

Avenging Angel: Back in the Saddle

By Kristen Ashley
Teaser Chapter

Chapter One

Catch Me if You Can

It was dark as pitch in the area around the makeshift encampment that sat in the parking lot of an abandoned warehouse, in what had become a kind of no man's land just south of the heart of the city.

This darkness might have to do with the fact it was nearing one in the morning.

It wasn't a great time to do my search, but in the last six months, I'd been hitting up the encampment at random times, day and evening. I always came up empty handed. But due to safety issues, I'd never gone so late (or early, depending on how you looked at it).

This time, I was giving it a shot precisely because it was so late (also because I was getting desperate).

He had to sleep somewhere, and I was hoping it was here. At the same time, I died a little death thinking it might be.

It was the night before Thanksgiving.

I'd hoped he'd be somewhere with someone on Thanksgiving, even if that someone wasn't me, and, well, that somewhere was here.

I'd learned, and I had the requisite materials with me.

Four bags full of bottles of water (sorry environment) and a backpack stuffed with packs of beef jerky, boxes of protein bars and hydration packets.

Oh yeah, and an empty used sharps container.

Homer shuffled out first, as Homer always did. I wasn't sure Homer slept. I was sure Homer was King of the Homeless Encampment.

I was sure of this because I'd learned something else. I had to make Homer trust me before anyone else did.

This took time.

And lots of bottles of water and packs of beef jerky.

He said nothing as he took two of the bags and the sharps container from me.

Then he mumbled, "Late night."

"Is he here?"

My eyes had adjusted to the dark. I'd hit the encampment, and in the dim light that came from the city and various camp lanterns dotting the space, I saw his eyes in his dangerously tanned, leathery, whiskered face catch mine.

And I saw my answer.

No.

My brother wasn't there.

"Seen him?" I asked as we began to move through the oddly organized labyrinth of tents, tarps that created crude shelters, loaded grocery carts and the scattering of debris.

"Did you bring clean syringes?"

This wasn't an answer to my question, and sadly, my answer to his was, "Not this time."

He nodded, reached into a bag, made a noise, and a hand came out of a tent.

He put a bottle of water in it as I shrugged off the backpack to pull out a bag of jerky.

Homer took that, tossed it into the tent, and we moved on.

We did this at two more tents before I said, "Homer."

That was all I said, but he got me, so he stopped and turned to me.

And he stated it plainly. "You find him, you quit coming."

Oh my God.

On the one hand, it felt good that he trusted me, and him saying that meant he and his brethren appreciated me. I didn't have the resources to give much, and I knew I didn't help their situation at all, but it was nice to understand the little I did meant something.

On the other hand, I needed to find my brother.

"Are you...keeping him from me?" I asked.

He shook his head.

But he said, "Others might."

That meant, since Homer knew everyone and everything, others *were*.

Damn.

I pointed out the obvious. "I've gotta know if he's all right."

Homer gazed around the dismal space that looked bad and smelled worse.

I took his point.

If Jeff was here, he wasn't all right.

Then again, I already knew he wasn't all right.

Just as I knew, the minute Mom kicked him out seven months ago, and he didn't do his usual—bunk with one of his buds, then figure his shit out and get back on his meds—I would be doing what I was doing right then.

And there I was, doing what I was doing right then.

We moved through the space, silently handing out waters and protein delivery systems, with me looking closely at faces and trying to peer into tents.

I came up empty.

As usual.

When we were back at Homer's tent, he took the spent plastic bags from me (something else I'd learned: Homer had a thing for plastic bags), but handed me the clattering sharps container.

"It'd be good you bring syringes next time," he said.

With that, he ducked into his tent and disappeared.

I stared at it, the feelings I was feeling balling up inside me, the weight so heavy, the urge was almost overwhelming to open my mouth and shriek my fear and frustration to the skies above Phoenix.

I didn't do that.

I carried that weight with the container and my empty backpack to my car.

