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Las Vegas
Nights

Angelique St. Chase, Jr



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CHAPTER 1

"Oh my God, Scott! You feel incredible!" I whispered into his ear with my hot breath cascading down his neck. Having met only two hours ago, I could feel him climax for the fourth time inside of me, and showing off sexual skills most porn stars had yet to discover. My back arched just as my body felt like it was being struck once again by lightning. I felt the electricity travel from neuron to neuron starting at my groin and radiating to every cell. As a Psychology Professor at the local University, he knew how to read me as very few people ever had. The seduction had started over the internet when he responded to my online profile. 6'5" and in his early 40's, Scott had an ageless soccer player's body. After a week of relentless emails and messages, I had finally agreed to meet him in person for coffee that day. As the time to meet drew nearer, I was rethinking the wisdom of meeting in such a public place. Being a well known casino executive in town, privacy could be an issue. As such, the thought of a crowded coffee house with people listening in at will was less than appealing. While grabbing my keys to head to our agreed to meeting spot, I decided to book a room at a nearby hotel instead. Given my work, I looked upon hotel rooms as convenient extensions of either my office or home depending on whom I was meeting. Without ever having seen me in person or having spoken to me on the phone, Scott agreed to the change in venue.

I was not sure what I had expected to happen. I had placed an order with room service for some wine and food, so that much I had been planning on, along with some flirting and conversation. The odds after all of his getting me naked within the first 10 minutes of stepping foot inside

the room were the equivalent of winning the *Power Ball* on the first try. I should have bought a ticket that day.

Our initial encounter started with my opening the door and leaning in to greet him in the typical European fashion of a kiss on each cheek. I guess they do things differently in Texas, though, since he instead of going for the air by my cheeks, took control by kissing me fully on the mouth. Then, in one fell swoop, pinned me against the foyer wall while cupping my breast before the door had even finished shutting. "Well, that settles the chemistry question," he noted upon coming up for air and moving further into the room. Within 10 minutes, our clothes lay crumpled on the floor and 5 minutes later round one of several that day was well on its way. It was a whirlwind of activity for the next few hours as we attempted to outdo each other in our adult version of *show-and-tell*.

Then it happened. The flashbacks I had been trying to avoid with such a meeting. It seemed that even Scott could not stop my thinking about *him*. Why did I have to recall his touch, his scent, his kiss at the most inappropriate of times?

CHAPTER 2

Ken screwed the cap back onto the fountain pen with which he had signed the divorce papers just moments prior. The only thing left was the judge's signature and stamp to make it official. He was admiring the pelican shape of the clip so as to avoid looking at the person to whom he had been married. The person, with whom he had had children with, had been financially responsible for and shared residences with for over a decade and a half.

It had been a long time coming. The meeting today in the lawyer's office to witness their signatures was simply a formality. There was no anger or great sorrow, other than for time wasted. They had been living their own lives for close to a decade now. Separate bedrooms had been just the start of their relationship decline. With the children going off to college and becoming adults in their own right, and living their own lives, it no longer mattered if appearances were kept up or not.

They were free to pursue the people that had made them happy after they came to realize that it would not be each other. She had her boyfriend living across town, and he could finally follow his heart to Las Vegas.

As he stood up to thank everyone for their time and shaking hands, including his soon to be ex-wife's, his thoughts turned to his future. He had not spoken to Pandora Richardson in close to a year. How would he find her again?

CHAPTER 3

Scott Himmel was a godsend. There were plenty of men in this town willing and eager to have sex with me - or any number of other women - but few were worth the effort. If you were a woman in Las Vegas under the age of sixty and weighed less than 300lbs, the easiest thing in the world was to have sex with someone - anyone - at any time. While looks certainly did not hurt, they were truly not necessary considering the simple law of supply and demand. Already ranking as the U.S. city with one of the, if not the highest available male to female ratio, these numbers, while high, still did not provide an accurate reflection to what degree the selection process was skewed in the favor of women in Las Vegas. Not only could visitors outnumber residents but also most visitors to this charming town were business convention attendees - and the majority of these were men. Either way, though, be it for business, escapism or a little of both, travelers flocked from all over the world to visit this Mecca of Indulgence year around. It was synonymous with the Mob, money, entertainment, drinking, gambling, and of course sex. While the LVCVA (Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority) had not created this image initially, it sure had done a fantastic job of keeping it polished and shiny. It was for all those reasons and along with many others that I had decided to call this city home once again after having traversed the globe.

It had been less than an hour since Scott and I had left the hotel room. I was basking in the afterglow of it all while sitting and sipping on a glass of Riesling at *Fleur*, one of my favorite restaurant/bars in the *Mandalay Bay* on the infamous Las Vegas Blvd (aka the Strip). Watching the latest batch

of visiting conventioneers, I was reminded of why people watching on the Strip was one of my pet hobbies. Thank you, drunk tourists, thank you. I had arrived barely in time to hear Sandra, my darling bartender, put on her best industry face as she answered the questions of the woman on the barstool next to me. I could hear her patiently describing such exotic foods as 'fingerling puree' and 'creamy polenta' to someone who apparently thought that any restaurant that did not have a drive-through was '*fancy*'.

