

## Family Troubles

### PENNY

I eyed Xavier as he paced around my office, tension in every line of his body.

He was pissed. It was easy to tell.

I had more than my fair share of experience with angry men.

Their jaws would tighten.

Their eyes would darken.

Their hands would curl up into fists.

And then they'd loom over me bigger and bigger ...

I squeezed my eyes shut, bringing a hand up to my throat.

*Jacques is gone. You have to focus on what's in front of you.*

I took a deep breath, trying to push down the anxiety that threatened to swallow me whole.

When Brad had asked me to marry him, to forget all the stigmas and elope, my entire world had changed. The sun seemed brighter. Food tasted better. I was the happiest girl on the planet.

But life was cruel, and it ripped away our love when it had barely begun.

Now I was in Brad's old office, worrying about the future of a multibillion-dollar corporation and the emotional stability of my new stepson.

Stepson.

I opened my eyes and saw that he was still pacing like a wild animal.

Like a beast stuck in a cage.

Seeing Xavier as a stepson was impossible. I couldn't magically become a mother figure to him. Besides, he was *older* than me...

And it's not like I was immediately some *businesswoman extraordinaire*.

I was just as confused, and—as much as he'd never admit it—scared as Xavier was.

But at least I was trying.

Was it too much to expect a little help from Xavier?

My eyes were starting to sting, and I blinked them fiercely, refusing to let tears spill over.

I channeled my frustration into my voice instead.

"What's wrong with you?!" I asked.

He stopped pacing and glared at me. Glared like he wanted to wrap his hands around my throat. He took two big strides to my desk, looming over it and me.

"What's wrong with me??" he yelled. "What's wrong with me??"

I tried not to flinch, my heart pounding in my throat.

*Stay strong, Penny.*

"The whole fucking world has gone insane!" He stormed away from me, and I couldn't help but breathe out a little sigh of relief. "Do I even need to explain how fucked up this situation is, Penny? Are you that dense?"

"I get it, Xavier. Things are really confusing right now, but—"

"If you get it, then why are we even talking about this shit? I'm going to fire every single one of those assholes, your new HR policies be damned. I'm going to—"

"At least I'm trying, Xavier!" I cut him off.

He stopped mid-tirade, staring daggers at me.

"You don't think that I'm just as confused as you are? I loved Brad, Xavier, but when I agreed to marry him, when I agreed to help safeguard the company he loved so much, I thought that he would *be here with me*."

I watched some of the anger leave him, in its place a slow, creeping sadness.

"I want to make this work, Xavier. For Brad's sake as much as yours. But I need you to help me out here. What Henry said in that boardroom ..."

I saw his fists clench.

"...To be honest, he exposed you. Everyone could tell you didn't really care in there."

"Can you blame me??" he asked. "This wasn't even my deal. It was *yours*. If you can't even handle the small details yourself, then—"

"I can blame you, Xavier. This is your company. You're the CEO. Act like it."

I could see the anger bubbling up from within him again. I opened up a drawer at my desk and took out the photo I hoped would help calm him.

I held it out to him as a peace offering.

### XAVIER

I looked down at the photo Penny held in her hands.

A photo of my mom.

She looked radiant in a summer dress. Even the large sun hat couldn't shadow her brilliant smile.

"It was Brad's favorite photo of her," she said quietly. "He told me that whenever he was frustrated or unsure, he'd look at this photo and it would help calm him. Clear his head. Maybe it'll help you too."

It was a picture of Mom I'd never seen before. I took the photo in my hands, trying to find the peace that my dad seemed to find when he looked at it.

But all I could think of was how Penny seemed to know more about Dad than I did. How uneasy that made me feel.

Could I trust her?

Scheming women had burned me before. That was something I'd never lose, an instinct to protect what was mine from the liars and cheats in the world.

Sure, Angela had come along and proven me wrong, but that was Angela. That girl could turn a serial killer into a saint.

Dad had found Angela for me.

Surely I could trust his judgment one more time with Penny?

She reached out gingerly, resting her fingers on my hands, her touch featherlight.

"I'm not here to replace Amelia, Xavier. I never wanted to. I never could."

I pulled away from her touch, alarm bells going off in my mind.

It was the perfect thing she could say to gain my trust.

*Too perfect.*

It was a perfectly calculated move. One I refused to fall for.

"Fine," I said. "I'll work more with you. At the very least it'll give Henry less ammo to shoot me with."

Penny smiled, relief relaxing the tense arc of her shoulders.

Who knows, maybe she was being genuine. But I wouldn't bite. Not yet. I'd work along with her for now, but at the first sign that she was here to undermine me, I'd personally kick her out the front door.

*Dad's wishes be damned.*

### ANGELA

I dropped the bath bomb into the tub, watching it work its magic. The scent of roses rolled over me, soapy suds and rose petals floating to the surface of the water.

I lowered myself into the steamy water, sighing in satisfaction as the heat sunk into my exhausted bones. I let the suds wash over my skin, the water surrounding me in a soft embrace.

I closed my eyes, sinking deeper into the tub, blowing bubbles on the water's surface.

It had been a long, stressful day.

What better way than to unwind than a bubble bath?

