

EARNING IT

A STOLEN MOMENT NOVEL

FREE EXCERPT

BY ANGELA QUARLES

Chapter 1

PEPPER

ur 2 cold

GLARE AT THE four-month-old text, barely glancing at the bearded hipster bumping past me on the sidewalk. The sender? That'd be my ex. The hockey goalie who slapped away our year-long relationship with a text. Well, a series of texts over a five-minute span.

I'm killing time, and like someone who keeps picking, picking, picking at a scab, I'd pulled up those texts to stare at that last one. Cold?

Ambitious. Driven. Yes.

But cold?

I shove the phone into its pocket in my purse. I am *not* my parents. Thinking of those two fills me with a familiar but fuzzy unease.

A searing wave of fuck-that-asshole follows. He's still infecting my life—what I need is closure. I can't let that infection spill into my new life here in my old hometown. I yank the phone back out, resigned at this point to looking like an idiot to anyone who might be watching.

An article on Facebook from yesterday waves at me—hello, perfect revenge!

Tap, tap, tap. A quick search, a phone call, and... Yes.

I mash the end call icon on my Samsung and do a tee-hee dance on the sunny sidewalk. I sheepishly glance around to see who witnessed my little bout of enthusiasm on Sarasota's Main Street, but the locals and the few meandering tourists are preoccupied with their own lives this morning. Why should I care anyway, right?

Angela Quarles

Because thanks to my vengeance-driven donation, there's now a Madagascar hissing cockroach at the Bronx Zoo graced with the name Phil Stoddart.

It might be a placebo, but damn, it feels fantastic.

That task hasn't wasted enough time, so I pop under the barely cooler shade of one of the pin oaks lining the street and enter today's tasks in my app. It's my last day for errands before I start work with my new medical practice. Ha—look at me being all casual. *My new medical practice.*

Try first. Yesterday, seeing the nameplate next to my door—Dr. Rodgers—had brought goose bumps along my arms, making everything terrifyingly and excitingly *real*. I'm finally starting my career as a sports medicine doc. See, it's *that* life I can't wait to start after twelve grueling years of schooling, but instead, I'm five minutes early for a coffee date I'd rather not go on, much less be early to. So yeah, I'm stalling.

My high school best friend set me up with a colleague at her law firm. A lawyer? No, thanks—got enough of them growing up. (Read: my parents.) But since she's the only old friend I still want to hang with here, I succumbed. What's one morning?

All right. That's as much as I can reasonably stall. Now to face Rick the Lawyer, make small talk, and sip overpriced coffee. Maybe he'll surprise me. With the fresh reminder of Phil's opinion of me, maybe it'll be good to swim in the dating pool again. Live a little.

I dodge the sidewalk amblers and push through the door of the Mocha Cabana exactly one minute early. The rich scent of coffee and sweet pastries envelops me. Customers of all ages are bunched around the café-style tables. The population has definitely skewed younger since childhood. When I moved away, the realization that not everyone was seventy-plus years old was an eye-opener.

I do a quick scan—all I have to go on is that he's my age, he's got dark hair, and his name is Rick. And he's a lawyer.

I paste on a smile.

My gaze latches onto the man by the corner window, whose unnervingly masculine face is bisected by the fluctuating shadow of a nodding palm frond outside. The table in front of him is practically Lilliputian, he's so huge. He's the only man in the place matching Rick's description, though, and my heart does a tee-hee dance of its own. And I can tell, in that odd way that happens sometimes, that he knows I've arrived and is aware of me viscerally. That he's watching without watching, because the air between us has that crackly, weighty anticipation that triggers my sixth sense. This guy will have significance in my life, it says.

Combined with a rush of attraction? Not the reaction I want for a lawyer—or

Earning It

for anyone right now. Shit.

But Lordy, he must work out in his off hours. He's fit in a way you rarely see outside of movies and comic books. His hair is midnight black, and if it wasn't just past his ears, I'd totally peg him for active military—but not in the way you might think. He doesn't have those all-American good looks honed into sharp cheekbones and jaw like you associate with Marines. No. It's in the posture, the confidence, the strength. He owns—dominates—the space around him.

