face, and I turned my cheek into his palm. “I can’t love you the way you deserve,” he dropped his hand, backing away, voice breaking.

Silent tears rolled down my cheeks. “Love isn’t supposed to be perfect, Owen. It’s messy. Flawed. Scarred. Because we are. I see you. All those late nights, the messages. You gave me back those words I thought were gone. My soul. I. See. You. Your scars. And mine. Our messy? It means...you’re

mine.” My voice broke along with my heart as he turned, and walked away.

His back to me. Rigid with the things I craved for him to unleash on my body. As if he couldn’t trust himself to be messy with me ever again..



THREE HOURS LATER, I laid in bed, eyes dry and burning from the tears I no longer had in me to shed. My journal clutched to my chest.

A thunderstorm rolled in, and a downpour began seconds after I watched Owen walk away from me.

The rumbling claps of thunder a reminder of how alone I was, heart breaking into a million pieces.

I rolled over, sleep evading me once again. Months ago, I would’ve picked up my phone, and messaged him.

Before I knew his name. His body. Taste.

His scars.

But now I was utterly alone. I ignored Jessa and Kylie’s texts.

The sound was so faint at first; I was sure I imagined it. It happened once more. A light rattling, like a tree branch or a scurrying mouse. The doorbell had broken weeks ago, and I had yet to fix it.

My phone vibrated. Stopped. Then started again. Over and over. For five minutes straight.

Sighing I picked it up, rubbing my eyes.

I’m here, Angel. You lead, I follow.

My emotions warred with my heart, wanting to tear down the stairs, open the door and fling myself at him. My brain wanted the same beginning, but ending with a kick to the groin.

On shaking legs, I headed down the stairs, my oversized sweatshirt hanging off one shoulder. When I reached the door, I placed my palm on the door and pressed my ear against it, eyes closed.

“Angel, I know you’re there. And I know you can’t decide if you want to open the door. I don’t blame you. But you need to hear this, just as much as I need to say this. I don’t know how to not want you. Walking away fucking rips my heart out. But, our age difference matters. Maybe not as much as how badly I want every fucking inch of you to be mine, body and soul. My good girl. You deserve more than me...but, fuck it. I’m too weak to leave you like this, knowing it’s breaking you. I won’t do what others have done to you, Reid. I will fucking build you up, and remind you who you are. Because that’s my job, what I need to do. It always has been. I can’t make guarantees beyond now. I don’t know if I’m capable of more. But, Angel, I can’t walk away without seeing your smile. One more time.”

My palm slid along the cool wood surface, and with one last breath, I opened the door.

TO BE CONTINUED...

DECADENT ANGEL RECIPE

SIGNATURE COCKTAIL



Ingredients:

- *Stemless Wineglass*
- *Two fresh strawberries, sliced*
- *One 16 oz can Lime White Claw*
- *Moscato wine*
- *Ice*

Fill stemless wine glass halfway with ice. Pour in one 16 ounce can of Lime White Claw. Add sliced strawberries, and top with Moscato.

Enjoy with your favorite best book friend forever!

Or snuggled up next to a hot, tatted, bearded, older Marine...

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some stories need to be told, but they linger in the shadows until the time is right.

By no means is Reid and Owen's story over. But without a few serendipitous events, it might still be in my dream journal, waiting for the spark that would ignite their fire.

Thank you, my wonderful author and Insta inspiration, Maria Thayer. You gave me the push and place to tell this story that I've wanted to for so long.

I knew Reid would get her story, but it would be messy. And that it would be an age gap with a military alpha male. Originally, my love for Top Gun and our local air show swayed my thoughts. But, the more I thought about it, the more I changed my mind. I love those flyboys, but I needed a protector. With a guarded heart, just the right side of grumpy, and knew he had to be a Marine.

But, their meet cute (and there's nothing cute about it, trust me!!) evaded me. I'm a big believer in life giving you the answers you seek. Call it a sign, fate, or just the stars, I wait and watch.

And then a series of moments aligned, giving Reid and her grumpy, older Marine their meet cute. Or, Meet Hot.

This is obviously a work of fiction, but I've learned our community is vast and varied, but your vibe attracts your tribe. And that tribe is EVERYTHING.

I won't name names for everyone, but this person (and one other) knows how much they helped with this story, as well as

Reid and Owen's upcoming book, both directly (Thank you for the Marine vs the other trope hashtag) and indirectly. Inspiration when I needed it, and encouragement when I didn't ask. Words can't tell you how much appreciation I have for you. With all of it.

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My family. My boys! You are my everything, even when you're loud because you know just when I need a hug or dark chocolate. You can't read this one, but know you are the reason love is my favorite thing to write about. You've helped me become the best version of myself.

And to my husband. Babe, there are no words that can explain how wonderful you are, and I'm sorry you have to hear all about tropes and marketing. Lanes. Covers. But the rest is well worth it. I. Love you.

To all the readers and dream chasers...never stop.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ariana can be found getting her Zen on while practicing hot yoga, going for a run, reading her favorite authors in the middle of the night, or having a bourbon on a Saturday while plotting the lives of her characters as they whisper and sometimes yell in her ear.

