

WAYWARD ANGELS
Book 4 of the Wounded Warriors Series
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Excerpt

Four

Gregg couldn't stop thinking about the spunky blonde with jewel eyes who drove a Harley. He didn't like the way she made him feel. This kind of attraction he used to relish, but he now dreaded it.

Relationships had never been his strong suit. He'd spent a lifetime indulging in short-term liaisons with women that amounted to no more than a few hours of mind-blowing sex. The women he knew could be considered confident, independent, overtly sexual and seductive, both jaded and guarded. They didn't need a man for any more reason than he needed a woman.

Vulnerability, sweetness, lacking-in-confidence, open affection. He didn't understand that. Maybe his intrigue with Stormie Knight came because of his unfamiliarity with the traits she possessed in spades.

Essentially, he'd spent a lifetime doing it all wrong. Now that he'd given his life to Christ and made a commitment to follow Him, he wondered often if he ever really knew the meaning of right. For the past year, his way of handling things was to follow the Lord and assume the opposite of everything he'd ever done must be right. Love and commitment had to be right. Sex and addiction qualified for wrong. He had to be careful about crossing familiar lines like the one inspired by Stormie's presence.

Trouble was, he recognized a part of himself in Stormie Knight. Though they hadn't talked about anything personal, he saw a kindred soul in her. He guessed she'd had more than her share of short-term liaisons, with maybe one or two of the long-term variety. He'd gotten to the point that he could sense both extremes in a woman.

From the start of his relationship with Christie, he'd guessed she had little, if any, experience with men. He could've seen her naïveté through a dense cloud.

He hadn't exactly lied to Craig about that either. He'd known of Christie's inexperience, but most inexperienced women didn't come off as aggressive. She'd cornered him at every turn like a she-wolf in heat toward the end of their relationship. Craig would never believe it, of course. He would always believe that Gregg was a womanizer to the nth degree.

Stormie had experience. Very little would surprise her. She knew exactly how to study him under the veil of her long eyelashes without expressing anything bawdy in her approval of what she saw. No, the lady had inborn and experienced sensuality. Even the way she rode that Harley, the way she handled it. Yeah, she'd been around. Yet she'd maintained her openness and a form of innocence.

Ahh, need to stop thinking about her. Being here, where I can still smell the strangely arousing grease she wore like perfume. Not going to help me out of my reverie here.

The shelter halls were eerily quiet when he came out of his office. He found Chad at the front desk getting ready to leave.

"Hey, did Diego stop by today?" Gregg said.

"Sorry. Nope."

Gregg's jaw tightened in concern. Never good when Diego stayed away. Though the kid wouldn't check himself into the shelter formally, he usually came around at least once a day. Diego had begun to trust him, even rely on him, but their relationship was still fragile. Gregg didn't like to think what had kept him away this day.

Still worrying, he had started for his car when his cell phone buzzed against his hip. He pulled it out. "Yeah?"

"Hey."

"Look, I'm sorry for what happened earlier today."

Craig's voice annoyed him, but he played ignorant. "Which thing?"

"With your new janitor. You did hire her, didn't you?"

"You know it, bro. She'll fix the central air tomorrow."

For a moment, as Gregg unlocked and slid into his Maserati Coupe--the very last of the expensive toys from his heyday--Craig said nothing. His silence spoke volumes nevertheless. His next words came in a casual, careful, nonjudgmental tone. "Anything else happen?"

"Nope. How about you?" 10...Christie. 9...How could you? 8...She's so innocent. 7...We all know, well, that you're not innocent. 6...You brought her down. 5...It's never good to bring a good woman down. 4...Especially one I'm in love with but too dumb or shy to do anything about. 3...How could you? 2...I can't get over how you could do it. 1...Let alone how easily you got over it.

"I wanted to apologize... Well, for assuming...about things with Christie," Craig said.

Considering it amounted to the best apology he'd get from his brother, Gregg didn't bother looking for a more specific list of spoken wrongs. "You plan to admit to her you got a thing for her?"

Craig didn't answer. He didn't have the guts to take the leap of faith required. He'd rather lose Christie than lay his heart on the line.

"How's Diego?" Craig said, well aware of the kid's precarious situation.

"He didn't come in today. It's not like him. Hope nothing's going on out there."

Out there. Fact was, Gregg didn't know where Diego stayed, outside of on the streets. He'd looked for him a couple times, but he'd never found him. Maybe that was a good thing. Safer for him.

"Let me know when you do hear from him."

"Will do. Talk to you later."

