Guess Who's Back

Unknown
I wasn't good enough but Xavier Knight is?

Unknown
I have eyes everywhere.

Unknown
You can't run from me.

Unknown
Good luck, Ms. Carson.

Unknown
You'll need it.

ANGELA

I looked at the barrage of incoming texts on my phone, feeling my stomach lurch with each one. My phone was on the table, and Dustin tried peering over to see what was making my face pale.

"What is it?" he asked. We were at his coffee shop, and it was again empty.

I'd taken to stopping by the shop whenever I were for a jog, which had been often in the past couple of weeks. Running let me clear my head, and it gave me an escape. And escaping from that penthouse ...well, that was a blessing if I'd ever seen one.

Although, this morning, my jog hadn't been so much of an escape as it was uninterrupted time to think.

The second half of the dinner last night had gone fairly smoothly, with Xavier and I even managing to laugh a few times with each other.

When he took my hand to help me up from the chair as we were leaving, it felt almost natural. He'd helped me into his Bentley, and then, explaining that he was going to meet a friend for a drink nearby, had Marco drive me home.

The whole thing was more than civil. It was friendly, like he'd gotten to know me and now didn't hate me. Maybe he even liked me.

It would make everything so much easier if we could get along. The penthouse wouldn't feel so dangerous all the time, and maybe I'd even start to feel at home in the place I lived.

These were the thoughts I'd had on my run this morning—thoughts that were filled with possibility, that were filled with hope.

But now, here I was with Dustin, sitting at a table in the empty shop, drinking peppermint lattes and talking about some movie he'd seen last night.

And that was when the texts started coming through, when my attention shifted from Dustin's animated recap to my phone. Even though it was an unknown number, I knew exactly who they were from.

"Hello?" Dustin asked, waving his hand in front of my eyes. "Who is it?"

"It's nothing," I said.

"If it were nothing, you wouldn't look like you just saw the ghost of MJ. Spit it out," he pushed.

I looked at him, seeing the handsome face of a twenty-four-year-old barista looking back at me. His kind eyes seemed to remind me that, at the moment, with Eric not responding to me and my brothers constantly busy with the restaurant, he was the only friend I had.

"Okay. Fine. It's my old boss," I said, eyes downcast. I was picking my cuticles, trying to distract myself from the pain I was feeling on the inside.

"Who is he?"

"He was the head of Gelsa, this really important tech company. The original founder was from my town, Heller, so that's why the headquarters stayed there. I worked for him for a little over eleven months."

"Okay ...you're not giving me anything here, Angela."

I sighed. Then I looked at Dustin.

"He was ...he was trying to get me to ...to sleep with him. The entire time I was working there. At first it was inviting me to dinner. But when I kept rejecting him, he started making me go to private meetings in his office.

"She would try to touch my leg or my shoulder. And when I stopped going to those, it got worse. He got my personal cell number and would leave me voicemails, and he would follow me home from work. By the end, it was like I couldn't go grocery shopping without seeing him somewhere in the background. It was really bad."

"Jesus," he said, his hand flying to take mine. I looked at our hands, and he knew what I was thinking. "Oh, I know you're married, Angela. Don't worry. I'm not into you ...well, I'm not into women," he said. "But back to you."

And just like that, he had revealed something so private to me that I felt okay revealing my thing. He had put me at ease.

"I tried quitting. For a whole month, even though the job was amazing and I loved the work, I just couldn't deal with his constant harassment.

"I'd switched my numbers a few times, but he always managed to track me down. I started having panic attacks. I finally told my brothers what was going on, and they were the ones that gave me the strength to really quit."

"And then what?"

"I put in my resignation, and he called me into his office. I walked in and made sure the door was left open. He took the resignation letter from my hands, and he whispered, in the cruelest voice you can imagine, that I'd never work again.

He said once I left his company, that was it. He would make sure I was un-hire-able." I looked at Dustin, and I was sure he could see the pain in my eyes.

"He told me I shouldn't have said no."

"Swordman," Dustin said, and he squeezed my hands even harder, "you don't deserve that. Nobody deserves that, but especially you." He grabbed my phone and read the texts.

"Jesus. Have you gone to the police?"

I nodded. "When it started, and then again before I quit with my brothers. But they said I didn't have any proof. And besides, he's a huge, powerful CTO, and I'm just an inexperienced twenty-three-year-old. The odds were never in my favor."

"So you're just ignoring him?"

"He's messed up a lot of my life, but ...I can't really do anything. He has the power, the resources. He has to run out of town eventually, right?"

"Have you told Xavier? *He could probably help—*"

"No!" I shouted. Then I looked down again. "I don't want him to think I'm some damsel in distress. It's ...it's embarrassing."

Dustin looked at me with so much pity I thought I'd cry.

"No, stop that," he said, motioning to my mom. "None of that. Don't waste any tears on your creepy boss, that motherfucker. Do you understand me?"

I nodded.

"You know what? Screw this. We're having a day."

