

CHAPTER ONE



H EAVEN.

He had to have died at last, and somehow—*God only knew how*—ended up beyond the pearly gates.

Garrett Hawkins didn't bother questioning the admission details beyond that. No sense in tempting Saint Peter, or whoever the fuck was standing watch today, into checking notes and realizing a mistake had been made. Wouldn't do the guy any good. At this point, Garrett wasn't past blowing the balls off anyone who told him he had to leave.

The deal was, heaven was nothing like the scene they'd taught him in summer Bible school. No sugar-spun clouds. No bad haircuts. Not a single angel with a half-tuned harp.

Heaven was silk sheets, his tongue on the inside of Sage Weston's left thigh—and her answering sigh because of it.

“Garrett! Damn it! Higher. Please...higher!”

He chuckled and sank a soft bite into her tawny flesh. “Is that any way to talk in heaven, sugar? Ssshhh. You're gonna get us tossed out.”

He spoke the last of it as he crossed to her other thigh, making sure his mouth brushed over her glistening pussy in the process. Christ, how he wanted to stop there, and he thought about it as he watched new drops of arousal on her sweet pink folds, but there'd be time to return for all that sweet ambrosia and then some. In heaven, they finally had all the time they needed.

A shiver claimed the new skin that he began to suckle and lick. “Sergeant Hawkins, you're making me insane!”

“I hope so.”

“Ohhhh! Bastard!”

“Mmmm. You taste like cream and honey.”

“*Garrett!*”

He sighed and laughed again. “So impatient. So greedy.” He trailed his lips toward her knee, inciting another protesting moan from the silk ribbons of her lips.

“Impatient? You’ve been teasing me like this forever!”

“And isn’t it fun?”

“I hate you.”

“No you don’t.”

“I’m leaving.”

“No you aren’t.”

He was about to taunt the inside of her ankle when she really did yank it away from him. He raised his head in question, only to have the back of it bonked by her other foot as she swung that over the edge of the bed as well. “Sage! Hey!”

“Don’t pull petulant on me, Garrett Hawkins. I invented it, and I do it way better than you.”

He almost smiled. She’d been a bass of sass and fire since they’d met at that dive bar in Tacoma, and he loved her a little more every time she rekindled the attitude. It also made up his mind about the next words out of his mouth, issued as a deep and heated growl.

“You’re not going anywhere, Ms. Weston.”

Her eyes widened, ablaze with bright peridot shock. She pushed out her chin and tacked on a smirk. “Is that so, Sergeant?” She stepped into a little white thong trimmed in sexy-as-hell pink lace then tugged on a white tank over the bra he hadn’t gotten the chance to get off yet. “Why don’t you watch me?”

He laughed, though the sound was made of anger, not mirth. Thanks to the countless sessions with Shrink Sally, as he’d affectionately come to call the poor woman assigned to “fix” him a year ago, he also recognized that the rage was directed at the guy in the mirror across the room, not the woman in front of him. That only tripled the resolve for his next action.

Without giving her any warning, Garrett hooked two fingers into the lace at her hip and pulled hard. The surge of her body returning to his side matched the rush of joy in his blood and the roar of arousal in his cock. This was where she belonged. This was so fucking right.

With a grunt, he twisted the panties tighter. The fabric gave way in his grip. It fell away, exposing her incredible golden hips. Sage let a gape fly at him, though he took that from her too, ramming their lips together while he pulled her and flattened her to the bed again.

“I’ve got a better idea,” he growled, rolling his hips so she felt every pounding inch of his erection. “Why don’t *you* watch *me*, sugar?”

She did just that, lashes jerked wide from those brilliant green eyes, as he jammed both her arms over her head then lashed them together using one of the bungee cords off his mission pack. For a second, he wondered why his pack made it to Heaven with him, but he was too grateful to question the issue for long. It was just as weird that her old bed had made it too, a wrought-iron thing he’d never liked much, thanks to its headboard full of fancy curlicues that tangled with each other like a damn tumbleweed. But right now, he was really grateful for the thing. The two bungee hooks fit perfectly around a couple of whorls in the headboard.

