

Avenging Angels: A Lick and A Promise

By Kristen Ashley

Teaser Chapter
PLEASE NOTE: This chapter is unedited.

Chapter One

He Wants You

I shouldn't be here.

I knew I shouldn't be here.

But when Raye called, even though my mind said one thing (that I shouldn't be here), my body (okay, my heart) said another.

So I was there.

The good news: I was just one more body in the mix, so it wasn't like I was the castoff chick hanging around, embarrassing herself pining for some dude.

In other words, that hospital waiting room was a crush seeing as all the Hottie Squad was there, all the Angels, along with Tex, Nancy, Shirleen, Marjorie. Even Tito was there.

So I was just another person in a sea of people who were worried as fuck Knox got shot.

That was the bad news, Knox had been shot.

Twice.

He'd been shot...*twice*.

Oh yeah.

That was the *way* bad news.

He did not get shot while conducting Nightingale Investigations & Security business, which it was my understanding was a possibility, if not a probability in their line of work due to them not being your average, everyday private investigations and security business, but a whole lot more.

He got shot because his family was a nightmare.

More good news, the surgeon came out and told us he was out of surgery, stable, resting and no lasting damage had occurred. Though he'd need some time to mend and do physical therapy to regain full strength in his shoulder and leg.

Okay, so that was mixed good news because, absolutely, no lasting damage was obviously a good thing.

But he had to recuperate from two gunshot wounds he got because his family was borderline ready for their episode of *Evil Lives Here* and that totally freaking sucked.

More of that mixed good news, my staring contest with Cheyenne was over.

Although I sensed why she hated me—even though it was lame as hell, since she had him for a while, and I didn’t (well, I did, but it wasn’t a very long while)—what I didn’t know was why she was there at all.

They’d broken up.

But by damn, when the surgeon came out, the bitch popped out of her seat like a demented Jill in the Box and shouldered even Cap and Mace out of the way (respectively, Knox’s best bud and his boss) to belly up to the doc.

She also lied and said she was Knox’s partner, so she got to be the first to go back and see him.

Usually, the dudes were super cool with chicks. Lots of patience (needed), lots of understanding (also needed—what could I say? we were a bunch of nutso broads), all kinds of room to be who we were and do what we did (as, of course, it should be—save Knox in that scenario, but that was a longer story).

But when Cheyenne did that, everyone got pissed, and even the dudes didn’t hide it.

And when she did it, Raye took my hand (again, she’d been holding it on and off for the last three hours), and Brady shot me a look.

Truth: Brady and me had screwed the pooch.

Honestly, it seemed a good idea at the time.

Okay, not a good idea. A demented, in-your-face, heartbroken idea. But when you were heartbroken, demented ideas often seemed like good ones.

Then again, I was learning not to lead with the heart. Though, admittedly, I was learning this by messing up royally because I’d done something stupid at the edict of my heart.

My heart had me sitting right there, benched, because I meant nothing to Knox except being a member of his friend posse.

A distant one.

Someone he was around who he tolerated.

And that was it.

And my heart led me to pretend-flirt with and okay, semi-kind of fake-date Brady (really, it was just two friends hanging out, but we wanted Knox to think it was something else) after Knox got together with Cheyenne.

We did this so he might feel a little bit of what I was feeling since Cheyenne was suddenly at all of our AAHS shindigs (Avenging Angel/Hottie Squad, for your information, of which I was a member of the former, and for more information, that former were unprofessional, unpaid chicks who stuck our noses in places they shouldn't be, but someone had to do it, and the latter were professional, trained, skilled badasses).

And since Knox scraped me off, and he knew where I was at with him, he had to know how that would sting.

Sure, he'd made himself clear, and as such, I had no claim, so who was I to engage in some harebrained fake dating scheme to make the guy I liked (right, okay, dammit...loved) jealous?

The idea was doomed from the start.

Why I couldn't get a guy like Cap, like my bestie Raye did—a man who struggled with our whole Avenging Angels vigilante gig, but he got a lock on it because he knew how important it was to his woman—I did not know.

