

Business or Pleasure?

DUSTIN

“So, what do you think?”

“The purple one,” I said with conviction. “Definitely the purple one.”

Jake’s eyes twinkled with approval. “You have a gift for this, you know.”

“High praise, coming from the incomparable Anthony Jacobs himself!” I crowed.

“Oh, please.” Jake rolled his eyes, his long lashes catching in the dusty sunrays of my studio apartment.

I smiled lazily, watching him sort through huge swaths of fabric, setting aside the shimmering purple silk that I had picked out.

My apartment was in its perpetual state of organized chaos: stray easels, splashes of color, piles of canvas, and the smell of acrylics and oils all mingling together like one of Picasso’s fever dreams.

I loved it to death, but I always felt like there was something missing. Something that would pull the place together, a calm center to the vibrant and spontaneous energy of the room.

Looking at Jake, I knew I found it.

His *just-got-out-of-bed* hair was a golden brown in the sunlight, his bright green eyes sparkling with life. I watched him furrow his brow and bite his lower lip as he contemplated the next piece of fabric, and suddenly I wished that those were my teeth on his lips instead.

I laughed, shaking my head in wonder.

Jake’s got me going all googly-eyed.

I put my chin in my hands as I watched him work.

I wonder if this is how Angela feels about Xavier?

I remembered I’d jokingly told Angela that one day I hoped to find someone who would make me go all cutesy and doe-eyed, but deep down I never truly expected it. I mean, trust me, I’d gotten around. But I’d never met anyone that came close to being boyfriend material.

But Jake ...

Jake seemed to sense my gaze. He looked up with an arched brow, a challenge in his eyes. “What?” he smirked.

Inspiration struck me like a lightning bolt, like a flash sale at my favorite boutique.

Everything must go! 90% off!

I leapt up from the couch.

“Freeze!” I cried.

“Huh?” Jake asked, incredulous.

“No, no, no.” I walked up to him and carefully arranged his posture so it was how it was a moment ago. I placed my hands on his hips, nudging him to lean on one leg, guiding his hands to rest on his waist. I took his face in my hands, trying to arrange his expression into that playful, challenging smirk from a moment ago.

I felt my heart pounding as I stared into his eyes, my hands still cupped around his cheeks.

“Don’t move,” I whispered.

Jake rolled his eyes, a slight flush to his cheeks.

“Well,” he prompted. “Hurry up, Mr. Artist. You know I can’t stay still for long.”

I flashed him a smile as I scrambled to get my paints and an easel set up. I sat in front of him, finding the perfect angle where the skylight alighted perfectly on the crown of his head.

He was my centerpiece. An anchor in a swirl of color and motion.

Listen to me, going all gooeey. Angela would laugh at me for sure.

We were silent for a while. Jake stood as still as he could, humoring my request, while I blocked in the scene before me on the canvas.

“I wasn’t kidding, you know,” Jake said.

“Hmm?”

“You really do have a talent for fashion design.”

“Well, duh. Have you looked at me?” I peeked at him from behind the canvas, twisting my face into the weirdest expression I could make.

He laughed, and the sound made me feel as light as a feather.

“You could have a future in design, Dustin. If you wanted to, that is.”

I began to work in more colors onto the canvas, turning the idea over in my mind.

“The Dustin Stirling Collection, by Anthony Jacobs. It ~does~ have a nice ring to it.”

“Hang on, hotshot, you have to come up with a design first,” he said.

“I’ll get right on it after I finish my *pièce de résistance*,” I said, brimming with confidence.

I heard him sigh, amusement in his breath.

“Well, your *pièce-de-whatever* better be coming along quickly. My leg is starting to cramp.”

I smiled as I peeked at him from over the canvas. I had the feeling there’d be a lot more paintings to come.

ANGELA

“Thanks, Marco, I’ll call you when I’m ready to go.”

He nodded as he rolled up the window, and I watched him reverse the beamer out of the driveway. The luxury car looked so out of place next to my dad’s run-down truck in suburban New Jersey.

I tugged at my designer dress, suddenly feeling self-conscious. When was the last time I’d worn jeans?

“What are you doing standing out there in the driveway, you creep?”

I turned to see Lucas leaning in the doorway, a smile on his face.

I stuck my tongue out at him as I marched up the steps, leaning in for a hug. I looked up at him.

He looked *tired*.

There were bags under his eyes, and it looked like it’d been a while since he’d shaved.

“How’s the new daddy life?” I asked.

“It’s great, can’t you tell?” He laughed. “I’m getting a whole three hours of sleep a night.”

I patted his shoulder, giving it an encouraging squeeze.

“But it’s worth it, right?”

“Oh, Bella’s the joy of my life.” Lucas grinned, and I could see the genuine happiness shining through his haggard exterior. “I just wish babies didn’t poop so much. There’s a mountain of used diapers in the trash, Angela. A *mountain*.”

I wrinkled my nose as I pushed past him into the house. The drone of the TV mingled with the enticing scent of a gooeey cheese casserole baking in the oven. I felt my shoulders relax a little, the tension leaking out from my body as I walked down the familiar corridors to the living room.

“Hey, sweet pea.” Dad called from the couch.

I squeezed in next to him, giving him a tight hug.

“Hey, Dad.” My eyes drifted to the TV, the midday news sounding in the background. “Where’s Danny?”