Tuning out the budding food critic as she finally placed her order, I looked into my wine glass as if it were a crystal ball that held all the answers and my thoughts turned back to Scott. He was sensual, take-charge and addicting - both in and out of bed come to find out. I could still feel his right hand on the small of my back as he had pulled me towards him, his left hand behind my head entwined in my hair, and that look he would get in his eyes every time he was about to seduce me. However, that was not my favorite memory. My favorite memory was afterwards: after the sex and the dialogue that would ensue. Like the first time he sat completely naked, and oh so striking, with no inhibitions across the table arranged by room service before his arrival with a selection of cheeses, fruits a bottle of wine and two glasses. All it took was food, wine, and conversation to change my life forever.

CHAPTER 4

"I have to admit that I am still a bit stunned as to why a successful, independent, beautiful, single woman winds up online looking for a Friend-With-Benefits," he said as he sliced a piece of cheese and put it confidently on a water cracker.

"The Internet is my wheelhouse. I spend more time online than anywhere else and ... isn't that how everyone meets these days anyway? Besides, I work long hours; would rather sift through the data on my computer than the hurt feelings in person; and after the last relationship ended as badly as it did, I am not looking to jump out of the frying pan and into the fire. I am one of the best friends a person could ever have; just do not ask me to marry. I will make you miserable if you do," I responded as I sampled the fruit spreads that accompanied the cheeses.

"I am not the kind to fall for someone easily."

"That's what they all said."

Taking a sip from his glass to wash down the cracker, he asked, "All? Is it a common occurrence? People asking you to marry them?"

"I don't know how to answer that question since 'common' is a relative term. I don't think any marriage proposal is common, even if you have been proposed to by a total of 14 different people," I answered as I combined the apricot spread with the Gouda cheese.

"14?" Crumbs flew out of his mouth.

"Yes," I replied in a matter-of-fact tone.

He grabbed the water to ease his cough from having mis-swallowed and after taking a sip asked, "Only 14?"

"Well, at last count. Not that I am keeping score." I paused to do a mental calculation in my head. "Yes, 14. Or, I should say those were the serious proposals. I am not including the times when they did not have a ring." I carefully balanced cracker, cheese, and spread, and brought it to my lips.

"Are you a hypnotist or something?" he asked laughingly.

"Maybe," I answered with a shrug.

"But seriously. Do you think you do this on purpose?" He popped one of the grapes into this mouth that he had plucked a moment ago.

"Do I do what on purpose? Have people fall in love with me; spend two month's salary on a ring; get down on one knee in a public place; and ask me to marry them within four months of knowing me? No ... never on purpose."

"Within four months of knowing you? Really?" His eyebrows rose as he combined a piece of Asiago with one of the grapes in his hand.

"Well, it's not always four months." I stole the Asiago and grape combo off his plate and smiled as I bit into grape and cheese stack.

I saw the relief on his face as his eyebrows went back to normal height. "I was starting to get worried. Even for a shotgun wedding, four months seems a bit fast."

"Usually it is less than that. Four months is just the longest amount of time it has taken for someone to ask me to marry him, if he is going to ask

me to marry him, that is. Both of my ex-husbands proposed within two weeks of having met me." I explained before he could finish cutting the second piece of cheese to go along with his grapes and have it accidentally go down the wrong pipe.

"Two weeks?" He had put down the knife to focus on my answer.

"Yes."

"Indeed." Leaning back in his chair so he could take the information in a bit better, he asked, "What, pray tell, did you do to the 14 serious, and the other not so serious, men that made them propose to you?"

"You would be in a better position to answer that than I."

"I'll get back to you within the next four months then," he replied with a laugh. "So, 14 proposals and two marriages. How many times have you fallen in love? 20? 30? 100?"

As I prepared to take another bite of Gouda and Apricot, I stopped my hand mid-air and looked into Scott's eyes. *Should I tell him?* I wondered. He has those eyes and that smile like: *this is someone I can trust. This is someone to whom I can tell all my secrets. This is someone who will understand what I have been going through for the last few years.* No wonder he is in the field he is in. I placed down the cheese, picked up my wine glass instead, took a sip of courage, looked into his eyes, and confessed. "Once, and sadly it was not with either one of my husbands."

"Why marry them?" I saw curiosity on his face.

"The first time because I did not think that I would ever fall in love, so I married the person I thought would be the best work partner," I answered as I picked up my Gouda and apricot again. Taking a thoughtful bite and enjoying the sweet, salty, and tangy sensation on my tongue I closed my eyes. Opening them up again after swallowing, I continued. "The second time, I knew better it's just that I felt that I would never find it again, so I married the person I thought I could help the most," I concluded with another sip of wine.