Though, I didn't make it to my car.

I stopped dead twenty feet away when I saw Eric Turner, investigator at Nightingale Investigations & Security. The place of business of Eric, Cap (my friend Raye's boyfriend) and a number of other badasses who were all ridiculously attractive.

Yep.

Every.

Single.

One.

His ass was resting on the fender of my black convertible Mini, his long legs stretched out in front of him, ankles crossed, his arms also crossed on his chest.

He'd been there a while.

Waiting for me.

Okay, one could say, until I met Eric, I hadn't been into older guys.

And he wasn't older, *as such*.

It was just that he belonged to the first generation of the Hot Bunch guys of NI&S (Raye had dubbed the younger generation the Hottie Squad so we could tell them apart, something that was necessary due to their overall concentrated level of hotness, which was so high, it was immeasurable, so we had to pry them apart somehow).

The first generation were all married (except Eric) and had wives and children (except Eric).

But the minute I clapped eyes on him, I was into him.

That was because he was mega hot.

It was also about other things, which I wasn't in the place to contemplate fully at that moment, seeing as it was now closer to two in the morning, and he had no reason to be leaning against my car at that time—or ever.

Yet there he was.

I restarted walking toward him, and when I arrived, I quipped, "Of all the gin joints."

"I'm not finding anything funny, Jessie," he replied.

Hmm.

One could say we hadn't had very many deep conversations (as in...*none*).

But I'd been around him somewhat frequently, seeing as Raye, one of my three besties, was not only hooked up, but shacked up with Cap. This meant they often came to The Surf Club to have lunch or grab a cup of joe. And The Surf Club was where Raye, my other two besties, Harlow and Luna, and I worked.

Obviously, I'd heard his voice, which was normally deep and mellow, but it could get smooth, rich and warm as fudge when he said things like, "Thank you," after I put one of Lucia's (our chef) divine creations in front of him.

Now, it was still deep, though not at all mellow, or smooth. Instead, rough and edgy.

In other words...pissed.

"Eric—"

He cut me off. "Have you lost your fuckin' mind?"

"No, I—"

"Wrong," he bit off. "You have. You've lost your fuckin' mind."

Now, hang on a second.

This guy worked with my friend's boyfriend.

No, wait.

Cap was my friend too, so take that degree of separation out, he worked with my friend.

I waited on him a couple of times (right, that was a lie, I'd waited on him multiple times).

And I went out and had wings and beers while watching the Cardinals with that crew once, and he was there.

Other than that, and the mad crush I had on him from not-so afar, this guy did not factor in my life.

"What I'm doing has nothing to do with you," I told him.

"Wrong again," he retorted.

I was losing patience.

No surprise, since I wasn't the most patient being on the planet, or even in the top ninety-nine percent (and on my bad days, such as now, I occupied more of the lower .3 percent bracket).

"How do you figure that?" I snapped.

"I take it you haven't read the Rock Chick books either."

The Rock Chick books were published novels written about all his buds' courtships (though, not his, obvs).

I know, weird.

But true.

They also apparently stood as warning signals to Raye, Luna, Harlow and me about our futures.

Which would normally lead one to diving right in.

I'd meant to, but what could I say?

I wasn't a reader.

Topping that, the one I wanted (the one I was shockingly currently with) didn't want me.

I didn't confirm I hadn't read the books.

I didn't say anything at all.

He hadn't moved from his cool-scary-guy crossed ankles/arms lean against my car (and I hoped his fine ass didn't put a dent in my fender, because he was tall and built, and muscle like his had to have some heft to it), so I mimicked him, without the crossed ankles and leaning parts.

Okay, so I just crossed my arms on my chest.

“We adopt one, we adopt all,” he stated. “Raye came into the family, now you’re all under our protection.”

“That’s sweet and all—”

He interrupted me.

Again.

“It’s not sweet. We’ve been through this shit before. It’s compulsory.”