She lives her own Happily Ever After with her amazing husband, who shares her love of racing, comic books, and Firefly, along with her two spirited also amazing boys who love reading books under a blanket just as much as she does.



ALSO BY ARIANA ST. CLAIRE

REVVED UP SERIES

When We Were Prequel

Track Me Down Duet Part One

Turn Me Loose Duet Part Two

Never Have I Ever (A NYE Bonus Scene)

Claim My Heart (Van & Gia)_A Revved Up_Standalone *Coming Summer 2023*

STRANGER SESSIONS

When We Were Prequel

Trust Fall

Trust Fall (The rest of the story, title tbd!) Coming soon!

SNEAK PEAK: TRACK ME DOWN,
REVVED UP DUET BOOK ONE

Ready to get Revved Up? Just for you, I've included the first chapter of Track Me Down, book one of the Revved Up Duet!

He was the boy who broke my heart, and the man my body craved against my will.

I recognized the danger in those sexy hazel eyes, but the illicit thrill only drew me closer to the one boy I should stay away from. Luc Rosetti, the son of my father's fiercest rival. He stole my heart on a hot summer night under the boardwalk lights, far away from the racetrack. Then he left without a word. Shattering my trust, my world, and my defenseless heart.

I just finished picking up the pieces and moved on, when in walked the one person I never expected to see again. My body instantly reacted to the sinfully irresistible man who seemed to be hell-bent on racing his way back into my life, taking what he wanted, on and off the track.

And damned if that didn't turn me on like anything else, despite knowing how destructive the consequences could be.

Luc revved me up like no one else. But how could I trust how he makes me feel and let go of the past?

Would the secrets and lies looming between us break my heart even more? Or could the one man who left

me, alone and devastated years ago, put the broken pieces back together?

Get Revved Up on and off the track...steamy romance, featuring strong, sexy alpha males with heart and a competitive streak, and the sassy, passionate, unique women who love them!

The Revved Up Series Duet is complete and available now on [Amazon and Kindle Unlimited!](#)

ONE



ALEX

Five years ago...

“Make it stop, make it stop,” Luc gasped, laughter and tears clouded my vision as my body flung against the cold metal back of the caged capsule endlessly spinning around and around. The centrifugal force flinging our two bodies, who were no longer at rest, together. Forever spinning.

A growl of deep laughter hit me as my elbow contacted against the hard, warm body next to me. “I can’t,” Luc sputtered, trying not to stare as my hazel eyes sparkled. When I wasn’t looking at him with suspicion, my guard raised way up. “Hey, stop elbowing me, darlin’,” he laughed at my expression again as the ride flung us and the outside world blurred.

A peel of laughter fell from my lips as I let myself feel every moment of happiness. No one would dare get on the ride with me, knowing I knew every trick to getting the compartment spinning at a dizzying rate. But, for some reason neither of us were ready to admit to, Luc noted the challenge in my eyes, and despite the history with our dads, stepped right up while the rest of the group went off in search of dinner. “Listen here, tough guy, suck it up-” Another loud giggle escaped my wide-open mouth as Luc proved I wasn’t the only one who knew their way around the ride.

I desperately tried not to notice the way his brown eyes were sparkling, the setting sun catching the gold streaks in his shoulder-length hair. When I caught him staring at my mouth, I tried to ignore how his tongue darted out and wet his lips. The one person I couldn’t afford to let my guard down with, no matter the reason, and I couldn’t peel my eyes away. My family’s livelihood, and honor, depended on it.

But damn, if there wasn’t something about Luc now. All grown up and no longer the little boy I used to run around the track with, following him like a puppy who just wanted to play.

The ride continued. Moments seemed like forever. I knew somehow things had changed. Even if I fought against it, Luc wasn't the enemy. Especially if he let me torture him while everyone else had left us behind.

With one last tug on the lap bar, I fell hard into him, and my left hand slipped and found purchase on top of his. As we gripped the cool metal bar together, our eyes flashed up to meet one another, and the laughter faded the slightest bit.

The ride slowed to a stop, and the incline made me slide once again into him, my body colliding with his. He grunted with a smile as he looked at me with a raised brow. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you did that on purpose." Luc smiled softly, and I wanted the moment to never end for reasons I refused to acknowledge. His body, warm and pressed up against me, made me intensely aware of my legs brushing up against his. The way my breasts were pinned between my arms as I leaned into him. My lips parted as I breathed, and I hope he felt it, too.

I cleared my throat, purposefully lightening the tone of my voice as I pushed myself away from him and the heat between us. "Well, you'd be wrong." Giggling as I pushed the bar away and climbed out of the car, I gave him a view of how well those cutoffs hugged me from behind. As I threw a look over one shoulder, I added, "This time."

Luc looked as if he couldn't help but return my smile. He slowly followed me out of the ride, subtly readjusting himself while I acted like I hadn't seen a thing.

With the one forbidden boy I couldn't help but take a second look at, a wave of guilt overwhelmed me. I blew a breath out. As we stepped down the rickety steps of the Tilt-A-Whirl, I looked around for the rest of the group.