He *has* sharp cheekbones, but they're not part of an overall shiny, do-gooder package. Instead, they're combined with an olive skin tone, shadowed eyes, and a commanding nose that all adds up to Devastating.

Yipes, this easily-six-foot-two stack of hunky muscle is a lawyer and—I swallow—my blind date.

Pulse stupidly racing and that weighty awareness tingling up my back, I shuffle into line to order my café mocha. Deep breath. Live a little, I remind myself.

Swim in the dating pool? Now I want to splash in it, and I can't tell if it's because I want to cause a distraction or revel in the sheer *fun*.

One thing I *do* know—this reaction is *so* not like me.



LUKE

YEAH, I SAW her come in. Yeah, it's now forty-two seconds past my self-allotted time for staying in this frou-frou place. But can you blame a guy? The curvy brunette in the red dress snagged my attention as soon as she strolled in. The space around her seems less...murky.

That's not quite right. As a Navy SEAL, details are *always* dialed in, so it's not that my surroundings shifted from fuzzy to sharp. The clouds didn't part and reveal her in full sunshine or any of that crap. No. But the details are usually flat. Now it's as if she makes the space more...vibrant. 3D.

She doesn't see me at first, so I steal a moment and let my gaze linger. My hands flex—her trim but lush figure makes me want to trace all those curves. Grip her hips. Such a contrast to her glossy hair pulled into a reserved bun at the nape of her neck, which screams *take me seriously*. The red liquid of her dress hugs those grippable curves, teasing, promising. The Florida sun bathes her gorgeous face in warm light.

Shit. I'm getting downright poetic.

Angela Quarles

I press two fingers to my pulse. Cuz this shit isn't normal.

I still, my instincts fully engaged, because something about her is familiar, but I can't zero in on what. And now it's ninety seconds past my time, and I *should* be dumping this joke of a coffee and getting on with my day, but, yeah, the brunette. Maybe she's getting her order to-go, and I can see her on the way out. Okay, see her fine ass, cuz she's gotta have one, right?

And that's why I'm thrown off guard. Something else that's not normal. A swath of red fills my peripheral vision, scant inches from my face, and I know without looking up it's her. A coconut scent wafts over me. Wafts? Did I just use the word *waft*?

A delicate throat clears, and an intriguing voice says tentatively, "Rick?"

I look up, ready to correct her. Lucky Rick.

But I pause. And go very, very still.

Holy. Shit. It's Pepper Rodgers from high school. Pepper of the hormone-fueled teenage fantasies. Pepper the ever-optimistic. Pepper whom I totally humiliated at the science fair senior year. I'd call her the one who got away, but I never had her.

Her brown eyes don't flash with recognition.

Can't fault her. I'm not the shuffling beanpole with braces and acne she knew in high school.

Suddenly, I don't want to correct her and lose my opportunity to be around her for the next few minutes she might grant me. Cuz she wouldn't want to talk to Luke Haas—or Haashole as she dubbed me—but she obviously wants to talk to this Rick person.

And doesn't know who he is.

Chapter 2

LUKE

SURVEY THE BUSY café. Completely unnecessary—no one has come in around my age and hair color. While I don't know any of the customers, most are familiar by sight. Sarasota's a small town when it gets right down to it. And during the summer? Most are local. In the winter, it's different—our population swells twenty percent with all the tin can tourists and snowbirds burrowing down here to escape the cold.

All the while, Pepper's puzzled gaze is a subtle pressure, waiting for me to make a decision and speak.

I lock eyes with her and, God help me, smile. No affirmation or denial, but a gesture that could be misinterpreted. Not proud of it, but...fuck. My gut whispers that this is a stolen moment, and I want to be that thief. Badly.

Besides, she doesn't live here anymore. Hasn't since we graduated twelve years ago. Normally, my life operates within that dangerous slice defined by the phrase "margin for error," and I do my damndest to keep that margin slim. Keeping it slim and trim is the only way I've gotten anywhere in life.