With a frustrated whimper, Sage wrenched her arms. “Wh-what are you doing?” She craned her neck, exposing the nervous drum of her carotid. “Garrett, why—”

“I told you.” He stated it with steeled calm. “I’m not letting you leave. It was a mistake to do that the first time. It was a mistake not to go after you. So now I’m keeping you right here, safe with me. Just trust me, my heart. You’re going to be very happy.” Without preamble, he tore her tank top down the middle now. “And very satisfied.”

Her breath caught on a sexy-as-hell hitch. “My hero.” The sigh changed her voice, too. Her tone transformed from incensed to breathless, but climbed into a strained cry when he took care of her front bra clasp with one deft snap. “Oh...mmmm!” She moaned then arched into the fingers he trailed around her dark berry nipples, pushing her puckered fruit up at him. He gave into the craving to sample one with deeper intent, pinching the nub and then pulling. Hard.

“Shit! Ohhh Garrett!”

Damn. Her startled cry made him want to try it on the other nipple, and he did. Both her areolas were red and irritated now, their tiny bumps standing in attention around the distended peaks at their center.

To his perplexity—to his shame—he got painfully hard.

That didn't stop him from getting greedy. With both of his hands on her tits now, he couldn't resist tugging on both her beautiful nipples at the same time.

“Damn it!” she screamed. “Garrett, th-that hurts! Oh, God! Oh...mmmm...”

She fell into an enraptured moan as he made up for the man-pig behavior, soothing each breast with long, tender licks. That wasn't a huge help to his aching body. His cock had gotten more hard and hot, throbbing between their stomachs. He shifted a little so he could dip his hand between her thighs, intending to continue his gratitude by giving her pussy a nice little rubdown—but what he discovered had him grinning in delighted shock. Her tunnel was gushing, warm, and creamy for him. She took one finger, then two, then three, her walls secreting more tangy juices all over his skin. Her arousal revved his mouth again. He pulled his tongue back from her nipple and bit into the stiff nub.

Her whole body bucked off the mattress. “Garrett! Hell! Why are you doing that?”

“Because you like it.” He said it to her ear as he worked a fourth finger into her. With one of his thighs, he shoved hard on the knee he'd just been worshipping, opening her legs wider for him. “Because the pain makes you wet for me.”

He dragged his mouth against hers again, but this time she didn't let him into her wet heat. She opened her lips only enough to get her teeth into his bottom lip.

“Damn you to Hades.” She whispered it with her teeth still anchored in his flesh. He yanked back, licking at the flesh she'd torn open, though he did it on a dark smile.

“Too late, sugar. I think my passport's already got that stamp.”

She looked adorable as she rolled her eyes. “Which is why you’re in heaven with me?”

Before he answered that, he did kiss her. He did it thoroughly and desperately, possessing her tongue in bold sweeps, permanently tangling his essence with hers.

“We’ve always lived on borrowed time, my heart. We both know it.” He gripped her leg, hooking her knee around his shoulder. “Which is why I’m going to fuck you hard now. Which is why you’re going to let me. Which is why you’re going to love it.”

Her eyes shimmered with tears. Her lips lifted in a misty smile. “Okay.”

His penis surged against his fingers as he guided himself to her tight, moist entrance. “Tell me you want it.”

“I want it, baby.” Her obedience didn’t land him in Heaven again. It made his whole heart and soul turn into paradise. “I want your hot cock, Garrett. Please. Now. Deep inside me.”

“Yeah.” He swirled the searing pre-come around his bulging head, then pushed himself into the first inch of her channel. “Oh yeah, sugar.”

“Garrett.” Her strident gasp filled him. “Garrett...Garrett...”

“Soon, my heart. Soon.”

“Garrett! Fuck, man. Open the door!”

What the hell?

His fiancé suddenly sounded like his best friend. Correction: his demanding, door-pounding, subtle-as-a-linebacker, *ex* best friend.

“Hawkins! Get your ass out of bed and answer the door!”

Garrett’s eyes flew open. He squeezed them shut again. “No.” His voice was a croak, absorbed by the grimy walls of the room in this no-name Bangkok hotel he’d checked into last night. He looked down, trying to piece together this new truth. The pre-come was real. One of his hands was still wet with the stuff. His fingers were also really wrapped around his aching boner, as he lay beneath a mound of cheap, cloying sheets.