Or an Eric or Gabe, my other friends, Jess's and Willow's dudes, who were super chill and didn't kick up a fuss at all.

Or even a Javi, who wasn't all fired up about it, like Cap, but he knew he could probably exert some pressure on Harlow and she'd totally cave, but he didn't because being an Angel was an important part of who she was. And he wanted the woman she was, not the woman she sacrificed bits of herself to be for him.

But *nooooooo*.

It was me who got the one who gave me an ultimatum.

Give up the Angels, and have me, or stay with the Angels, and lose me.

I stuck with my bitches.

And lost Knox.

So, uh...*yeah*.

I shouldn't be here.

I shouldn't care.

What he did was messed up.

But here I was.

Because, fuck me, I was in love with the guy.

It was on this thought that Cheyenne showed, returning from her visit with Knox (and it wasn't a very long one), and the room went wired. Partly because she showed and everyone wanted news about Knox, but probably also because she had a look on her (very pretty, damn it) face that could curdle milk.

And it was aimed at me.

She stomped right up to me.

I braced.

Raye, on my right side, shifted like she was going to get up and shield me (or get in a catfight—with Raye, anything went). Cap, Mace and Brady started to move in. Jessie, on my other side, straight up took her feet, definitely to be my shield.

But Cheyenne just shot daggers at me with her eyes and spat, “He wants you.”

And with that, while my insides froze solid in stunned surprise at hearing these words, and Harlow whispered, “Oh my,” and Shanti muttered, “Well, all right,” Cheyenne marched away.

My head screamed, *Don't go see him!*

My heart had other ideas.

Therefore (because I might be learning, but I hadn't actually *learned*), I got up and started walking.

I stopped and turned to look at Mace. “Do we know what room he's in?”

“Three west,” Mace said.

I turned and started to hoof it to wherever three west might be.

At the T of the hall, I began to go left, but Cap called, “Right!”

Okay, I should have paid attention to where Cheyenne headed. Then again, I didn't think my feet would be taking me in this direction, and as a rule, I tried not to pay too much attention to Cheyenne.

I shifted right.

Three rooms in, to the right again, was three west.

I stopped at the door.

He wants you.

I felt my heart flutter, and I took a breath to prepare for what I might see.

He wants you.

I pushed open the door.

When I entered, and saw Knox in the hospital bed, I was surprised.

I was ready to witness tall, built, handsome, vital Knox Chambers with a tube down his throat, more in his arms, his skin pale, his affect haggard.

He was none of these.

So he was a little pale.

But mostly, he just looked asleep.

Just asleep in a hospital bed with the covers folded carefully over his boxed abs, his magnificent and perfectly hairy chest bare, his shoulder bandaged, an IV in his arm, and one of those heart monitor thingies on his finger.

That was it.

He looked like he could get up, tug on some clothes and take a hike or go for a run.

Okay, so he'd have to cool it and not go gung-ho due to what was under those bandages.

But still.

Jesus.

I mean, what was with these Nightingale guys?

I walked to the side of his bed and whispered, "Hey."

His eyelids rimmed by those beautiful fans of dark lashes didn't even flutter.

Did he fall asleep in the few minutes between Cheyenne leaving and me arriving?

Well, he'd been shot (twice). That would take it out of a guy. Even a Nightingale guy.

"Knox?" I called quietly.

He didn't move.

I didn't like this.

Knox was a mover.

Even when we were at someone's pool party, he was not the one who lounged on a float and sucked back a margarita. He was the one who suggested pool volleyball. Or he tried to round up a touch football game. When he sat, one of his legs bounced, like he had other things to do and many places to go, and he had to be ready to go those places and do those things.

He was a man who was made for the military, the first part of his career.

So he was also made to be a private investigator, what he was now.

He was a man in motion.

A man of action.

Though, I'd seen him motionless. Watching some game at a sports bar or during a Superbowl party. He got pretty intent when he watched sports.

Or asleep in bed, at my side, and in those times, I'd watched him for what felt like hours, mesmerized.

Un-hunh, yeah.

I didn't like this.