This here? It's outside the parameters of slim margin for error, but that's how bad I want this.

I can be Rick for a morning. Be someone other than an expensively well-trained shell posing as human. Alleviate the monotony of my life. For a brief moment. Until she recognizes me. The odds are damn high it'll only be a moment—the subterfuge will be over quickly if this is a business meeting.

So, yeah, I curve my lips, and am rewarded by the most stunning, hits-me-in-the-solar-plexus smile. I've never received any of her smiles, and damn if I don't want it to be the first of many I'd catalog. Note the time and date. The

Angela Quarles

cause and effect. Because this smile achieves what little else does—penetrates through the gray and lights me up with color. Because this smile transforms her face from a put-together, beautiful brunette, to a gorgeous but personable woman. And fuck, there's the beauty mark on her right temple that I remember vividly. Vividly because it drove me crazy. Makes no sense, but the vision of a lick on that spot as step one in the exploration of her whole body was my teenage wank material.

Aaaand apparently it still does it for me. Huh.

She sticks out her hand, and the move, while confident-looking, has an overlay of nervous bravado. "Hi, so nice to meet you! I'm Pepper, but I guess you figured that out."

Her voice has changed since high school—more confident and mature. No nonsense, yet its tones seep into me, warming me. Her outstretched hand beckons, and—still floored I'm going with this new plan—I stand and slide my palm against hers, completely engulfing her small hand. Her skin sears mine, warm and silky, a one-two lust combo. A jolt of arousal spikes through me. Another surprise for the day. I'm racking the fuckers up like kill points ever since she walked in. Before I look like a complete ape-man, I grasp her hand and shake, a firm one that signals she has my respect.

Her laugh has an edge—another indicator she's nervous. She slips into the opposite seat in a graceful twist, and I follow suit. She's all curves, right in front of me. Vibrant. Anxious. Pepper.

That anxious-vibrant combo punches me—I'm not worth that much mental anxiety. I stop myself from reaching out to clasp her hand in some kind of primitive protective gesture. I want to soothe her. No doubt exists that I've affected her. Good. Sucks to be the only one.

I need more background intel, so I sit back and risk keeping quiet. Occupy my stolen moment for as long as I can. She doesn't disappoint.

"Can you believe Tricia?" She sets down her red coffee mug and straightens her spoon on the saucer, the rattle and clink barely audible in the noise of the café. Did I mention that everything is red here? Dealing with all this relentless red is one of the reasons I come here. I'm waiting for the sheer solid front of it to penetrate and normalize everything, but it hasn't yet.

"Unbelievable," I answer. A safe reaction to whatever Tricia's done.

She angles forward, her head tilting almost in apology. "This is my first blind date, so you'll have to forgive me."

Ah. A blind date. Now that I know the situation, I adjust to the new intel, but then her thumb rubs up and down the handle of her mug. Of course, I transfer the action to someplace my mind has no business going.

Earning It

I clear my throat and shift in my seat, leaning forward. “Mine too. We’re both blind date virgins then.” Jesus, that sounded cheesy. But she takes it in stride. “How much did Tricia tell you?”

The odds are looking better that I can stretch the moment. Be Rick.

“Nothing except, you know”—she waves a hand at me—“how you look. I know you’re a partner in her law firm.” At that, her eyes flare with panic—odd. It’s gone just as fast. Since I know fuck all about law, I’ll need to keep our conversation away from work. If I don’t ask her about her job, maybe she won’t ask about mine.

She bites her lip. Which acts like a fucking missile, shooting another bolt of lust through me. Down, boy.

I absolutely *cannot* go there. Not with her.

But the space between us is sexually charged, as if it has a weight of its own and is simultaneously pushing against us and pulling us toward each other. The sensation’s a new one.