Sage was nowhere to be found.

Of course not.

Because she was dead. For a year, two months, sixteen days, and almost twenty-four hours now.

The knives of grief, all ten million of them, re-buried in his chest. As he gulped through the resulting dearth of air, he raised his clean hand to his chest, scrabbling for his dog tags. More accurately, he searched for the gold band that hung on the chain between them.

Though his head ordered him not to do it, he slipped his ring finger back through the band. For one wonderful, extra moment, the knives went away, and he relived the day he and Sage had picked out the jewelry...the day when he'd thought it would soon become a part of his wardrobe for good.

He remembered every detail of how beautiful she'd looked. It had been a brilliant late spring day. Her hair was a cascade of light brown sugar that earned her his favorite nickname, falling against the freckled shoulders that peeked from her pink sundress. But her smile...ah, he remembered that the best. Her lips had glistened with her joyous tears, and quavered with her soft whisper.

I can't wait until you get to wear it for good. I can't wait until you're all mine.

A month later, he'd gotten the phone call from Heidi Weston that upended his world forever. The woman who was preparing to become his mother in-law stammered that he needed to come over right away. He'd actually packed a bag, thinking Sage had been hurt, maybe badly, judging by the sound of Heidi's voice. He was prepared to stay long enough to get as much info as he could about her condition, then head for the base to force himself onto whatever flight was headed anywhere near Botswana. When he'd walked in to see the CNO and the Chaplain sitting there, each holding the hand of a sobbing Heidi, his knees hit the floor along with his pack. Only half their words reached his brain through his roaring senses. *Tribal warfare...region unexpectedly unstable...van sidetracked off the main road...likely rebels...found burned out...nothing but ashes found...*

He swallowed hard, and pulled his finger back out of the ring. As expected, his brain crowed while his heart screamed on the torture rack of memory. He waited, breathing hard, for the agony to end. He begged the wounds to bleed hard and fast, letting the anger get here and turn the pain into a scab. After that, he'd be able to move again. To function again.

“Hawk! Damn you, man!”

Anger moved in on the grief. Thank fuck. Fortunately, nothing got him more pissed off than Zeke's mommy hen act. After rolling from the bed, he tugged on his briefs then stumbled across the room. The dirty light and traffic sounds beyond the thin shutters told him it was about midday. Or maybe his growling stomach did.

"Okay, why are your panties in a wad?" He glanced at Zeke after opening the door, the last of his grogginess obliterated by the neon Hawaiian print of his friend's tacky tourist ensemble. Z's khaki shorts were clearly on his timber log legs for one purpose: covering his sorry ass. Like anyone would notice the damn thing after getting blinded by the lime green and banana yellow shirt. "Don't tell me you're bored, with all of Bangkok out there for the taking. We don't roll on this mission until nightfall. That gives you at least five hours to work your flogging arm and your kinky cock through a lot of cheap tail, my friend. I'll bet the girls at Club Subjugate are missing you something fierce, Sir Zekie."

"Sir Zekie. Aw. That's cute, honey." The guy busted into the room, kicking the door shut behind him. Zeke's six-foot-six frame was only a couple of inches taller than Garrett's, but the man's mountainous build intensified the effect of his stature, especially in this room designed for people half his size. "As much as Chelsea and Chyna like my side-by-side spanking special, shit like that gets redundant by myself. You tried the fun-filled dungeon field trip once. Think you want to sign up this time?"

Garrett snorted and flopped on the bed again. His friend wasted his breath with the memory. Yeah, he'd gone. Yeah, he'd tried it. Z had gotten him in a weak spot around the six-month mark after Sage's death. He'd been desperate to forget the pain for a while, hoping "the magic of BDSM," as Z called it, would help. More urgently, he'd been hoping to figure out the kinky-minded demon that crawled in the back of his imagination since—

Well, he knew since when. And that secret would go with him to his grave. An occasion, God willing, that would come sooner than later.

Needless to say, he'd scratched the itch just fine that night. Or as truth would have it, hadn't scratched. That part of things wasn't such a state secret, which justified the response he tossed at his friend.

