

## Beginning of the End

### DUSTIN

"And Angela had no idea?" Jake asked, his eyes twinkling.

I rolled my eyes. He seemed to love the drama going on between Angela and Zoe. It was the morning after their falling-out. I had spent the night at Jake's place, a lavish apartment in the heart of Midtown.

It wasn't quite as fuck-you-money as Xavier and Angela's apartment, but I'd rate it pretty high on that scale. The floor-to-ceiling windows could dim or brighten on command, affording a breathtaking view of New York, currently at sunrise.

"Or so she says," I replied. "I believe her, though. That girl really does have a heart of gold, but she can be oblivious to what's going on around her sometimes."

"And you're one of her closest friends, rotten to the core," he teased. "Someone needs to look out for her, I guess."

"Stuff it," I laughed, taking a feather pillow and smacking him across the face with it.

Jake pushed the fluffy weapon off, unperturbed. He rolled over on the king-sized mattress, dragging the silk sheets along with him. He propped himself up on his elbows, resting his chin in his hands as he stared at me.

"So? What will they do now?" he asked, enraptured.

My breath caught in my throat for a moment, the rising sun turning his brown curls a molten gold, copper flecks flashing in his vibrant green eyes.

"Helloooo," he called. "Earth to Dustin?"

I blinked.

"Uh, what?"

Jake frowned, a dimple on his cheek.

"Are you still half asleep? I asked what Angela and Zoe are —"

I interrupted him with a quick kiss.

I saw his eyes go blank for a moment, before he returned to the present, his face scrunching up into a scowl. He took the pillow and smacked me with it.

"No, you don't!" he said. "Don't distract me. Details! I want details!"

I laughed, marveling again at the fact that I'd found this magnificent little beast out in the wilds of New York City.

"Okay, okay." I sat up from the bed, stretching the sleep from my bones. "I have no idea what they're going to do now. Zoe quit. Angela is probably too ashamed to speak to her ever again, so she's going into the Gala alone."

Jake frowned, his scowl turning thoughtful.

"And you're okay with that?" he asked finally.

I sighed.

"No," I said. "No, I guess I'm not."

"I mean, it sounds like Angela just genuinely didn't know," Jake continued. "It's also kind of Zoe's fault for not saying anything, after all."

"You're right, Jake."

"As always," he replied smugly.

"Yeah, yeah." I ruffled his hair, much to his protest. "I'll go talk to Zoe, all right?"

"Angela helped you kick-start your career, didn't she?" he prodded. "It's the least you could do."

"I know, I know," I groaned. "I'm going already. And here I was looking forward to a lazy morning with you."

"You don't get to be lazy around me, Dustin. Now get your sweet butt out there. You've got a stack of pancakes waiting for you if you pull it off."

I got up, throwing some clothes on, the promise of pancakes giving a bounce in my step.

Jake watched me as I stood at the threshold of the apartment door.

"Extra syrup?" I confirmed.

"Mhm." I was rewarded with a brilliant smile.

I closed the door behind me, walking down the hall towards the elevator.

I had a relationship to save.

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**DUSTIN**  
where r u, girl?

**ZOE**  
In Central Park, near Bethesda Terrace.

**ZOE**  
Feeding some birds! 🐦

**DUSTIN**  
stay there, I wanna talk to u about something

**ZOE**  
Perf!

I walked into Central Park, looking for Zoe. She was easy to find.

She was sitting on a bench, feeding some pigeons with an old lady.

*God, how typically angelic can you be? This girl rivals even Angela.*

"Zoe!" I called.

She looked up and smiled at me, saying her goodbyes to the kindly-looking old lady.

"Hey Dustin, I was going to visit your cafe later today actually." She held out a suit bag.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It's the dress that Angela got me," she said. "I didn't mean to take it. I kind of just grabbed everything in a rush to get out of there and ... well, I don't need it anymore."

I shook my head, pushing the dress back to her.

"Dustin?" she said, confused.

"Keep it," I said. "We need to talk."

### XAVIER

I was at the end of my rope.

This PR team was either incompetent or very purposely wasting my time.

Both offenses deserved immediate termination of their contracts.

I'd spent the night here in my office at Knight Enterprises, putting out fire after fire. I'd downed who-knows-how-many cups of coffee by now, burning the midnight oil to get the situation under control.

*Is this what Dad had to do every time I fucked up?* I wondered.

If it was, then I didn't give him nearly enough credit. He was a champ, and I fucked up far more than my fair share.

I'd very deliberately locked myself away inside, refusing to see either Penny or Henry. I wasn't sure I could keep my cool if I saw either of their faces.

I had called Angela the night before, telling her I wouldn't be able to come home for the night.

"Oh," she said, the worry apparent even through the phone. "Do you want me to come by? I can bring you a change of clothes, at least."

I smiled. That was my beautiful, thoughtful wife. She wasn't even upset about being left alone for the night. Her first concern was my well-being. Just hearing her voice had calmed me a little.