"You could help the most? Were you doing penance for something?" he asked as his fingers entwined under his chin.

"I told you I am a great friend. I have hurt a lot of people though in my life ... usually ... well, usually the ones who fall in love with me," I said thoughtfully while tapping the edge of my wine glass.

"Why do you think that is?" I could see that he had completed the transition from curious small talk to full-blown analysis mode.

"You are familiar with my namesake? The myth of Pandora? The first woman formed of clay by the Gods, who through her charm and beauty was to bring misery upon the human race?"

"Yes."

"Well, it has nothing to do with that," I smiled self-satisfied at my comedic timing. Scott was not going to be dissuaded and his eyes showed that he was seeing past my efforts of sidestepping his questions by way of humor.

"Who is it that hurt you so deeply that you felt the need to take your revenge and lash out at every man within perfume distance of you? Which, by the way, is delightful," he added with a wink.

"*Chanel* does know their stuff, don't they?" I asked a bit coquettishly, grabbing on to the odd tangent.

"Like I said, it is intoxicating just not the answer to my question." Scott could steer the topic quite adroitly.

"No, it isn't," I agreed with a sigh, knowing I would have to come clean, however, not sure that I wanted to just yet.

I could see his face softening as he picked up on the extent of my discomfort, even if the source was still a mystery. Leaning forward a bit before feeding me a grape he said, "OK, how about this Pandora. While

your namesake did let loose a lot of harm upon mankind, I personally like to remember her for having also released hope. After all, all's well that ends well."

"Do you think there is hope for me?" I asked looking him in the eyes wondering if I would ever have redemption.

Leaning back into his chair again with a smirk he answered, "That depends on what specifically you are asking. If you mean is there hope for you to go from an outstanding to sub-par lover in bed? Then the answer is sure."

Wanting to smack him but only being within reach of his lower region and afraid of hurting his exposed private parts, I held back and said instead, "You know what I mean."

Turning into the thoughtful analyst again he said, "I think that we have the ability to get over anyone in our past ... If we want to."

"What if I don't want to?" I knew the question made me sound like a 3-year-old. The only thing missing was the stomping of the foot and the tossing of the head. However, unlike a 3-year-old, my tone was not obstinate and instead one of self-reflection and sorrow. I had suspected that this had probably been the truth for some time now despite my vows to the contrary in past discussions and self-appraisals.

"That is entirely your choice. Of course, it makes me wonder what sort of man is able to hold your attention for all this time? What makes him so special?" His long academic fingers formed a steeple in front of his mouth as he asked the question.

"You're being such a psychiatrist right now! I have the feeling that I am part of a case study." I responded twirling my glass while a hint of a sad smile played on my lips.

"No case study Pandora - Just a friend having a friendly conversation. Yes ... a friend with a professional background and in-depth knowledge of human behavior and therefore probably able to ask better questions ... but

a friend nonetheless." Scott answered as he sliced the Camembert gently and smeared it onto the cracker.

The sad smile deepened as my eyes took on a faraway look. "Well, the short answer is he wrote me love letters. No one had ever, ... at that point, or.... actually anytime after, written me love letters. The long answer ... hmm ... how long do you have?"

"There is no expiration clause on friendship Pandora. I'll listen for as long as you want to talk," he answered sincerely as he looked into my eyes, no longer focusing on the cheese or cracker.

Propping my feet up on the ottoman I sank down lower in the overstuffed chair and took a sip from my glass. "Ok ... this isn't easy for me to discuss ... And, honestly ... are you sure you're up for this? I mean, this is another man I have had sex with that we are talking about. Not some story about a car purchase or vacation horror story. Can you maintain objectivity?"

"Well ... my nickname is *House*, as in *Dr. Gregory* from the TV Show ... if *House* had been a psychiatrist instead of an M.D., he would have been me ... although maybe that is not the best thing to mention given his faults ... Either way, though, maybe now it makes sense when I say that I promise to be completely unemotional about the matter. These types of puzzles are what I live for solving and hold a personal interest to me," he answered popping cheese and cracker into this mouth.

Nodding, I decided to trust him. Ultimately, I did not really know him all that well and things such as these were often times easier to discuss with a relative stranger as opposed to a fast friend. I decided that Scott would have to read the letters - those darn letters - to understand fully. He would be the first to do so other than myself. I knew them by heart, of course. I could probably have recited them aloud! Nevertheless, the full impact would require seeing those words and their letter shapes. I felt the familiar weight of my convertible laptop/tablet computer while lifting my briefcase, which had been leaning against my overstuffed chair. The computer served as my digital modern day attic of personal memorabilia -

minus the cobwebs - and contained everything necessary to help explain the current state of my mental quandary.