"You really think that offer's relevant?"

Z shrugged. "Lots of water has passed under your bridge, dude. Maybe commanding a sweet little subbie will fire your rockets this time around."

"No," Garrett snapped, "it won't."

"Right. Because you'd rather stay here and just beat off after your wet dreams about Sage."

"Fuck off."

"It's been over a year, Hawk."

"Fuck *off*."

"Fine." Z pulled the faded Yankees cap off his head, revealing the miniature broadcasting station literally sewn inside it, before scrubbing a hand through his tumbling dark brown hair. "Turns out free time just got drastically cut, anyhow. That's why I'm here collecting your sorry ass."

He'd just cracked open a lukewarm soda and was about to take his first guzzle. He stopped the can halfway to his lips and shot a quizzical look across the room. "What do you mean, 'cut?'"

Zeke dropped into the room's sole chair and shrugged. "CENTCOMM received a line of new intel. Seems we're gonna be more effective going in to rescue these girls as the bad-ass, uniformed machines we've been trained to be, instead of a bunch of American dorkgasms looking for some girl-next-door type pussy." He stretched his tree trunk legs out, crossing them at the ankle on the foot of the bed. "So as soon as you get your ass dressed, we're buggin' back to the embassy. They're gonna let us change, and get haircuts and shaves." He scratched the scruff on his jaw. "Thank all that's holy."

Garrett cracked a dry smirk. "You sure it's just not because you blew our cover with that shirt? Maybe somebody with half a brain looked at you, and realized no normal person, even a dorkgasm, would willingly dress in that."

Z looked at his get-up with a frown. "What's wrong with the shirt?"

"Oh c'mon. It's hideous. It's not yours, is it? Central gave it to you, right?"

"Yeah, uh, right."

Zeke followed up his hasty answer by cracking one of the shutters and feigning interest in the activity outside. Garrett rose, shoved into jeans and a plain white T-shirt, and listened to the scene that his friend beheld. Scooters zoomed, taxi drivers argued, bicycle bells dinged, and food sizzled. All in all,

it was a typical day in Bangkok: probably the same kind of day that ten American aid workers had been enjoying just six weeks ago, prior to boarding a plane for their mission in Myanmar.

The five men and five women had never arrived for their flight. Two days later, the men had been returned unharmed, spelling out the abductors' purpose with more clarity than a Soi Cowboy tittie bar sign. Undercover CIA agents had been rapidly inserted on the case, and sure enough, after ample questions were asked and money tossed around, they were invited in on the newest trend for discerning American businessmen looking for a good time in East Asia: American girls who would do everything a native girl would, at exactly the same price.

Tonight, the assholes running the racket were going to find a new surprise waiting for their sorry dicks. Garrett's blood surged with the anticipation of delivering that surprise. He hoisted his pack, slipped into his "lazy American tourist" loafers then cocked his head at Zeke.

"You gonna sit there moping because I called your shirt a fashion disaster? Come on, Fashion Sparkle Barbie. Let's depart this fair establishment."

To his perplexity, Zeke didn't budge. He closed the shutter with unnerving calm. "Just another sec, Hawk."

The gnat of suspicion in his senses morphed into a mosquito. "What is it?"

"Sit down. There's one more thing we gotta discuss."

The mosquito started biting. "No," Garrett snapped, "there isn't."

Without looking back at Z, he went for the door. Had his hand on the knob as his friend's rejoinder hit the air.

"You don't get to load up for the op unless we drill down on this."

Garrett watched his fingers go white around the knob. Officially he and Zeke were equal rank, but his friend's tone clearly pulled a top dog on him. That only meant one thing.

"Franzen put you up to this, didn't he?"

Z lowered his legs then balanced his elbows on his knees. When he lifted his head, deep assessment defined his stare. Garrett almost rolled his eyes in return, but he caught sight of himself in the dusty mirror over the bureau.

His hair, a nice gold when it was clean but the color of a worn dishrag now, was as rumpled and long as Zeke's dark brown waves. His eyes also looked like rags, blue ones that'd been used on muddy boots. His skin was sallow. He hadn't slept well since—well, in over a year—and it showed in every wrinkled, grungy inch of him.