Compulsory?

Screw that.

I didn’t need some hot guy thinking I was an obligatory pain in his ass.

“Consider yourself let off the hook when it comes to me,” I offered.

He shook his head. “It doesn’t work that way.”

Okay.

I’d had a tough night.

And tomorrow was going to be a tough day.

Jeff wasn’t there, or they were hiding him from me, so I’d continue to bring water, hydration packets, food, clean syringes, bath wipes and the like. My mother was useless (per usual). My father was a piece of garbage (per usual). Therefore, no family Thanksgiving for me, and I loved turkey, and stuffing, and all that shit.

But more, because Mom and Dad were such wastes of space, it was on me to find Jeff.

And the longer it took, the more terrified I got.

So...yeah.

I wasn’t in a stellar mood.

And Eric looked delectable, all long, lean, muscled, black-haired hot guy, lounging against my Mini.

But I was into him, and a girl could feel vibes, so I knew he wasn’t into me (which sucked...*huge*, until very recently, when I was figuring out he could be a dick).

So there was also that.

But straight up, I wasn’t doing this.

I started to head to the driver’s side door when he said, “The other guys think it’s cute. I’m older and I’ve been through this crap before, and this vigilante shit, it’s not cute, Jessie.”

That stopped me right in my tracks.

“I’m not being cute,” I whispered, my words trembling with my fury.

Because trying to find my missing brother who had significant mental health issues was nowhere near *cute*.

Finally, he pushed off my car and moved to me, so I had to tip my head back because the dude towered over me. And I wasn’t short.

That said, even though I’d never had a guy that tall, I knew he was the *exact perfect* height to kiss.

Cripes, the hits just kept coming.

“I know,” he said, his voice having changed, back to smooth, even gentle. “But what you’re doing is dangerous.”

I tensed, my head so screwed up with worry about Jeff (and, I couldn’t deny, unreciprocated longing for Eric), it hadn’t occurred to me to spare a moment to cipher why he just happened to be here.

I felt my eyes narrow. “Do you know what I’m doing?”

“I’d like for you to talk to me about it.”

That was both sweet and not an answer to my question, so the second part negated the sweet part.

I abandoned that line of questioning to get things moving so I could go home. In the deep fall and winter, it got cold at night in the Valley, and suddenly, I was freezing.

“Homer looks after me,” I asserted.

“Homer?”

“The King of the Encampment.”

“And what do you know about Homer?”

“I know he’s the King of the Encampment.”

“What else?”

“What else do I need to know?”

“Is he addicted to drugs?”

“That’s not need to know.”

“Is he PTSD?”

“That’s not need to know either.”

“It will be, when he turns because he can’t find his fix and he’s going through DTs or he’s having an episode, and you’re in his space.”

“Homer’s solid.”

“He lives in a homeless encampment.”

“He’s still solid.”

“How do you know that?”

All right.

Enough!

I threw both my arms out and cried, “I just know, all right?”

“Jessie?”

I turned.

And sure enough, about ten feet away, there was Homer and about seven other dudes from the camp.

They seemed menacing in the shadows, but they were scraggly and didn’t get regular nutrition.

Though, even if they were healthy, Eric was the kind of guy who could probably best the lot of them.

Another of those reasons why I was into him. It was clear he could take care of himself and any bad business that came his way, so in the end, if you were his, he could take care of you.

No one had ever taken care of me.

Not ever.

In my entire life.

“Everything okay?” Homer asked.

No!

“Yes,” I lied. “This is Eric. He’s a friend. And he’s not a fan of the hour I chose to visit you.”

Homer looked to Eric. “You’re right. It wasn’t smart.”

Oh my God!

Really?

“Homer!” I snapped.

He was still looking at Eric. “Make sure she comes when it’s safer. And come with her.” He jerked his head to the men behind him. “We’ll let you in.”

With that, he and his bedraggled, improvised posse shuffled back to the tents.

No help there.