“Oh, he’s just finishing up at the restaurant. Things are getting busy, what with the grand reopening and all.”

“Reopening?” I frowned.

“Oh, yeah.” Dad said off-handedly. “We’ve been putting a fresh coat of paint on the place. Thought it would be a nice way to give some life to it, maybe bring in a couple of new faces.”

“Oh.”

Dad looked sidelong at me. “Angela?”

I stood up from the couch a little too quickly, stumbling a bit for balance.

“I’m gonna go help with the casserole.”

I paced to the kitchen, and I could feel Dad’s eyes on my back.

They’re reopening the restaurant? Why didn’t they tell me anything? Did they forget to tell me, or did they just not bother to? Or maybe they did, and I just wasn’t paying attention at the time ...

I shook my head, trying to clear the thoughts from my mind. A knot began to form in my stomach, but that might have just been my hunger talking.

I found Em in the kitchen removing the casserole and placing it on top of the stove. She looked a lot better after her trip to the spa. Though she still had bags under her eyes, there was a shining determination in them rather than bedraggled desperation.

“Hey Angie,” she said, hugging me with her oven mitts still on. I squeezed her back, glad that my little gift had helped her.

“Where’s Bella?” I asked.

“She’s sleeping upstairs, finally.” Em laughed. “Help me set the table, will you?”

We had just finished setting the plates and cutlery when Lucas walked into the kitchen with Danny right behind him. Danny collapsed into a chair with a groan.

“Man, I’m starving. Oh, hey, Angela.”

I cut him a big piece of the casserole, setting a pile of melted cheese down on his plate.

“How’s the reopening going?” I asked.

“Cheese casserole *again*?” he complained.

“Don’t like it, don’t eat it,” Em said.

Danny took a bite, talking around the mouthful. “Almost done. I’m gonna head back over there after a quick lunch,” he sighed, turning to me. “It’s a lot of work. Especially now that Lucas is skipping out on me.”

“Skipping out?” Lucas said incredulously as he took a seat next to Danny. “You wanna take on poop mountain?”

“You’re exaggerating,” Danny accused.

“Nope.” Dad chimed in as he sauntered in from the living room. “Literal poop mountain.”

Danny continued to chow down his food, undisturbed by the graphic mental image. “Either way, work’s getting tougher with baby Bella taking up all of your time.”

I sat next to Dad and Em, cutting myself a slice. The banter around the dining room table was easy, and I felt the knot in my stomach slowly coming undone. They were family, after all.

“Speaking of work and baby Bella,” I said. “How are you finding time to run the flower shop, Em? It must be tough doing both.”

“Too tough,” Em agreed. “That’s why Lucas and I decided to sell the shop.”

I nearly choked on the cheesy casserole.

Dad patted me on the back roughly, handing me a glass of water. I guzzled it down.

What? I gasped when death by casserole had been averted. “Wasn’t that your dream, Em? A flower shop in New York City?”

“It was,” Em agreed. “But I have a new dream now. And it’s to be a mom.”

“Just like that?” I asked.

“Just like that,” she confirmed, taking Lucas’s hand from across the table.

I tried to wrap my head around it. It felt like it was yesterday when Em had finally opened her shop in New York. I remember how excited she was, the glow and passion in her eyes as she arranged her flowers just right.

And now she was giving it all up.

“You couldn’t find a middle ground?” I asked, astonished.

“Well, maybe,” Em relented. “But we also thought the money could be used towards the down payment of a house.”

“We wanted our own place to raise our family,” Lucas chimed in.

I felt dizzy, my appetite suddenly lost. Everything was changing so fast.

Too fast.

Without me.

“Oh, I know,” I said with a smile. “I can just buy you two a new house!”

I was expecting hugs and laughter, not the uncomfortable silence that greeted me.

“Angela ...” Em said. She looked at Lucas.

“We appreciate the thought, but I think we’d like to do this ourselves.” My brother looked at me strangely, almost like he didn’t know who I was.

I felt the knot return in my stomach, tightening my insides like a vise.

“That’s a lot of money, kid.” Dad raised an eyebrow at me.

“Not at all,” I insisted. “It’s only a couple hundred thousand—”

“Easy there, Mrs. Knight,” he joked. “You’re surrounded by common folk at this table, remember?”

My words died on my lips.

Since when was I not considered a part of the group? When did I become an outsider?

I attempted a smile, trying to swallow the panic bubbling up in my throat. I felt like a stranger with my family. I felt like they’d moved on without me, that I’d strayed on a new path without even realizing how far away I’d wandered.

“Sorry guys, I just remembered I had some work to catch up on tonight.” The excuse sounded hollow in my ears, but it seemed to do the trick. “I’ll see you all next time, okay?”

“Do you need a ride to the train station?” Danny asked.

“No way,” Lucas joked. “Our sister gets driven around in a beamer now, didn’t you know?”

I laughed as I walked away, but it felt like I was swallowing broken glass.

“Hey, sweet pea.” Dad called. I stopped to look at him, and there was concern in his eyes. “Take care of yourself.”

I nodded, opening the front door and shutting it behind me.

Did I really change that much? Was I really so different?

I walked to the curb, Marco’s number already punched into my phone, my thoughts in a whirl.

Em had given up her dream for her daughter.

For family.

Could I do the same?