Wait. No. It’s exactly how it was in high school. When that sensation penetrated and confused my puny adolescent, hormone-addled brain into being a dipshit to her. As if I knew it meant something, and I needed to take action, but I had no fucking clue and just, yeah, did stupid shit.

So. My plan is clear. Be a new person. Be this Rick the Lawyer. And talk to the only woman who’s ever made me feel any kind of spark outside of combat for the space of this coffee date. Best case scenario, I get to be outside my skin—free to be whatever the hell I want. Worst case—she recognizes me as we chat. She’ll be pissed, call me an asshole, but it won’t be anything she hasn’t called me in the past, so... Win/Win?



PEPPER

HOLY YUMMY PRESENCE, Batman. I have no words, which is unusual for me, to be honest. I don’t want him to shatter the gorgeous-man illusion with law talk, so the blip in my brain is me scrambling for another conversational topic. I’d planned to coast through this date by asking him about his job and letting him rattle on, because that’s what guys seem to do best—talk about themselves. Especially on first dates. So I’ve heard.

I wrap my hands around my mug, letting the warmth ground me. I blow into it to stall. My brain isn’t helped out by the zing I feel being this close to

Angela Quarles

him. He's the definition of sex on a stick. Normally, I don't even say stuff like that, but I heard it on some show and it pops, all unwelcome, into my brain. And that's a little too overwhelming for me, so...

"Um, are you new in town?"

No judging. I've gotta start somewhere, and it's obvious he's not going to take the plunge. My voice comes out a little thready, but I put on a brave face.

He leans back, and the movement sends a scent my way. *His* scent. And of course it's intoxicating. Manly. Sex-on-a-stupid-stick manly. No doubt he received more than his share of pheromones when he was made. I do *not* lean forward to keep it in range.

Okay, I do.

To cover my action, I prop my chin on my hand and wait for his response like I'm all calm, but really I'm like a dog whose rump hits the floor in record speed, tail thumping madly, waiting for my treat—his voice. I've only gotten four sentences out of him so far, but those four sentences?

Sexy. Well, not the sentences themselves, but the voice that carries them. Deep, rumbling, self-assured.

Sexy.

Jeez, my brain is stuck on that word. I do my best to feign polite interest instead of oh-my-God-can-you-just-sit-there-and-be-any-more-sexy?

All right. That word's now banned from my vocabulary. I'd like to get through this blind date with dignity, thank you very much. Especially since this type of over-the-top reaction is new, like a feverish infection.

"Moved here from Virginia Beach about two years ago." His voice prickles over my skin, fills me. Burrows into some lonely part of me I didn't know was there. And then kicks my heart rate into a greater pace, because I absolutely do *not* know how to handle the attraction I'm feeling for this stranger. This can't be normal, can it?

I bite off a piece of chocolate croissant and lick the crumbs from my lips.

"And you?" He takes a sip of coffee and looks at me over the rim, his eyes carrying a knowing kind of weight to them. God. He can tell I have the hots for him.

I stop myself. Normally, I'd feel like the potato salad caught thinking it was a fancy *amuse-bouche* to have a chance with someone like him. But now I'm like, screw it. So I think he's hot and he knows it. Is that a crime?

I moved back to my hometown because I want to start fresh. Be the new me I put on hold for twelve mind-numbing, sleep-deprived years. And the new me is totally fine with a hot guy knowing I find him attractive. Might be good to see where this goes. New town. New fling. New not-cold me.

Earning It

Take that, Phil.

But I'm bungling it already, because that was a stupid-long pause. God—it's as if I have little dating experience. Haha. That's me being sarcastic, because that's exactly what this is. I'm twenty-nine, but I might as well be eighteen.

The sad truth is—I poured all of my twenties into school. Phil was my first and only real relationship, and that came about because it unfolded with little effort on my part—he was a patient—and because I *thought* that finally reaching the fellowship stage of my schooling meant I could create time for a relationship. Boy, had that been an epic miscalculation.

And now, I've paused even looonger.