After pressing the disconnect button, Gregg got on the road for home. Once again, he analyzed the hour and twenty minutes he spent having lunch with Stormie earlier that day, wondering if he'd said or done anything inappropriate.

Don't know how to act with a woman, Lord. I don't even know if she's a Christian, or if I should be thinking about her. I can't get her out of my head. Don't let me go. Not now. No matter what happens there, show me Your will. Let me do it Your way, and not my old way.

The gate in the fence around his stone house stood open, the way he always left it, just as he left his doors unlocked and never bothered with the security system. He lived in a good neighborhood in Brookfield. He had an open-door policy with the kids in the city. They knew him, and they protected his house. He'd had a few problems with stealing in the beginning of his experiment. Instead of dealing with the problem himself, he'd let the kids work it out. Since then, nothing went missing, only to be sold for drug money. The kids policed each other better than any cop could, and set down the laws that allowed Gregg to continue offering them a place to hang out, to learn, to sleep and eat. A place to be safe.

He'd bought the house without ever seeing it before he moved from Los Angeles to Milwaukee. In his mind, he didn't need more than a place to crash at the end of the day. He didn't care about the bay windows or cathedral ceilings, or the outdoor pool that he only used for an occasional party. He hired someone to clean the inside and keep the outside presentable. Since most of the guys who came around only cared about a place to crash, too, they didn't mind that he lacked a lot of furniture, and all the walls were bare.

Pulling into the two-car garage, he wondered again about Diego. If he didn't come by the shelter tomorrow, he'd try looking for him.

When he walked into the house, his gray tabby was waiting by the door and immediately wound himself around Gregg's ankles.

He leaned down scratched the cat's ears. "What's up, Kittenhead?"

The cat lifted his head to look up at Gregg and offered a meow.

"All that, huh, you old rogue? Sounds exhausting."

Scooping up the cat, Gregg tramped across the wide-open marble floor. His boots made a rhythmic sound that wouldn't be heard over the music blaring from behind a closed door. Since most of the guys were runaways with volatile home situations, they stayed inside the house as a rule. At the library double doors, where Gregg had a massive collection of books covering just about anything of interest, along with a wall of computers, he called out in greeting. They either looked up or stood up from their various places around the room. "Any of you see Diego lately?"

None of them had.

Gregg went to the game room on the opposite side of the house. "Seen Diego?"

Upon seeing him, someone turned down the music. Though Diego had only come to the house once or twice and Gregg didn't really expect to see him here on his own, he was disappointed when one of the other guys said, "Haven't seen the guy."

"I've got a freezer full of steaks. If anybody's interested, I'll fire up the grill."

He laughed at the mass cheer that went up.

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The TV blared and provided the only light in the annually re-decorated living room, but Stormie didn't see or hear anything but the memory of Gregg's face, his smile, his amazing butt, all set to the music of the sound of his voice in her head.

Anyone who'd followed Gregg Stevens' career knew he had become a Christian and had given up his music. At least he had until he made his first and only Christian Blues album a year earlier. Following it and a cut-short tour, he'd made a public statement, claiming he wouldn't be making another album--secular or Christian--anytime soon.

His legions of fans--Stormie at the head--still bemoaned his retirement. She'd listened to his Christian album long before she accepted the Lord herself, just because he made it.

For all intents and purposes, Gregg had given up his every vice. Christie Renata Zondervon was the last woman he'd been linked to romantically, but considering that they'd made her album together, the rumors could be all hype. Maybe it'd been nothing.

Not that it mattered. She worked for him for less than she spent during one of her uncontrollable, legendary shopping sprees. Gregg Stevens was her employer. The rest of it amounted to a puzzle she had no right to solve. But she wanted to. What would it be like to get to know him? To have him like her, just a little? Or as much as she liked him?

The insane direction of her thoughts broke her out of her silly daydreaming. Her father was home. He always worked late, even most weekdays. She often wondered what he'd do when it came time to retire. His whole life came down to work. That, and telling her what she was

currently doing wrong. As a stockbroker, he owned a successful business that raked in enough money for an army to live luxuriously on.

She supposed without his vast fortune to fall back on, she wouldn't have made as many mistakes as she had in her life. He bailed her out each time. Maybe she should have been grateful, but she always resented him.

She sat up and saw him by the hand-carved back table, sifting through and opening mail. No, she didn't want to explain anything to him, and if she stuck around here long enough, he'd ask her questions.

Before she could rise from the sofa, he asked, without looking up from envelopes, about the job interview.