“Jessie, look at me.”

I tore my eyes from the men who were fading into the mishmash of tents and darkness and looked up at Eric.

Mistake.

There wasn’t a lot of light, but the man was so handsome, I could see every delicious angle and delightful hollow of his perfect face.

And how did he get so close without me noticing?

God, I’d never been this close to him.

He smelled like rosemary and cedarwood.

Scrumptious.

And I suddenly got the whole magnetic thing, because, even if I was pissed at him and in a crappy mood, I felt the pull of his hotness and it was almost impossible to resist.

That said, holding a sharps container and being downwind from a not-great smell (though, the rosemary and cedarwood helped) in the middle of the night with a man who wasn’t into me but was ticked at me, wasn’t conducive to me throwing myself at him.

Then again, I wasn’t a throwing-myself-at-a-man type of girl.

I was a catch-me-if-you-can one.

“If you want us to find him, we’ll find him,” he stated.

Newsflash: I wasn’t only impatient, I was stubborn.

Oh, and I could hold a grudge.

So with this shit he was pulling, which was brand-new, it meant he had a whole year before my grudge wore off.

Therefore, instead of taking this supposedly hot-shit investigator up on his offer, I shot back, “I’m no one’s obligation.”

“I see you took that wrong,” he muttered.

“Can we be done with this?” I requested.

“We can, if you promise you’ll call me if you ever come back here, so me, or one of the guys, can come with you.”

“I’ve been doing this a while and...”—I held my arms up at my sides, the sharps container dangling from one hand—“here I am, perfectly fine.”

Suddenly, the container clattered to the ground, and my front was pressed to the side of my car, my legs were kicked wide apart, my arm was twisted behind me, I had a wall of muscle pressed tight to my back, and Eric’s mouth was at my ear.

“I make my point about how shit can shift in an instant?” he whispered there.

Even though I was pissed—no, *insanely* pissed—his smooth voice in my ear traveled down the skin of my neck, and I had to fight a shiver.

“Get off me,” I whispered.

He didn’t get off me, nor did he let me go.

His other arm snaked around my belly and he pulled me tighter to his body.

God, every inch of him felt hard, totally unyielding, and he was very warm.

Lord.

“I make my point?” This time, his voice was rougher, almost thick, and I was still insanely pissed, but it did a number on me.

“Please, let me go.”

He did, and he didn’t.

He let me go enough to whirl me around, then he pressed me back into the car, front to front. He had one arm tight around my waist and the other hand he rested on the soft top beside me.

But, oh crap.

This was worse.

By *a lot*.

“You think I want to be out at two in the morning having a frustrating as fuck conversation with a stubborn woman who knows I’m right?” he asked.

“Fine. Great. I won’t ever come here again,” I lied.

“You’re lying,” he called me on it.

I could take no more.

Honestly, could you blame me?

“Can I just go home?” I demanded.

His onyx eyes roamed my face for what seemed like an eternity (and as per the Official Crushing on a Guy Handbook, which I’d recently spent a good deal of time memorizing, in the

section where it dealt with unrequited crushes, it was considered an actual eternity) before he let me go and stepped away.

“You have friends,” he pointed out, going softly now, because his tone was just that.

Yeah.

I did.

Good ones.

And we’d just gone through a shitstorm with Raye.

I loved them, and I knew they’d take my back.

But this was...personal.

Private.

Family.

“It’s a family thing,” I told Eric.

Those onyx eyes moved over my face again before he sighed. Heavily.

“Just be smart,” he said.

As if I intended to be dumb.

I glared at him.

Something shifted in the way he was looking at me as I did. Something big and important and consuming.

So much of all of that, it made me stop glaring and start staring at the same time trying to get a handle on just what that shift was.

He then muttered, like he was talking to himself, “Shit, I’m fucked.”

And he had to be talking to himself, because I sure didn’t know what he was on about.

He then bent, nabbed the sharps container and sauntered to his truck.