"August 2nd is the first date of several that will live in infamy in my mind. It was the day he first contacted me. I had no idea then that this would be my own personal Pearl Harbor of emotional invasions until the damage had already been done and assessed months later," I said with a nervous laugh as I fumbled with the zipper. "What I thought was an innocent friendship at first, wound up shaping the rest of my existence." As my hand moved to power up my computer, my mind was already moving back in time. I was seeing scenes of my life moving at lightning pace, and experiencing the full range of emotion with each flash of memory. I felt like a time traveler or a CPU downloading information. While these scenes were all familiar to me, having lovingly re-experienced each memory hundreds of times during my quieter moments, - especially the painful ones - Scott's presence and questions were causing me for the first time to look at them, not as emotional time capsules, but analytical data. It was as if a switch had been flipped and I was accessing a different part of my brain. Shuffling through my memories and reorganizing the data with this new perspective, I wondered aloud, "Of course, while that was the first time we interacted, just like trying to find the point of origin of anything, where did it actually start? With my marriage? With my mother? The big bang and the origin of the universe."

"Hmm, I know I said to take as long as you like, but could we start maybe some place between the origin of the universe and August 2? Preferably closer to the August 2 than the origin of the universe," he replied with a smirk.

With a sigh, I tried hard to slow the rapid chain of events my brain was reconstructing, just as a video game had to rebuild the confines of its world every time it was powered up. We were sitting across from each other, and I could still see him, but in my mind, the room was spinning and melting around me. I felt like *Professor X* from the *X-Men* while the Professor was in the chamber. In the back of my mind, I could hear my inner voice asking *Why ... why ... why* and with each why a new scene would pop up. "Had it not been for 100 different things happening exactly the way they did, I would never have met Ken, and you and I might not be

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sitting here today. I see life as a wonderfully complex chain reaction. For example, I would not be doing work-wise what I am doing today had it not been for my 6th-grade teacher. I would not have had this 6th-grade teacher without my mother falling in love with a married man and moving to the town we did. She would never have been in the same business as this married man without her ex-boyfriend Peter, and on and on it goes. Where to begin?" My computer had finished loading.

"Well then, at the risk of sounding cliché, why don't we start with your childhood?"

I turned my head and knew where I had to look to find the memory I needed.

CHAPTER 5

Believe it or not, my life is based on a true story. I grew up living both sides of the fairy tale - the dark and the light. Adored and fawned over one minute and physically beaten and ridiculed the next. I knew that my mother loved me; just sometimes, I wished she loved me a little less. Growing up, I was luckier than most I suppose since my abuse was at least in nice surroundings and would alternate with hugs, kisses, and words of praise. Love and its expressions had therefore always been confusing to me from the start. Unlike many others, I did have my Grandmother, who would protect me when she stayed with us. She would stand up for me with quiet determination. Maybe having her as an example was what gave me the strength in the end to do what I needed to do.

I was considered a child prodigy in ballet, tested at a genius IQ intellect, and more often than not, had adult responsibilities thrust upon me from a young age on. I wore make-up since I was three while on stage but was not allowed to do so in my personal life until my mid-teens, and rarely did so now. Tall my whole life long, I topped out at 5'10" in middle school. My stepfather, always the soul of gentility, would call me a brute. I was never what could be considered a petite and delicate little flower but being called a brute from age 12 on by an authority figure, was a bit harsh. I had a volleyball player's frame, with a DD chest. Fortunately, my two redeeming features of femininity outside of my chest were: my long hair and the ballet grace that had been drilled into me for hours on end until it became second nature.

I was in my mid 20's when Ken and I met. Despite having been married for a few years, having traveled the world over several times, having dined with royalty, diplomats, heads of Fortune 500 companies and calling more than a handful of celebrities friends - all before the age of 21; I was naive and inexperienced when it came to relationships. This, like everything else, was a dichotic existence growing up for me. On the one hand, I was sheltered from the romantic relationships. Never even having had the time to have a boyfriend while in high school, no idea how to start a relationship, I had no idea how to attract a man other than what was written in the teenage romance novels. On the other hand, I had learned about the 'Birds and the Bees' when I was three years old and would vacation on nude beaches with my mother and was able to see sexual images in most magazines growing up. My first real kiss from a boy was on the evening of my 16th birthday, and my first long term relationship that lasted longer than a few weeks was my first marriage.