"I got it," she admitted, reluctant because she knew he wouldn't approve of any course of action she took.

"Full-time? Part-time?"

"Part-time. Just mornings. My best time. So I should be okay." She rose to a sitting position on the sofa and wrapped her arms around her knees without looking at him.

"What will you be doing there?"

"You've heard about Wayward Angels for Boys. It's a shelter for troubled guys. I'm repairing the things that go wrong in the building."

His busy eyebrows almost covered his suspicious blue eyes. "That sounds dangerous."

"Backed up toilets and fickle central air units are dangerous?" Stormie hooted, knowing precisely what he meant and not wanting to admit it. "You really think I can find trouble for myself anywhere, don't you?"

"I'm not talking about repairs. These kids could be criminals, sex offenders, murderers."

She bit back a sarcastic reply and told him about her uniform and the distress pager she'd be wearing around her neck.

His lingering disapproval showed on his face. In the silence that followed, she couldn't kid herself that it wouldn't be long before he went where she'd told him never to go again. *What will it be first? Would he demand to know why I haven't called Leslie? What really happened with Redo? My prolonged and silent absence for two months? The car accident? His blood on me?*

"Have you contacted Leslie?"

"Why should I?" she said between her teeth.

He stopped sorting the mail and stared right at her. "Who do you think you're talking to, young lady?" he demanded, turning her into a rebellious little girl again with every harsh word.

Stormie stared straight ahead at the oversized, marble fireplace. "Someone who can't stand to leave well enough alone."

"Well enough has never worked for you, and you know it, Stormie. It'll come back to haunt you, whether you want it to or not. Leslie might be able to help you with that."

The urge to cover her ears and her eyes overwhelmed her. She needed to get the sound of the gunshot out of her ears, the smell of sulfur out of her nose, the sight of that rivulet of blood slicing down the center of Laredo's face... "It wouldn't haunt me if everyone would just stop talking about it. You and Dani are relentless. If it was anybody else, you'd let them work it out on their own."

She whipped her head back toward her father, her glare red-hot inside her eyes, daring him to deny it.

"You're right. If it was anyone else, I would. Call her, Stormie, before it sneaks up on you and you can't handle it."

No more. She couldn't take it another minute. She sprang to her feet and crossed the room in a half dozen strides. Over her shoulder, she tossed, "You don't know what you're talking about, old man."

Soundlessly, she rushed upstairs, but the fears and uncertainly hit her before she could drown it out with blasting music. She could almost feel the cold steel against her cheek as he mockingly caressed her. *"You belong to me. In life. And in death."*

Don't think about. Don't think about Redo. She took a deep, calming breath, closing her eyes and conjuring the memory of Gregg's best sidewinder grin. *Don't think about Leslie--she can't help me now. Don't think about what happened at all. You don't want to be in her psychiatric hospital for crazies. Against your will. Not that again.*

Gregg's blues guitar flooded the room. She huddled in the corner of her bed. *Remember Gregg. Remember how he touched you without touching you, and you knew he was saying he liked the way you look. Remember how you've always wanted to meet Gregg Stevens. Remember, his voice carried you out of the darkness. Out into the light. Don't mess it up now.* But the evil in her mind followed it up with the question: *But have you ever done anything else?*

Her sister would tell her to pray, but Dani couldn't know how unnatural it felt to turn to someone, to turn to *God*, when she felt helpless. She'd spent a lifetime running away from problems with drugs, sex, and reckless behavior in so many different forms. Anything to avoid facing herself, her pain, the illness that'd plagued her for most of her life. No, it felt anything but natural to put her helplessness into someone else's hands. To trust someone, even someone she knew gave His life to redeem her worthless one.

She couldn't get prayer words to form. Not in her head or on her tongue. Fear was too strong. What could she ask for? Strength? She had none. God to heal her? She'd spent a lifetime asking for that, in stupid, desperate ways. God to help her? How? Where to begin?

I'm forgiven. You've forgiven me...then why won't the guilt go away? The anger? This feeling like I'm being punished for a lifetime of mistakes? For vowing to live every day like it's my last? Laredo made that same vow, and look where it got him. Where it almost got me. Inside my car, wrapped around a telephone pole, with no idea how I even got there? All I could remember was Gregg Stevens' voice, leading me out of the dark. Leading me to You.

Stormie looked down at her hands as she held back the tears she needed to cry. She trembled violently with the need to cry. But she didn't let go. She couldn't break down the dam she built years ago to hold back her strangling emotions.