As if to punctuate the ridiculous silence, the frothing machine behind me chooses now to *scroooosh* overloud and overlong. I wait until it's done and say, "I grew up here." I take a sip of my café mocha, grateful to have something to do with my hands—they're like fluttery, alien things with no direction.

His gaze hasn't left mine, and I resist shifting in my seat. "Must've been nice, growing up near such beautiful beaches."

"Sure," I say, because that's what everyone expects, but honestly, it wasn't. I hated the whole smearing down with lotion and baking in the sun thing. Classmates filled my yearbooks with snide remarks about my pale state. *Get a tan, girl* was my fave of the lot. "But tell me about Virginia Beach. I've never been."

He leans forward, takes the bait—thank God—and regales me with stories about his buddies there, their pranks, his favorite spots, but all the while I'm thinking our conversation is really about something else.

I do get a vivid picture of the Virginia Beach he knows, and I want to visit. See these places. With him.

This is nuts.

It's just...he's so deliciously self-assured, as if he's in complete control of himself and whatever situation befalls him, and the thought sends a thrill through me. He's so out of my league, but a girl can pretend. It's not that I think I'm pond scum or something, but I'm average in the looks department and my limited dating experience places him in the unattainable sphere.

Unease worms its way into my newfound resolve to live a little. Seeing his control—his ease and charm—highlights how different we are. We might both be self-assured business professionals, but only for *him* does it carry over into his dating life. I lack that. And I'm surprised to find this bothers me. Not about him. God no. But about me.

I polish off my chocolate croissant, trying to enjoy its sweet buttery flavor as I listen to him and struggle with what to think. What to do.

His words and my words and our breaths are combining across this café

Angela Quarles

table in this corner coffee shop, and I feel as if there are other presences here with us: my nerves, for one; a weighty, breathless expectation; potential.

However, as the minutes pass and conversations and customers ebb and flow around us, it no longer *feels* as if he's out of my league. We just click, and it seems so completely natural to be here talking. With him.

For instance, how weird is it that we both visited Nuremberg the same year, but a month apart?

“*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*” he asks, with a challenging eyebrow lift.

“*Ja*,” I answer, but my German's rusty, and I say so in German. I continue in English, “It was a stop on a short tour of Southern Germany before I started my spring semester abroad in Munich. Stayed at the coolest youth hostel, a converted castle.”

He chuckles, a sound that drops into that weighty expectation and sizzles along my nerves. “I stayed there too.”

See? *Click*. Fate. I shift forward in my seat. “It was raining when I got there, so I didn't get to appreciate it at first, but I met two Canadians—a brother and sister—and we had a great time holed up in our room.”

He nods along. “More people should travel abroad, if they're able. We're so isolated here. Most Americans don't get how weird it is that we can travel for hours and hours and still speak the same language.”

Which leads to a discussion on the merits of experiencing other cultures. Somewhere in that time, a barista clears away our dishes. Before I know it, a whole hour has disappeared, and we've been talking, laughing, sharing, and I honestly can't remember the last time I felt so free with someone. A whole hour in which he hasn't once glanced at his watch as if he can't wait for an excuse to leave my presence.

A whole hour which has been an exercise in restraint. Restraint from reaching out and touching the skin on the back of his hand, feeling the hairs brush against my palm. Restraint from running my fingers up his muscled forearm, because I totally want to feel his strength whisper across my skin. Restraint from asking, are you for real?

Restraint from leaning in and letting his warrior-like body shelter me. Which is screwed up because I don't need sheltering. But I get the vibe that if I had a problem, he'd know how to fix it. And he'd want to.

The realization that our date is close to over washes through me and leaves behind a jittery, panicky residue. It's the only reason I can explain my next words, “Let's have sex.”

I clap a hand over my mouth, and I know my eyes have about bugged out of my head. “Holy shit,” I whisper. My heart's pounding as if it's going what-

Earning It

the-hell? But I actually wait for a response, because it turns out, I was kind of serious. Actually, I totally am.

Wow.

I've got some she-balls, and I'm loving it. The new me.