"What? What do you mean?" But Dustin was already up, cleaning up the counter and closing the cash register. He flipped the sign to the window.

"Dustin! Can you do that?"

He looked at me and shrugged. "I don't know. Probably not. But, hey, I just did."

And then he offered his hand to me, and I grabbed it, and he guided me out of the coffee shop, down the block, and into a train station.

When we got out at Prince Street, right in the heart of Soho, Dustin dragged me into a nail spa tucked into a basement space on the corner.

When we walked in, I was floored by how luxurious the spa looked on the inside; the outside had been so nondescript. Everything was marble: the floors, the manicure tables, and walls. All of the nail technicians were dressed in all white, and soft, melodic music played.

"Dustin!" a chorus of technicians called out when we walked in.

"As you can see, I'm a regular," he said to me before waving at them. "I come here whenever I'm having a shitty day," he explained. "Nothing a good pedicure can't fix, am I right?"

An energetic technician bounced over to us, grabbing one of each of our hands. "What today?" she asked.

"The works," Dustin said, without consulting me.

"The works!" the technician repeated, and she summoned another technician over. This one had long, braided hair, but was a little more shy.

She took my hand and guided me over to a pedicure station. I took my shoes off and got ready to take my mind off the horrors of my past.

By the time we were at our fourth store, I had almost forgotten about the text messages. We had gotten manicures and pedicures, a facial each, and then went shopping.

We hit three stores without stopping, where Dustin convinced me to buy two slinky dresses, a blazer, and the tightest pair of jeans I'd ever owned.

"Your ass looks like it could be in a Kanye video," he said, and then he took my card and swiped it himself. "I'm and your husband will thank me later."

My husband. But before I could dwell on Xavier, or have any time to feel more self-pity, Dustin was pulling me into store number five.

This was a hat store, where hats of all shapes and sizes lined the walls. They had only one thing in common: their exorbitant prices.

"Cool, I've wanted one of these for so long," Dustin exclaimed, checking out the bronze fedora on his head in the mirror.

"It looks ...good?" I offered.

"Yeah, it looks good. For eight hundred dollars, it better."

"Eight hundred dollars! For a hat?"

"It's not just a hat," he said, patting my shoulder. "It's a statement."

I couldn't help but laugh. There was something so nice about being around Dustin.

I didn't have to watch everything I said or look out for the meaning behind his comments. It was easy, like hanging out with Eric. He cared about me because I was me, not because of my new last name.

I saw him checking himself out in the mirror and was overcome with the desire to do something nice for him. He had taken my mind off my old boss, off Xavier, for a whole day.

He was a true friend when I didn't have anyone else to lean on.

"Hey, Dustin," I said, motioning for him to pass me the hat.

"You wanna try?"

I just shook my head and brought it to the cash register. The saleswoman looked at me skeptically, like she didn't believe I was actually going to pay for it. I was wearing my ratty Converse, after all.

But I handed the Knight black card over to her, and her mouth all but dropped.

"Overpaid, really?" Dustin asked, his mouth open.

I smiled at him, then turned to the salesperson. "If you could gift-wrap it, that'd be great."

"Of course," she managed, swiping the card and watching as I signed the receipt. Then she wrapped the hat into a beautiful little package, tying it with a pale blue bow.

She handed it to me, and I handed it to Dustin, just as a familiar face walked through the door.

It was Mrs. Graden, the wife of the Knights' very important business associate. She recognized me immediately, her face warm as she came over to an kiss my cheeks.

"Darling!" she exclaimed. Then she turned to Dustin, eyeing him, then eyeing me. She noticed the bag in his hand. "These hats," she said.

"Exactly," Dustin said, nodding profusely and offering his hand to her. "I'm Dustin. Dustin Stirling."

She let him shake her hand. "Jessica," she offered at a volume just above a whisper, and then turned back to me.

"We were just heading out," I said to her, hoping to remove myself from this situation as soon as possible.

It was fun being in this world when it was just me and Dustin, but having a real socialite there, one that knew me and my husband, took all the "dress-up game" fun out of it. And I felt nervous, for some reason I couldn't put my finger on.

"It was nice seeing you," I added, and she smiled warmly, her teeth shining brighter than a lamp. She air-kissed my cheeks one more time, and then, with a final, "Ciao," she turned her attention to a black hat on the far wall.

Dustin and I walked out of the store, and where I looked back through the window in the front, I was almost certain I saw Jessica watching us go.

XAVIER

My phone buzzed in my pocket.

I frowned as I got out of the car and pulled out my phone. I forgot to put it on silent. I always did before big business meetings. I was right outside of the meeting place and I needed the focus.

Still, I couldn't help but glance at the screen.

It was a text from Jessica. The wife of Graden, the business man I was about to meet. We were close to closing a huge deal.

I groaned.

Probably shouldn't ignore this then.

But when I looked at the messages I wished I had.

Jessica
Xavier! You need to keep a closer eye on your wife.

Jessica
I saw her shopping today.

Jessica
With another man.

Jessica
And they looked like they were very friendly with each other...