"I think they left us behind," I murmured, trying to not look directly into those warm brown eyes of his. The second I did, I knew it would be the beginning of something I wasn't sure we should start. It complicated things enough as it was, with leaving for school early to start my internship as a part of my program requirements.

“Yeah,” he sighed, “sure looks that way.” He barked out a laugh. “Although with the way you abused me on that ride, I don’t blame them.” A chuckle escaped his lips as I shoved him with one hand against his chest, catching it under his own. My eyes darted down to where his hand engulfed mine. I loved strong, big hands. Such a sucker for them. Hands that could work a steering wheel, work wonders with the machines I’d watched speed around a track my entire life. I caught my breath as I opened my mouth to say something to lighten the mood when Luc interrupted my thoughts.

“I have an idea.” His eyes held mine with something I couldn’t quite name. Humor, longing, or just plain wanting what you shouldn’t. Or were those my thoughts?

I tilted my head to the side. “An idea?”

“A proposition,” Luc amended, glancing down the walkway filled with twinkling lights and people, then back at me. “What if we just met? And none of that other stuff is about us?”

“But it is-” He stopped my words with his finger, placing it on my lips. I wondered what his skin tasted like.

“What if for one night,” he continued, lowering his finger to my lower lip before letting it fall completely, “it isn’t. What if we just met on a spinning ride? No one else would go on, and,” he shrugged, “got left behind by everyone to do whatever we want.”

Studying him, I wanted to. Badly. It had been so long since I’d laughed and enjoyed myself. But the other part of me didn’t know how to let go of, well, everything. Logically, I knew the boy before me had nothing to do with the past few years of stress and unending struggle my family faced. But his father had. And that made him a huge reminder of why this wasn’t such a good idea.

As if sensing my unease, Luc lifted one corner of his mouth and reached out his hand, whiskey-colored eyes daring me. “Hi, I don’t think I introduced myself in between all the spinning. And almost vomiting back there. Luc.”

I looked down at the hand he held out and bit my lower lip. When my eyes met his, the twinkle in them, along with a half-smile on his lips, somehow made my hand rise to meet his. As we touched, I noticed how big his hand looked compared to mine, felt the telltale calluses from years of gripping a steering wheel made, and how the warmth spread through my body, hitting me in a place I never knew existed.

“Okay.” I smiled softly. “I’m Alex.”

We rode high in the sky looking over the water from atop the Ferris wheel, bumper cars slamming into one another with unconcealed glee, the carousel as the sun finished setting. Feeling free, no pressure to keep my guard up. Enjoying each other’s company. The easy way he laughed, his eyes twinkling with mischief as we competed in skee-ball, or when he would distract me when we competed for most shots at the rigged basketball game.

The way he promised to collect his prize later, looking at me with such heat, I blushed.

All the tension and past few years had melted away, and we were kids again. Hanging out after hours. Except for the way he made me feel wasn’t like when we were kids. When his hand brushed along the tips of my fingers as they neared the very top of the old rollercoaster, I wanted to melt into him. To lose myself in the feeling of freedom and not worry if anyone saw us. Or if I was doing something wrong.

“Penny for your thoughts. Talk to me, Goose.”

I chuckled at his reference. “Why?”

He shrugged as we walked along the closing food booths and carnival games. “You look so...light I guess. I wondered why.”

Looking out along the water, I swept a few escaped wisps of hair behind my ear and reached up to tighten my ponytail. We walked in silence for a few moments, taking in the quiet settling along the amusement parkway. “Every single day, I try to make the right choices for everyone else. I don’t want to disappoint my dad, or his sponsors, or my brother.” Taking in

a deep breath, I turned my face to him as we walked toward the exit. “But I never get to do what I want without thinking of all the other things.” A pause. “And tonight, I did. It was..nice.” Biting my lower lip, I added softly, “Thank you.”

Luc nodded, one side of his mouth lifting as he shoved his hands into the pockets of the jeans, hugging his long, lean frame. When we reached the exit gate of the park, we stopped and stood there in silence for a few moments.

“Listen-”

“I guess we-”

Luc let out a low chuckle. “You first, darlin’.”

Looking into his eyes, I knew I should leave it, us, at goodbye. I’d experienced my moment with him, and should be grateful no one noticed us together. Because I knew at any second, reality was going to come crashing down. And I didn’t want the memory of tonight to end on a bad note. “I was going to say, I guess this is it.” Reaching into the back pocket of my cut-offs, I pulled out my phone. “I can call my brother or somebody to come pick me up.”

He looked at me so intently I fought the urge to squirm beneath his gaze. “What?”

“What if,” he began, his eyes holding me prisoner, “we just,” shrugged, “go do something else?”

Swallowing, I returned his gaze and absently ran my hand through my ponytail, smoothing it. Even though I knew my dad would flip if he knew who I was hanging out with, I didn’t want to call my brother. Heck, my brother would probably freak out, too. But it all felt...good. Freeing. I nodded before I could change my mind.

“Okay. Mav.”