My first husband and I had met in Florida and started a company together that dealt in rare and collectible books. I was his second marriage. His first wife had left him for someone else. In addition to this ultimate form of rejection, he had a bit of an insecure personality already anyway; this would result in his repeated accusations of my cheating on him and looking for ways to leave. The irony of it all was had it not been for his accusations I would have never thought of leaving him, much less actually left. Despite being innocent and despite my best efforts to soothe his fears, these insecurities of his, not to mention, anything else I excelled at over him - which was a lot - would be a point of contention for our entire relationship. He was jealous of my looks, my intelligence, and my magnetic personality and while he would have no qualms to use my talents to his advantage, he would predictably and consistently fight with me over perceived slights and tell me that I was worthless. It was not until much later that I realized that while many women married their father, I had married my mother. It was a mentally abusive relationship and after years of trying to make it work and having a beautiful son together, I had started to come to the end of my rope. He was possessive and controlling. My life had become one of a conjoined twin with him. Rare was the occasion when we were not in the same room at the same time, even at home. For someone who had started flying alone at the age of five, I felt suffocated.

We had moved from Florida to Las Vegas earlier that year and the fights had gotten progressively more frequent and the accusations more ridiculous. Chief of which was always the accusation of infidelity. The allegations became so fantastically absurd that I had to wonder about his mental state. While alone in our home together, he thought I was cheating merely by being out of his sight, such as being in the kitchen while he was in the living room - with no one else in the house. The deranged delusions achieved their apex when he accused me of immoral relations while I was standing next to him in public. I doubted even Houdini would have been able to pull that one off, but the mere fact that a man had smiled at me was cause enough to give me the third degree. This ultimate fantasy turned out to be my breaking point.

Despite my legendary flexibility (both physical and otherwise), I found myself to have limits and had already left him twice before this latest separation. Being the kind of person who usually avoided conflict in every fashion possible, I never really knew where I got the strength from each time. Somewhere deep inside I must have had reserves of which even I was not aware.

I had never stepped outside of our marriage, even during our separations, even with his arguments to the contrary. The same could not have been said of him, which possibly also helped to clarify why he was so quick to accuse me of it. Each time I left, he would badger me into returning with promises of change and compromise. I would be worn down and eventually return. Albeit, there would be change and compromise at the start, it would repeatedly be renegotiated, to the point where my wants and needs were compromised completely out of the picture a few months into my return. It felt like everything I was and had ever been I needed to change just to make him happy. I didn't realize until much later that there was no making him happy for even when I changed and morphed myself into everything he told me he wanted, he was still not happy.

Emotionally it was difficult to come to the decision to leave. However, once I had made up my mind and despite not having family or local friends to lean on, it took only a matter of days to separate myself physically from Aaron in a somewhat permanent fashion. I had stayed at

one of the Las Vegas Strip hotels for less than a week before I signed the lease to move into a small two-bedroom apartment. Dividing the business, work and finances was another matter altogether, though. I was in my mid 20's and at a significant crossroads in life again. Technically married with a young son, my work life had become so entwined with my husband's, he had made sure of that throughout the years, that at the outset, I did not have a way to support my son and me other than to continue working in the business Aaron and I had founded. Moreover, the company required both Aaron and I for it to be profitable. It would take some time to find projects through my contacts that would not be in direct competition with Aaron as well as to find a way to fill the hole that my exit would create. I might not have wanted to share my life anymore with him - that though did not mean I wanted to hurt him financially and bring operations to a grinding halt. It was quite a balancing act. Separation, for the time being, was no different for me therefore from being married, other than it did cut down the amount of negativity I was exposed to by escaping to the safety of my apartment at night. True to form, Aaron, my husband, attempted to win me back even though I had left little doubt as to my intentions. I never did understand exactly why he would go to the lengths he did to coerce my return to him, when once he had me, all he would do would be to tear me down again. I was doing my best to avoid his advances without taking more drastic measures when I met Ken.

The business was divided into two areas, product knowledge, which was all Aaron, and everything else. I handled the '*everything else*' part, from operations to marketing. I wrote the business plans and the software, controlled the website, print production, graphic design, copywriting, technical issues, partnerships and customer service among other things. Part of the innovation of our customer service, at the time, was being available online. When it came time to decide, who would run this new and novel feature, the choice was a no-brainer. Aaron had a difficult enough time finding the on-switch to his computer. I not only had a natural aptitude but also had a minor fanbase that would seek me out online due to the monthly publication of my humor and opinion articles. This, therefore, like so much else, became my bailiwick and had me online most days for 12 hours straight, fielding questions and making sales and being available to just simply add that personal touch. Sometimes I would be logged in from the office and other times I would be logged in from my

apartment. I never could have guessed how this minor idea to improve customer relations would affect my life for years to come.

I did not pretend to know what Ken searched under for my profile to appear; maybe it was as simple as "female las vegas." He would never tell me even when I asked. However, one day unexpectedly I received an instant message from him and we just started joking around. I cannot remember for sure what he said. It was a week or so after a satirical article of mine had been published. The article was on the misguided self-appraisal of collectors and their collections and the feedback had been resoundingly positive. A copy of which was on my profile page. However, I also had a profile picture along with the article and knowing him, there was doubtlessly a comment or two on my appearance as well. Most people would observe on how my eyes would change from fiery green to cobalt blue, particularly when viewed in person. I had received remarks about their color and intensity ever since I could remember and had decided a long time ago that part of what made them stand out so was the long dark hair contrasting the lighter irises.