He scowled. If he was Franz, he'd likely have a few concerns about adding his name to the mission roster too. It didn't matter that he'd proved himself on over three dozen ops in the last year. He knew the concern was for *this* trip. He didn't have to be told why. But he'd put up with the formality anyway.

"Yeah, okay," Zeke conceded. "The Captain and I had a brief talk about your involvement on this one. You're a key piece of the team, Hawk. We could really use you. Even though you look like crap, your reflexes are still the best on the squad. You're able to make smart snap judgments even if the shit gets thick and the op goes sideways."

Garrett dropped his pack and leaned against the door. "Are you planning that much on this one taking a detour?"

"No. Hell, no." Like the protest about the shirt, his friend's answer flew out suspiciously fast. "It's just—we're gonna be deep in the forest on this one, G. I wouldn't be surprised if we come across fucking Jurassic Park or something."

"You know Jurassic Park is technically off the coast of Costa Rica and not Thailand, right?"

"It's sick that you know that."

"It's pathetic that you don't read."

His buddy's stubbled chin gave way to a grin. "And it's nice to see you getting pissy about something." In a murmur, he added, "Maybe there's hope for your humanity after all, Hawkins."

"Shut up and get to your point."

Zeke let the smile fall. "Okey dokey, Prince Charming." He rose and crossed his arms. "To be frank, the Captain and I are concerned about your focus on this one."

A needle of irritation joined the knives in his chest. "That's never been an issue before."

“We’ve never been called to retrieve hostages before.”

Garrett snorted. “Yeah, what about that? The Rangers and Delta getting their nails done or something?”

“You think I know or care? The op is what it is. More importantly, the hostages are what they are. American women, many with fair hair and eyes.” Z leaned forward, intensifying his gaze. “I need to know you can keep the emo lock box down on this, G. Complete objectivity. These girls will be terrified and traumatized, but our main objective is to get them to safety using any means necessary. The conditions will be shitty and the time frame will be worse. I need to know you can do that. I need to *know* you’re gonna maintain your edge.”

Garrett pushed off the door in order to take a determined stance. He bolted his stare into Zeke’s now, unwavering in his purpose, unblinking in his concentration.

“You think I’m gonna go cookie crumbs on you because some girl *looks* like her?” He shot out a bitter laugh. “You think that alone would do it? You really don’t remember what Sage and I had, do you?”

“Why do I need to? You’re doing the job to stellar perfection for me and half the world.”

“And?”

Zeke’s eyes slid shut and his mouth tightened, his version of contrition for the accusing words. “You haven’t let go of her. You still got that goddamn ring hiding between your tags, which should be secured to your bootlaces, assface, *not* your sorry neck. I can write you up faster than—”

Garrett cut him off with a derisive laugh. “Oh, that would be entertaining.”

“Listen, moron. I’ve got genuine concerns here, Garrett.”

“Got it, Oprah. Can I get you a tampon for that now?”

Zeke closed the space between them in one wide step. His jaw went harder beneath his stubble. “What you can do, damn it, is look me in the eye and swear to me that you’re squared with the personal shit and are solid to go on this op.”

Garrett notched back his shoulders and set his own jaw. He confronted the stare of his friend again. He’d seen those hazels oiled with booze, gunned

with adrenaline, bleary with exhaustion, afire with exhilaration and likely a thousand other things. But this was one look he always treated with respect. This was a stare of the guy would be at his side out there in Jurassic Land, holding the gun that could save Garrett's life. He'd be counting on Garrett to do the exact same.

"I'm solid," he said. "And you know I'd tell you otherwise, Z." The last shrouds of his dream fell away from his mind, dissolved by the salvation of mental mission prep. "Let me help you get these dick lickers."

Zeke didn't answer at first. He subjected Garrett to another minute of silent scrutiny. That was all right. He'd been through it before. What he couldn't handle were the daggers Z tried to add to the others in his chest, the blades that tried to gouge the others out.

That wasn't going to happen. Not today, not tonight, not any time soon. The knives were his. The pain was his. And as long as both were still there, he still had some part of her with him.