And one could say the man could *saunter*.

Whoa.

I shook my head to get myself together because I’d just learned, no matter how good he could saunter, Eric was a dick (yes, I was ignoring the fact he was out there to talk sense into me, because what I was doing, especially at that hour, truly wasn’t all that safe).

It was time to head home.

It was, because in a few hours, I had to get up, alone, and figure out how to roast a turkey breast, make some mashed potatoes and dump a can of soup into some green beans, then pick a

movie I could watch that wouldn't make me feel like a total loser because I was all by myself on Thanksgiving.

* * * *

I pulled into my parking spot at the Oasis, my apartment complex, and it was only then, the SUV that had Eric's glorious ass in it that followed me all the way home motored out of the parking lot of my apartment complex and turned right on Seventh.

“Overachiever,” I mumbled as I hauled my ass out of my car.

I went through the security gate, and even the courtyard of the Oasis, which was usually lit up with attractive string lights and the pool illuminated—always a cozy welcome home—due to the hour (and the fact the pool was being resurfaced) was dark and forbidding.

Like my mood.

I jogged up the steps, passed Raye and Cap's place, then let myself into mine.

I switched on the light on the table by the door and then let out a small scream.

A very pretty Black woman about my age, wearing a pair of sandy-white satin parachute pants and a stark white cashmere turtleneck, was sitting on my couch.

This outfit was the shit, and I instantly made a mental note to find those pants, at the same time I prayed they came in black.

I knew immediately who she was, even if, until that moment, I'd never met her.

Her name was Clarice, and she was the middleman for someone Raye and Luna referred to as Arthur.

She was also the wrangler of the Avenging Angels, of which, along with Raye, Luna and Harlow, I was one.

Whoever this Arthur was had given us three cars in three storage units, and an array of equipment that ranged from Tasers to handcuffs to white boards in order to conduct our (yes, vigilante) investigations.

When Raye and Luna recruited us, I was all in, mostly because those two were crazy bitches, and they were trying to find missing women.

I honestly didn't think much would come of it, but your girl goes on a mission, and that mission involved her navigating the seedy underbelly of Phoenix, you didn't ask questions. You took her back.

Then they actually figured out who took the women, and even found them.

Color me every shade of surprised.

But that was over two months ago, and since, we'd never used those cars, except to go visit our "informants" (who were more like friends we had a burger with every once in a while who also happened to work the streets as sex workers).

So I kinda figured it was all just a lark.

I mean, your average, everyday server at a funky coffee/cocktail bar (that also served great food, and fabulous drinks (if I did say so myself)) didn't go around cracking cases the cops couldn't figure out.

But here was Clarice, and I couldn't deny the quiver of excitement I felt at finally getting to meet her and what that might mean.

Even if she did break into my pad and scare the crap out of me.

"Not smart," she said before she pushed to her high-heeled, champagne sandaled feet.

I had a feeling she knew where I was that night, but I didn't ask. According to Raye and Luna, this Arthur person knew all, so it stood to reason Clarice would too.

"I take it you're Clarice," I noted as she walked to me.

She then walked right by me, to the door.

She put her hand on the handle and turned back to me.

"It's after two in the morning on Turkey Day," she bitched.

Seriously?

"Sorry, I must have extended your invitation in a fugue state," I retorted. "Hang tight while I pull together a cheese platter."

Slowly, she smiled. "I think I like you."

"I'll notify the papers," I stated. "Why are you here?"

Her smile died and she ordered, "Activate the Angels, Jess." She opened the door and made a move out of it, but looked over her shoulder at me before she was fully out, and she lowered the boom. "Or I will."

The door closed on her, and I heard her heels clicking along the walkway outside.

I stood immobile long after the sound of them faded to nothing.
Only then did the entirety of my night settle on me.
So of course, I muttered to myself, “Well...shit.”

Avenging Angel: Back in the Saddle

will be unleashed

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