

ANGEL JENDRICK

Secret Me



Can Tage be true to herself and her attraction to Wren without sacrificing her friendships?

Tage seems to have it all: she hangs out with the school's most popular clique and has a handsome boyfriend. She's also living a lie about her sexuality.

Wren, a nonbinary schoolmate, has been the victim of bullying by Tage's clique. This leaves Tage racked with guilt because she's always been drawn to Wren. When Tage picks up Wren during a snowstorm and they are forced to spend a night together, their true feelings emerge.

With Wren's support, Tage has to decide whether to come out to celebrate herself and her new relationship — and risk many of her friendships.

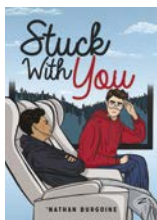
Secret Me

ANGEL JENDRICK

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ANGEL JENDRICK is the author of several contemporary romances. She also dabbles in poetry.

With her wife, their three children, their energetic Lab and cat, Angel lives on Prince Edward Island.




Real Love

a new collection of YA novels

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For Paige and Ava

01 Risks We Take

I LOVE THE RISK of getting caught.

Heart thumping, palms sweating, stomach-clenching kind of risk.

Catch me. Arrest me. *Do it.* I don't care.

I can barely make out the PA system over my pulse pounding in my ears with abandon, but I know the store is closing. I glance casually around me before adding the lipstick to the other stolen items in my purse.

Mine.

I leave the Charlottetown Walmart with a heavier load than when I went in, still feeling like something's missing as I pull on my toque and mitts. I need to think smarter when I shoplift, think *bigger*, because the stakes still aren't high enough. Not for my mother, the cop, to notice me. If I end up in the back of her police cruiser, maybe she'll remember the daughter she chose her job over. Sometimes I feel like I could literally disappear and it'd be days before she noticed.

Kind of a sad little reality, right?

I make my way to the sweet-sixteen birthday gift my dad bought me last year, when things were different — maybe better. Before he got a job out west and divorced Mom. With the mess of their split on my mind, I give the Camry's front tire a hard kick. Pain shoots up my leg and I wince, immediately regretting how stupidly impulsive I can be. Grumbling, and in a foul mood, I open the driver's door to trade my purse for the snow brush. As I'm limping around cleaning the snow off the car, I think of how good the South would be right about now. Gone are the days where I look forward to skating,

hot chocolate, and sledding. Now, as soon as a hint of chill creeps into the air, I'm wishing I was one of those lucky snowbirds. A house in Florida would be epic.

By the time I'm finally slipping behind the wheel, my hands are nearly frozen off. I start the ignition — don't ask me why I didn't think to do it earlier — and crank the heat. I spend the next few minutes checking my phone, killing time while the windshield defrosts. I stare at the notifications, my shoulders slumping. During the half hour I was in the store I got ten messages and one missed video call, none of them from my mother. Go figure.

Sighing, I reach over and set my phone in the dash holder, dialling my best friend Aiden as I steer the car out of the nearly empty lot. I live close to Victoria Park, in the Brighton area. My house isn't the biggest on the block, but I like it. Besides my friends, it's been the only constant thing in my life the last couple years. I know I can go home and be myself, without fear of someone watching me, expecting something from me I'd rather not give. Don't get me wrong, most of the time I love

my friends and the advantages that come with being at the top, but it can be taxing. The popularity you once craved begins stealing your uniqueness, your flair, everything that makes you you, until you're exactly like all the other pretty girls. You start to think like them, act like them, dress like them. Or at least that's the version you give to the rest of the world. The other, less acceptable versions are buried under sarcasm and flat-out bullying.

At home, at least I get to kick back in my too-large sweats and t-shirt and just be Tage. Every now and again, it takes me a bit to remember who she is. Funny how that happens.

Aiden answers on the second ring, her face and ginger hair filling up my screen. "Bout time you rang me back," she greets me, letting out a giggle. I hear her boyfriend beside her, more people in the background. "Hayley's parents are gone for the night, and I'm pretty sure she snapped the entire senior class her party invite. That means you, biotch. Get over here and shake that ass!"

My excitement to get home bursts, and I try to hide my disappointment. Some nights I just want a quiet night in. Entertaining mean-drunk Hayley is a total buzzkill, but I already know it's exactly what I'll do. As tiring as the parties and games get, change, and the potential rock bottom that comes with it, doesn't appeal to me in the slightest. At least I know what to expect from Hayley and the gang.

“And, Tage? You still have your fake ID? We're running out of vodka.”

* * *

Somehow, all of Hayley's parties end with me hating a little more of myself than I did hours before.

Not because of the cheer routines I'm pressured into showing off, or the fact that I constantly overdrink and never learn. No, the problem digs so much deeper than that, and it's only when I'm drunk that I let myself feel all the bullshit. I hate how weak-willed I am, how it's never gotten easier to bury or embrace my authentic

self. I despise the fact I have no one I trust enough to open up to, not even my selfish parents. I've been friends with Hayley for years, and she openly hates the gays yet hasn't a clue a queer like myself hides in her circle. I don't have the balls to come out, not after what happened the last time I tried.

I think I hate that most of all. Tough, bitchy Tage cares more about acceptance than her own happiness.

"Girl, where you off to? Let's do another one!" Hayley grabs my hand, tugging me back into the circle the partiers have made around the three of us. My gaze finds hers, and the contents of my stomach give a slight churn at the thought of tumbling a third time. Somersaults, Smirnoff, and small spaces? Not a good mix.

"I don't ... I feel a little sick," I admit. I had kicked off my heels some time ago and now have to squint to fully make her out. Everything is fuzzy, extra shiny, and her hair seems more angelic than I remember. She's so pretty it's disgusting, but that's where her beauty ends.

"Tage, you don't look so good," Aiden's boyfriend Dylan says as I push past our friends to head for the

bathroom.

“Speak for yourself, Dylan,” I reply, and my stomach does another flip. I’m betting puking is definitely in my future, but when I finally reach the second level, I catch a cool breeze from one of the bedrooms. Curious, I head toward it, immediately grateful the chill seems to be helping with my nausea. It’s Hayley’s brother’s room, but he’s working tonight so my guess is someone came up here to smoke. Taking a cautious seat on the bed, I close my eyes and inhale the crisp air.

Unfortunately, I’m not alone for long.

My gut has only just settled when my on-again-off-again boyfriend finds me hiding out. Ben stands in the doorway for a moment, letting his eyes adjust to the dim light before they land on me.

I sigh, not in the mood. I’m so tired of putting on a show for everyone. If I could just be myself, Ben wouldn’t be the one coming to kiss me. I’d probably be playing video games somewhere or watching manga or whatever else emo nerds do. I’d be kissing someone, all right, but not Ben.

“Hey.”

Ben stumbles in, smelling like beer and sporting a sloppy grin, and I watch as he falls onto the bed beside me.

“Hey, bae. What’re you doing up here? Waiting for me?” His grin widens. With his straight, white teeth and playful blue eyes, every girl in my school is under the illusion I’ve hit the jackpot. ‘Ben is so cute, so funny, so this, so that.’

He’s not my type.

But they *don’t* know the real Tage. Only one person in my entire school sees what and who I truly am. Wren, a nonbinary emo queer with a penchant for piercings and a smile to die for.

And I treat them like crap.