I took his hand, leaned toward him and whispered, "Hey, baby. You awake?"

Again, nothing.

Shit!

I was starting to freak out.

At this point, a nurse came in.

I turned to her as she headed to the monitors on the other side of his bed.

"He's not awake," I pointed out the obvious. "We were told he was out of the anesthesia."

"He's pretty drugged up," she replied, moving from the monitors to the IV to check that. "He woke from anesthesia, but still, he'll fade in and out for a while."

"So he's okay?" I asked.

She focused on me and gave me a small, professional smile. "He'll be fine. But he lost a lot of blood and had surgery, both are traumatic. He needs to rest."

I nodded.

"But even resting, company is good," she encouraged.

I nodded again.

She moved to the laptop she'd rolled in, hit some keys, sent me another professional smile, and she and her laptop rolled back out.

I looked down at Knox.

God, he was gorgeous.

That square jaw. Strong brow. Exquisite chest hair over equally exquisite pecs and down his defined abs.

Those wide shoulders (even with one covered in bandages).

“Trust you to be hot post-double-GSW surgery,” I mumbled.

Nothing from Knox.

But even though I wanted to be there and didn't want to be anywhere else, not until he woke up. Not until he was dressed and walking out the door of that room for good. Even with that, I was acutely aware there were a bevy of people in the waiting room who needed to see what I was seeing right now.

So, okay, perhaps in a drug-induced state he'd ask for me.

Once he was no longer in that state, he wouldn't want me around.

That was something (agonizingly) I knew for certain.

Even so, I had this shot.

This one shot.

Maybe the only one I'd ever get again.

And perhaps it was messed up.

But screw it.

I was going to take it.

I bent over his handsome face, my eyes to his beautiful lips surrounded by sexy dark stubble.

I didn't press. I didn't take much.

I just brushed my lips against his.

I remembered them being soft like that.

Soft, but not gentle.

The man was a greedy kisser.

On this altogether too painful thought, I lifted away, and my breath stuck in my throat because his hazel eyes were open and on me.

“Luna,” he said, and *damn*.

He might look all right, but his deep voice was fragile, and hearing that, it instantly gutted me.

I was about to say hey, when he spoke on.

“The love of my life.”

My body turned to stone in shock.

And hope.

Hope.

I hadn’t felt hope about Knox in over a year.

His hand I was holding tensed around my fingers, but then it relaxed, his eyes going hazy.

“Didn’t love me enough,” he muttered.

My throat started burning.

Hang right the ef on.

“Let me go,” he kept at it.

My mind immediately reengaged, taking over from my heart.

And we could just say, when it did, my mind was *pissed*.

“Let me go,” he mumbled a repeat, his eyes closed. “Walked away,” he whispered and his head fell a little to the side, so I knew he was back to sleep.

“I didn’t let you go, asshole,” I whispered. “You scraped me off.”

And he fucking well did.

Right.

Assess.

Knox was okay. He was going to be fine. He was in excellent shape. He’d breeze through PT.

He’d be fighting fit before anyone could blink.

And I was angry because him spouting that bullshit, drugged or not, brought back the hurt. Or not exactly brought it back, because it was always there, seeing as we shared the same friend posse so it wasn’t like I could get away from him and heal. But that hurt resurfaced full force and again shredded me.

Thus, I could not stay there, hearing his words bumping into each other in my head, witnessing his magnificence, all that was him never to be mine...

The love of my life.

Let me go.

How had he twisted that up in his head?

Seriously, I wanted to know.

I was not going to ask, not now, when he couldn't answer.

Not ever.

I had to get out of there.

So I did.

Right, actually, I didn't.

He might be a big jerk, but he was Knox. If not mine in reality, mine in my heart.

So before I took off, I said, "I'm glad you're okay. And I'm glad, with what happened, now the Nightingale boys are gonna lose their shit and deal with your sister and her idiot boyfriend, because that crap has to end."

He just lay there.

Lay there with his chest bare.

Was he cold?

I carefully unfolded the blanket and tugged it up so it covered his pecs.

Now it was time to go.