Ken was initially just another name on my computer screen. Granted a witty and flirtatious name, but all in all just another in a crowd of names. I was not looking for a tryst or any kind of romantic relationship and my online presence, while entertaining at times, was work driven. In the face of so much change, I was trying to simply keep it together and focus solely on my son and providing for him and my obligations as a whole. The fact, therefore, that during those first few weeks he knew what I looked like but I had yet to see a picture of him did not bother me in the slightest. All the same, after about two weeks he sent a picture of himself on a beach in Tahiti wearing a straw brimmed hat. The picture showed that he was tall, built like a linebacker, and fair skinned. Any kind of detail outside of the hat and landscape was difficult to make out, though.

Even if the photo and visual description of him were vague at best, spending 8+ hours together online on an almost daily basis, made for ample opportunity to get to know him in other ways. I knew he lived in Scottsdale, AZ and that he was in big business finance, what exactly that entailed I was not sure of yet. He visited Las Vegas for work and loved to play blackjack. Naturally, all of these were just words on a screen. He could

be anyone. Even though it had not been all that long ago when all access to the internet was metered and charged at an hourly rate, stories of online deceptions were already time immortal and plentiful. Despite being aware of the high likelihood of fraud, I took delight in the fantasy of it and had to admit to myself that I was enjoying the banter. I found myself smiling again much more often - no matter who he really was - the banter was one thing that certainly could not be faked.

As the days passed and his presence never waned, the instant messages moved from innocent jokes to risqué ones which moved to flirting outright. I could feel myself blossoming just because of his virtual presence and the words he chose to type out on the screen. After a while, I was not only daydreaming about him but also habitually looking for him every morning when I logged onto my computer. Feelings of attachment were forming rapidly. Fortunately, despite the emotions and despite his clever wordsmithing and my being in a vulnerable state, there was a part of my brain that still knew better than to fall outright for some electronic impulses on a screen. According to the news, being catfished was more the norm than not. The internet was rife with people pretending to be something other than what they were, which made it easier to deem our conversations no more than fun diversions. Then, one day, weeks after his initial contact, he called. The first time I heard his voice, it felt like a bolt of lightning had struck me. I was now able to confirm that at least I had been interacting with a guy online. His voice was so deep, smooth and sensual; even James Earl Jones sounded grating in comparison. This was definitely not a woman or a teenage boy. When he laughed, it was like a mountain shaking off a blanket of snow. It was that moment - with that voice - when it dawned on me, I might be in trouble.

CHAPTER 6

"Ugh! Where did the day go? My presentation is first thing tomorrow and I have yet to finalize it. I keep changing how I want to stage the material ... Not to mention PowerPoint can be cumbersome at times," Ken said with a sigh.

"Hmmm, looks like your presentation will be an exercise in extemporaneous speaking then." I was working on filling out some mailing labels while talking to him.

"Is that a long word for seat-of-my-pants?" I could hear the smile in his voice and had to laugh in response.

"I am delighted that I have been standing up for you after all. You really aren't at all as stupid as you look. I think you will do well on the pop quiz yet."

"As long as I get off my extemporaneous," he said in a by-and-by voice. "See! I used it in a new sentence!" I could almost hear the innocent pride of a preschooler in that one. Like a son showing off his first 'A' to his mom.

It took a moment for my mouth to relax enough from the smirk to allow sounds to form. "Two more times and it's yours. Remember to picture yourself naked in case you get nervous ... or is that picture your audience naked?" I asked with an unabashed coyness that surprised me.

Playing right along and upping the ante, his voice dropped an octave, which given its already natural depth I would have thought impossible, and became ultra breathy when he countered, "Maybe, I should picture you naked?"

I was thankful that this conversation was happening over the phone or he would have seen how bright red my face was turning at the thought. Bluffing in personal relationships was so not my forte. In a nonchalant voice as possible I answered, "Will that make you less nervous?"

"Nah ... actually that will just distract me," he responded in an almost off-handed tone with his pitch going back to normal.

With a mental sigh of relief, my nervousness abated and then it struck me that he had just admitted to my having an effect on him. *Me?* Bolstered by his admission of my influence and smiling at the thought of him becoming distracted by my image during his presentation I pictured all sorts of '*male wardrobe malfunctions*', and could not help but retort. "Not to mention that then there goes your '*extemporaneous*', either up into a tent or falling down to the floor."

"Yes, I would have to have some strategically placed file folders or jump into an interpretive dance to distract them from my hard-on." I could feel his laugh resonate through my whole body.

My ears perked up at the word dance. "I didn't know you danced," I responded a bit curious once I recovered from how attracted I was to the mere sound of his laugh.