I could still remember the days as a kid when I would grab all of the dish soap in the kitchen and fill the bathtub with it so I could make my own makeshift bubble baths. I'd splash around, giggling, until I started getting a rash.

Turns out dish soap isn't the greatest for your skin.

I laughed, remembering Dad's shocked face as he realized he'd need to go out and buy more dish soap because of his kook of a daughter.

Now here I was, in a penthouse apartment at the top of New York City, enjoying a luxurious bath bomb mixed with flowers and essential oils in a state-of-the-art Jacuzzi.

A far cry from dish soap, to be sure.

A long way from that little, suburban girl in the bathtub ...

I curled up into a ball, hugging my knees to my chest.

I was still me, wasn't I?

If I looked in a mirror, I'd still see plain old Angela.

So why did I feel like a stranger in my own skin?

I was saved from the spiral of my thoughts when the door to the bathroom opened.

Xavier stood there in the doorway, his eyes boring into mine.

"Welcome home." I smiled at him. "Join me?"

He closed the gap between us in three long strides, slipping into the tub before even taking his clothes off. Soapy water overflowed out of the Jacuzzi, spilling onto the bathroom floor.

"Xavier!" I gasped, laughing. "At least take your clothes off—"

His lips were on mine, suffocating the words before they could leave my mouth. I felt his hands wind around my waist, his tongue running along the bottom of my lip, begging for entry.

I moaned into the kiss, and he used the opportunity to intertwine his tongue with mine. This kiss deepened, so hot and heavy that it left me light-headed and gapping for air. A hot flush of excitement rushed through my body despite the hot water.

He began to trail kisses down my neck, onto my collarbone, and I wound my fingers into his hair, pushing up into him to feel as much of my body on his as I could.

There was something so hot about how he didn't even wait to take his clothes off before getting into the tub.

Like he just couldn't wait to get his hands on me ...

I felt my core clench with lust. My hands fumbled clumsily, trying to unbutton his dress shirt.

Xavier leaned back and ripped his shirt open, buttons flying about the bathroom as he revealed his chiseled chest and sculpted abs, glistening wet with soapy water.

*Oh my ...*

His lips were on mine once again, and I reached down into the water to stroke him through his pants. I somehow managed to get them off of him, and soon I felt his throbbing hardness pulsing between my thighs.

I burned with need, grinding against the length of him.

"Put it in," I moaned into his ear, biting his earlobe for good measure.

He didn't need any more encouragement.

I screamed as I felt him fill me to the brim, my nails scratching at his back. We quickly built up into a rhythm, my entire body singing with pleasure. The water sloshed back and forth around us, rose petals and suds spilling carelessly over the Jacuzzi.

Suddenly Xavier spun me around, bending me over the edge of the Jacuzzi as he took me from behind. I cried out again, my voice raw from screaming his name over and over.

"Xavier," I moaned. "Xavier!"

He grunted, and his pace getting more frantic and erratic. He was getting close, and so was I. I felt a sudden rush of panic, irrational and unwanted, swelling up inside of me.

Life felt like it was rushing forward at breakneck speeds, leaving me in the dust far, far behind.

Could I handle adding pregnancy to the mix?

"Come on my back," I said. "I want to feel your come all over me."

Xavier leaned over me, one hand reaching down to torture my clit as the other squeezed my nipple, all in rhythm with his thrusts. I was lost in a haze of pleasure, screaming as I came, my sex convulsing around his throbbing cock.

I heard him gasp, and I quickly pulled away from him, feeling his cock slip out of me. I quickly pushed back up into him, squeezing his cock in between my ass cheeks, grinding into him until I felt him spend himself all over my back.

I sighed, the relief I felt quickly replaced with guilt.

What was Xavier going to say?

### XAVIER

I groaned, riding out the wave of my orgasm, as I ground my cock into Angela's ass.

The view was nothing to complain about.

Seeing her ass flow into the curve of her hips and waist was keeping me rock solid.

Even if my body could keep going, I felt like the heat of the moment was gone. Why didn't she want me to come inside of her? Especially with our hopes of starting a family ...

The realization struck me so hard it felt like I had the wind knocked out of me.

She really didn't want to start a family.

I felt a stab of hurt slide itself into my heart like a dagger. Was her job really that important?

More important than me?

Don't get me wrong. I thought it was really fucking sexy that she wanted me to come on her ass. The way she said it, her voice usually so sweet and innocent, almost had me bursting right then and there.

I leaned back in the Jacuzzi, waiting for Angela to turn around and look at me.

She didn't.

I waited a moment longer for her to say something, but she stayed silent. It was like she was in court, and she was waiting for me to pass judgment on her.

I sighed, stepping out from the Jacuzzi. I started stripping out of my soaked clothes, starting up the shower.

"Xavier ..." she said.

"It's all right." I tried to smile, but I could tell I didn't have her fooled. "Things are really busy, right? Let's wash up and get some sleep."

I looked at her. Her expression was so apologetic it hurt me.

It kind of pissed me off, to be honest.

Was she pitying me?

I turned away from her and stepped into the shower. Even though I could still see her through the glass door, it felt like we'd never been further apart.