Apparently he is too, because his eyes grow dark, hooded, and the air shifts between us, growing even more charged. It's like—we've clicked so well, uncovering so much common ground between us, that it's left a vacuum which demands to be filled by a physical connection. To even the balance. To shore up the gains we made.

Except. That uneasiness returns and knocks around in my stomach. I have no time for the emotional investment a relationship takes. Yeah, I'm starting my new-me phase of my life, but I'm not ready to make time for a relationship. And then I have to laugh at myself for thinking so far ahead, but I can't help it. It's hard-wired. I miscalculated during my fellowship and indulged in a relationship with Phil. I can't risk that again. I need to solidify my base here before I can...expand.

But a fling? That might be exactly what I need to prove to myself I'm not cold. And to be upfront about this, I say, "This'll just be sex. No strings. Afterward? We part ways."

That last bit was hard to say, because everything in me aches to explore more with this man, but I...can't. Too much is on the line professionally. I'm already starting at the practice on shaky ground.

So if this is all I can have with him? Yeah, I want the sex too.

Then we'll never see each other again.

I could have kept quiet. Supposedly, guys don't care—they'd never say no to sex—but I always thought that truism was a bit too pat. Since I'm basically using him to get practice and gain some much-needed experience, I need to be honest. Especially because it feels as if we've made a connection.

He leans forward, his elbows propping on the table. His biceps bunch, and his whole body shudders with a slight tension.

Shit. Have I totally misread him? Us? Will the one time I say something bold and daring—the one time I take ownership of something I want sexually, the one time I decide to live a little—be the time I get shot down?

An internal struggle plays out in the depths of his green eyes. Did I mention they're green? Well, they are. A rich, layered kind of green that surprisingly makes me want to curl up and stare into them. All day.

He still hasn't uttered a word.

You know what? If I'm going to channel a sex vixen today, I need to own it.

Slowly, I stand and hold his gaze. Then I turn and stroll toward the door

Angela Quarles

as if I know what the hell I'm doing. As if I'm super confident he's going to follow me. As if I've totally done this before.

A chair scrapes.

OMG.

My thighs are shaky. I sure hope it's not ruining the saunter I'm going for. Then, his warm presence is behind me, and a delicious shiver races down my spine. And that's before his hand presses against the small of my back, sending a dose of heat to my core.

OMG. This is so happening.



LUKE

FUUUUCK.

I'm leaning forward holding the café door open for Pepper, and I'm so close I can feel her warmth, see the short hairs that have escaped the no-nonsense bun to soften the line of her creamy neck. Begging me to lick, to taste her skin. To flick and tease the small hairs and nibble my way up to...

Lust burns through me, making it hard to think.

And I need to *think*, dammit.

But I'm here and holding the door open precisely because each justification I made to steal more time out of this moment has been like a domino, click-click-clicking its inevitable path down and away—out of my control. I can stop this forward momentum. I can stop and say...

Pepper, I'm Luke from high school, the one you hate, but can we forget all that and keep...connecting? I actually didn't do what you think I did...

Pepper, we can't do this because...

We walk down the sunlit sidewalk, my hand warming at the small of her back and...no words come out. She's leading, I'm following, and... Yeah. She's in charge. Which is hot. And I'm along for the ride, however that ride plays out. The little mind embodied in my cock perks up again, imagining all the "riding" we can do.

No. That's not the point. The point is... The fucking point is...

The point is, she's in charge, and she wants this. And I do too. And she's set the parameters of the engagement. One time only. And maybe she'll chicken out and change her mind before we get there...

My breath shudders, fighting against the sudden, constrictive weight on

Earning It

my chest.

Fuck, I'm the asshole she believes me to be because I can't back away from this.

Yeah, the justifications are coming swift and hard, detonating like mortar shells, one after another against my rational mind. But one justification eclipses all—we're never seeing each other again.

Enjoyed this excerpt? Want to read on to find out what happens between Luke and Pepper?

Learn more, by visiting my website at <http://angelaquarles.com/book/earning-it/>

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