"I don't." He changed his inflection from playful to disarmingly frank. I could almost see him getting closer in my mind's eye. As if I was being invited to share a part of him few would receive an invitation to, he clarified, "But I would love to watch you dance. Something makes me think that you are probably at your happiest when you are dancing."

His insight caused me to pause. Had I said something along those lines in our conversations in the past? I did a quick rundown of the IM's I could

remember and concluded, no. He must have come up with this observation on his own. That was another point in the plus column for him! I decided to confirm his statement. "It is like being in a different world for a few hours. I go into an almost trance-like-state and just act out the music. Sometimes I focus on the lyrics, other times on the melody, countermelody or the beat." I tried to think of a way to draw a parallel to which he could relate. "The only way I can explain it is dancing is for me, like sitting outside sipping on a martini during the twilight is for you." We had spoken about sunrises versus sunsets in the past.

"That light does tend to bathe everything in the most beautiful colors doesn't it? Although that could just be the view through the martini glass talking," he answered thoughtfully and with a reminiscent smile in his voice.

"No, it is not just the martini glass. I think it is due in large part to expert PR and marketing firm the sun hired." I could not help but steer the conversation back to silliness. Humor was one of my many stocks in trade.

"The sun hired a PR and marketing firm?" I heard the confusion in his voice not knowing quite where I was going with this.

"Well, the sun is a star! It only makes sense." If my mind would have had legs and shoes, the tap dancing would have been unmistakable as it attempted to stay half a step ahead of my mouth, stretching my B.S.ing skills nimbly. "I took a trip to Austin, TX and went to this restaurant along Lake Travis. They would make the biggest hoopla over the sunset. People were cheering and banging on things etc. as the sun was dipping down into the water. How else would you explain those actions?"

"You're right. Cleeeeearly, it must be the marketing from the sun and not the restaurant," he replied with an amused tone. We were like two school kids sitting at the lunch table and flirting by poking elbows into each other.

"After all, the second most profitable form of writing is advertising copy."

"Only the second? What is the first?" I could hear the creak of the chair as he was leaning back in his office, probably putting his feet up on his desk.

"Writing ransom notes of course!" After a pause, another flash of intuition came to me. "Although if you write the advertising copy accurately, it is pretty much the same thing. 'Give us \$50 and we will hand you back your self-esteem in the form of pre-packaged colored powders that you can use on your face!'"

"Hmmm ... speaking of, have I told you how gorgeous you are without any make-up on?"

Taken a bit by surprise with the compliment, I could imagine him looking at a zoomed in picture of myself on his computer as I replied; "Now I am blushing. Don't you have a presentation to finish?"

"I do, but I would rather listen to you. I love figuring out how your mind works." I could hear the long audible sigh on the other end of the connection as the disarming honesty of that statement reached across the desert.

Our conversation lasted for hours longer that day, since Aaron had decided to go out, and I did not have to be concerned on being walked in on. I was still anxious each time I occasionally had to place Ken on hold, worried he might become offended at the interruptions and hang up. However, my fears were uncalled-for; he was always there when I returned. Each kind word he continued to speak was like another drop of water for my parched soul after having received so many ugly words for so many years from Aaron. I was surprised at how quickly the emotional connection between us deepened. How much I had been looking for validation and belief in me. I told him about my mother and growing up and my failed marriage and my concern about my being a good mom and we debated everything from religion to politics to the stock market. Long after the streetlights had come on and despite having spoken for hours, I was still reticent to say goodbye and could feel the sadness before my finger hit the disconnect button. As soon as the silence of the office engulfed me this strange sensation of missing him was everywhere. It was

obvious that I needed more of his words and emotion and breath - regardless of having never met the man in person. At least I knew it was a man I was talking to, though. So, he had that going for him - which was nice. When I went to sleep that night, all I could think of was that voice!

The next day when I woke up, I could hardly wait to log back in and see his name online. The mere thought caused my pulse to quicken, my stomach to flutter, and the corners of my mouth to curve up in a perpetual smile. I had never felt quite this enraptured before and I did a quick jump and then spun across the room to reach my computer keyboard. As soon as I realized what I had done and why I had done it, I squashed the thoughts back to their depths. I knew better than to let emotion rule my world. I had successfully been able to discipline my sentiments in the past. Ballet had taught me that. Refusing to cry when my mother would beat me even into high school had taught me that. Surely, I could get these butterflies under control. I threw myself into my work. That had normally been able to accomplish it in the past.

Yet, I kept looking to see his name online and I could feel my disappointment turn to worry as minutes felt like hours. With each move of the clock hand, my heart sank a little deeper. After about 15 minutes of suffering from an exponential increase of disappointment and fear, I mentally smacked myself over my own stupidity. Had we not spoken in depth about his presentation and the long string of meetings ahead for him this day? In my selfish excitement, I had completely forgotten that he would not be online for most of the day as a result. I was being such a stereotype moon-eyed dope! With a sigh, I concentrated on my list of things to do again until I heard those three little Pavlovian words from my computer that made my amygdala salivate if it could have salivated ... "you've got mail."