Finally, Zeke cracked a lopsided grin and chuckled. "All right, you charmer. Let's get the hell out of here. You need a shower, dude. Bad."

"Says the chump who smells like ass."

Zeke knuckled him in the shoulder. "You sure you got everything in that pack? Did you get your Jane Austen novel off the back of the toilet?"

"I've got your Jane Austen at the end of my dick."

"Hawkins, your dick is probably blue as your balls by now." Z snapped his fingers. "Hey! Maybe that's where you should secure your tags, yeah?"

He rolled his eyes. Scooped up his pack again. Discreetly adjusted the body parts his friend had just insulted with screaming accuracy. His cock was still doing its best to relax though his balls throbbed in frustration, sending shots of erotic what-the-fucks at him. They were supposed to be enjoying some post jack-off serenity right now, and the bastards were hitting the target damn well at reminding him of that every two seconds.

Get used to it, guys. He sent the dismal promise as he and Zeke made their way out into the sultry Bangkok afternoon. *Life isn't going to change anytime soon.*

THANK YOU for reading about Garrett & Sage's story!
If you enjoyed the story, please consider sharing about it with your friends and fellow readers. Reviews are always appreciated, as well.

Thank you so much!

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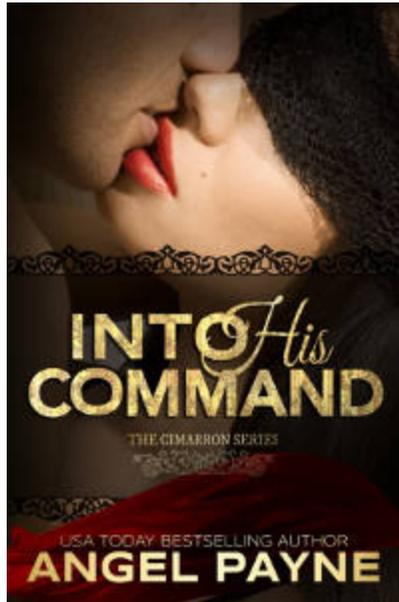
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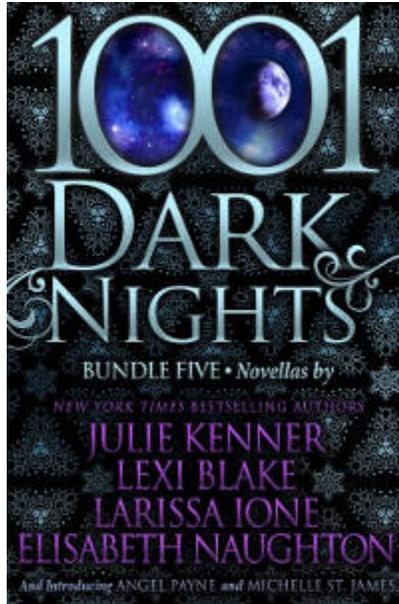


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About the Author



USA Today bestselling romance author Angel Payne has been reading and writing her entire life, though her love for romances began in junior high, when writing with friends on “swap stories” they’d trade between classes. Needless to say, those stories involved lots of angst, groping, drama, and French kissing.

She began getting a paycheck for her writing in her twenties, writing record reviews for a Beverly Hills-based dance music magazine. Some years, various entertainment industry gigs, and a number of years in the hospitality industry later, Angel returned to the thing she loves the most: creating character-based romantic fiction. Along the way, she also graduated with two degrees from Chapman University in Southern California, taking departmental honors for English, before writing five historical romances for Kensington and Bantam/Doubleday/Dell.

Angel found a true home in writing contemporary-based romances that feature high heat and high concepts, focusing on memorable alpha men and the women who tame them. She has numerous book series to her credit,

including the Secrets of Stone series (with Victoria Blue), the Kinky Truth trio, the WILD Boys of Special Forces, and the popular Cimarron Saga, as well as its spin-off, the Temptation Court series.

Angel still lives in Southern California, where she is married to her soulmate and lives on a street that looks like Brigadoon, with their awesome daughter and Lady Claire, the dog with impeccable manners. When not writing, she enjoys reading, pop culture, alt rock, cute shoes, enjoying the outdoors, and being a gym rat.



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