Of course (ugh!), I didn't.

I said, "And you better do what the doctor orders. No gonzo bullshit. Tearing your stitches or whatever. You don't know better than people with years of education and more years of experience. So stick with the program. No heroics."

He again didn't so much as twitch.

Okay, *now* it was time to go.

I released his hand and headed to the door.

At it, I stopped, though, and turned back to him again, mostly because, when it came to that guy, I was a total idiot.

"You're the love of my life too, asshole," I whispered.

With that, I went out the door.

I headed right back to the waiting room, and with everyone's eyes on me, evaluating, curious, concerned, I announced, "He's good. In and out of sleep. Whoever's up next can go on in."

With that, I went right to the bag I'd left in my seat.

And of course, the Angels were suddenly there, crowding me.

All of them.

Raye, Jess, Harlow, Willow, Shanti, Joey and Gemma.

I loved them. They were the best bitches a bitch could ask for.

But...

God.

I had to get out of here.

“You okay?” Raye asked.

“Did he say something?” Jessie asked.

“You don’t look too good,” Harlow noted, worry unhidden in her tone.

“Gotta bounce,” I stated, shouldering the strap on my bag and pushing through them.

“You gotta bounce?” Shanti queried, her words sharp with shock.

Joey followed me. “What happened?”

“Need space,” I told her.

“What’d he say?” Gemma, also following me (they all were), asked quietly.

“Space,” I bit, quickening my step.

I felt some of them do the same, but heard Raye advise, “Leave her.”

“But—” Willow began.

“Trust me. Leave her,” Raye said.

I started jogging, and they fell away.

I got out to my car.

I navigated a parking lot whose designers should be incarcerated for creating such a maze people had to navigate, those people being folks who needed hospitals for themselves or loved ones and as such, in no state to have to maneuver said maze.

And I had no idea why, because it sure wasn’t my heart or my head that made the decision, but as I drove, I ended up sitting in my car at the curb outside my sister, Dream’s house.

Dream and I did not get along (marked understatement). Though, recently, there’d been a thawing. Just not much of one.

Why I was there rather than going to my mom, I did not know.

Why I was there rather than heading straight to the grocery store, buying a gallon of Tillamook Vanilla Bean ice cream and a jar of Biscoff cookie butter, emptying both into a mixing bowl, cueing up *Once*, and eating the whole thing, I did not know.

But there I was.

“Fuck it,” I clipped, pushed out of my Prius and trooped up to her door.

I knocked.

Dream opened the door with a baby on her hip.

The baby was not one of hers.

Seeing as she had three kids from three different men, and three jobs to take care of them, she’d managed to create a fifty/fifty custody gig with all of her baby daddies so her kids were with their dads every other week. And this was that week.

But she had a daycare thing going in her pad taking in two other kids. So there were always kids.

After she opened the door, I noticed what I’d been noticing lately with growing alarm.

She was losing weight, and she looked beat down.

This happened when you had three jobs (her daycare, weekend waitress work at The Surf Club, where I also worked, and her Etsy store, which had taken off), three kids, and you’d used up all your family and friends (another long story), so you didn’t have a lot of help.

It was time for me to ask her about this regardless of the fact that, even if I genuinely cared about her state of being, I knew she’d be bitchy or spiteful or throw my concern in my face some other way.

I didn’t ask her about this.

I announced, “Knox was shot.”

My sister’s head jerked back.

I burst into tears on her doorstep.

For a second, I just stood there crying while she stared at me.

As expected.

We’d never been close. This deteriorated the last few years.

And I guessed now we were just...siblings.

But suddenly, I was pulled inside.

She closed the door.
She put the baby in a playpen.
She turned to me.
I kept crying but did it braced for her to say something ugly.
She didn't.
She pulled me in her arms.
And she hugged me.
Hard.

* * * * *

Thirty Minutes Earlier...

In Room Three West

Knox Chambers heard the door snick shut.
He opened his eyes.
He saw ceiling.
Physically, he felt pretty much nothing.
Mentally, he felt hazy and out of it.
Even so...
His lips curled up in a smile.

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