Subj: hmmmmmm.....
Date: 8/17 3:42:13 PM
From: FinanceGuy
To: Pandora

My dream.....or should that be Hope.....since you are Pandora.....or should that be sexy or delicious friend.....hmmmm.....I think we will go with.....

My Hope:

Wonderful hearing your voiceand while I do apologize for not being able to write to you sooner and for taking so much of your time yesterday afternoonI have to tell you that I have not had such a wonderful and meaningful conversation like in some time.

What happens when fire and intensity.....turn to hunger.....is that we become insatiable.....and.....well.....I am hungry.....thought I would give you some food for thought.....

I hope that you have a relaxing evening.....and here is hoping that if you don't dream.....you continue to at least have a daydream or two.....hell try having 69 of them.....there is a good number to shoot for.....

Pardon the pun.....call me crazy.....just as long as you call me.....lol

Thinking about the possibilities.....

C

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I was giddy and lightheaded with excitement. Had I been a Southern Belle, I might have fainted with the sudden change in blood pressure I

experienced. No one had ever written to me like this before. Those words 'thinking of the possibilities' had my brain reeling and doing the same, despite my best efforts to the contrary. This level of emotion was alien to me and I had to stop myself. My psyche was wandering into areas it had no business sticking its nose into. I should be put in a padded room with a white jacket and a butterfly net, for just merely '*considering the possibilities*' with this man that was causing my lungs to expand and contract irregularly just with his words. It took 20 different drafts before I finally hit the send button and decide to exercise extreme restraint.

Subj: Re: hmmmmmmm.....
Date: 8/17
To: FinanceGuy

Thank you for your very sweet and inspiring letter. By the way, I just realized in all of those wonderful hours of conversation, I don't even know your name. I am not sure why it never occurred to me to ask.

As to the hunger, don't they feed you during those meetings? lol

Waiting with bells on to hear your voice again.

Pandora

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Subj: Re: hmmmmmmm.....
Date: 8/18 9:58:29 AM
From: Finance Guy
To: Pandora

I will call you shortly

My name love.....is Charles

###

And that was lie number one!

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Truth vs. Fiction • Cover Model

TRUTH VS FICTION

One of my favorite quotes from Mark Twain is: "Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn't." I am sure he said it more than once and in different ways. I know I have heard other variations throughout my life. As I mentioned in the book, this quote personifies Las Vegas, and since this book is set in Las Vegas, it personifies the book as well.

The irony and one of the biggest '*Easter Eggs*' in this novel (and there are so many that I might have to write an accompanying reference book after the trilogy is finished) is that the parts that sound too incredible to be true actually are, while the parts that sound like they could plausibly happen are actually fiction. Every sex scene I wrote about, from how unbelievably fast things would happen, to the settings to the number of rounds, are a detailed description of actual events in my life as they occurred while living in Las Vegas. The storyline, the characters, and all the words between the sex scenes; well, that is the actual fiction. Don't get me wrong, yes, I have dated online, I have been catfished, I have traveled the world, and on it goes. As such, I had a lot of knowledge to pull from when I created the world for Pandora.

In regards to that world, keep in mind I am an avid mystery reader, inspired by the likes of John Grisham and Dan Brown and prior to them I read fantasy novels purely because of David Eddings. As such, most everything in this book has double and triple meanings and there is a reason for pretty much everything.

For example, Pandora has the last name, Richardson so her initials would be P.R. since her job is in marketing. Scott's last name is Himmel, which is German for Heaven since his job as a psychiatrist is the equivalent of being a sin-eater.

The characters themselves were actually inspired by other fiction characters with which I had identified strongly with. *Polgara*, a character created by *David and Leigh Eddings* was ever in the forefront of my mind when I wrote for Pandora and *Dr. Gregory House* from the TV Series *House* when I wrote for Scott.

COVER MODEL

It be me on the cover of this book - to the right of the glass (in case that needed clarification). I am the blue shirt-wearing person with the long hair. There were six different cover images I experimented with, and this one was a fluke, which wound up testing well. So, for those of you that saw ads prior to publication where the cover looked differently, you were not hallucinating. And yes, I also designed the cover, and did the layout, and built the websites, oh and I guess I wrote the book, too. :)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Living a life many fictional characters would be jealous of, Angelique St. Chase, Jr. was named after the romance series Angelique before she was even born. Residing in Las Vegas and entertaining her friends for years in the detailed descriptions of her life events, she finally decided to give in to her destiny. Knowing first-hand about the alluring, if sometimes heartbreaking life, that Las Vegas and online romance has to offer, she revels in being the book's cover model, going to celebrity chef restaurants, and speaking 7 languages.

Sign up here for her newsletter plus get insider info and exclusive giveaways!

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