"No, it's fine, don't worry about it. I'll be home tomorrow evening."

And on the long night went.

The next day had come and gone, and I was finally finishing up as the sun began its slow descent.

I was exhausted. I'd stolen a few moments of rest throughout the day—five minutes here, ten minutes there. Having a private shower in the building worked wonders as well. Still, I couldn't wait to be in my own bed, with Angela in my arms, this entire shit show behind me.

I was packing up to leave when the door to my office opened.

And there stood Penny.

As irritating as ever.

"Xavier, we need to talk ..."

There it was.

Her oh-so-sweet voice filled with concern. It sounded so fake. So *forced*.

A spike of fury rolled through me, the condescending tone in her voice had me seeing red.

"Bethany let you in, did she?" I asked.

I added my secretary to the list of people I would fire in the morning.

"It's not Bethany's fault," she added quickly, reading my thoughts. "Don't fire her, please. I'm the one who wouldn't leave her alone."

"I *specifically* told her not to let anyone in, and here you are. She can't even follow simple instructions. I'll fire whoever I damn well want to." I practically growled out the words. "I'm the fucking CEO."

"Well, you haven't exactly been the best example of a CEO ..." I could see Penny was gathering her courage, steeling herself for an argument.

I glared at her, daring her to keep going.

To my surprise, she did.

"I asked you to try and keep your cool at the airport, Xavier. I even warned you that they'd all be there...but you blew up. You blew up at everyone around you, consequences be damned."

"You don't know what you're talking about," I muttered.

"Don't I?" she challenged. "How many scandals is it going to take, Xavier? I know you're going through a lot, and I'm trying to help you through your problems, but—"

"Oh, I know *exactly* what my problem is." I slammed my fists down on the table, the mahogany groaning in protest.

Penny flinched, a flash of fear in her eyes.

But I couldn't stop myself. The anger surged upward like a volcano, and Penny was about to get a front-row seat to the eruption.

"My problem is all the *stupid fucking* people who leech money and fame off of me. My problem is all the fools in this company who don't know how to do their *fucking jobs*!"

I pounded at the desk again, a loud crack telling me that the wood had just broken.

"Is everyone in the fucking world blind but me? Am I the only person in this city with *any* fucking common sense?!"

My throat felt raw, exhaustion fueling my anger.

"My problem is Henry."

I glared at Penny, all of the rage and stress and venom pouring out of me.

"My problem is *you*."

Things would've been fine if Penny and Henry had just fucking disappeared from my life.

"What did I do?" Penny asked in a small voice. "What did I do to make you hate me so much?"

I opened my mouth to scream at her, but no words came out.

In my head, I knew I had no true reason to despise Penny. The logical side of me knew that she really wasn't a malicious person.

And that just pissed me off more. My anger was irrational. Nonsensical.

I knew that in my heart of hearts, there was a dark, ugly part of me that I was trying to suppress. A thought I was trying to keep buried.

But Penny kept pushing, dragging it closer and closer toward the surface ...

"Was loving Brad so much of a crime?" Her voice cracked, and she had to take a second to compose herself. "Is finding joy in working at Knight Enterprises so unforgivable?"

Penny shook her head, and I could see the threat of tears in her eyes.

*Don't you fucking cry, woman.*

"I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable Xavier, or if you felt like I was stepping out of line. But I'm honestly trying to ..."

"It's your fault that he's gone."

My words came out as a whisper, but they stopped Penny dead in her tracks.

She staggered backward as if I'd struck her, her face a mask of agony. My words were a dagger, and I'd stabbed it right through her heart.

The tears she'd been trying to hold back spilled over.

"If it weren't for you, he'd still be here," I said, my voice rising. The words rushed out of me now—that dark, ugly part of my soul rearing its horrid face.

Penny covered her mouth, trying to stifle the sob in her throat.

"He'd still be alive. We'd be happy. He'd have a chance to see his grandchild." My voice shook—whether from anger or from despair, I didn't know.

My mind returned to that final phone call I had with him, the accusations I'd thrown at him, the vitriol I'd hurled his way. The last words I'd spoken to my father were hateful and cruel. I felt something break inside of me.

"IT'S ALL YOUR FUCKING FAULT!" I screamed.

The words rang true.

But was I talking to Penny, or to myself?

"It's all your fault," I repeated, feeling empty.

Penny stumbled toward the door, tears streaming freely down her face.

I'd crossed a line, maybe one I could never come back from. She looked shell-shocked, as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

Honestly, neither could I.

She opened the door to my office, her foot halfway out when she stopped.

She looked back at me, and I expected her to be furious. I expected her to hate my guts, to despise the horrible person that I was.

Instead, I saw sadness.

Sadness, and a deep, deep hurt that cut me to the core.

"The board has been meeting without you." Her voice was a whisper. "I've been defending you, Xavier. Trying to convince them otherwise ...but after this ..."

She shook her head sadly. "I'm not sure if I have it in me to vouch for you anymore."

Penny looked me in the eye, and her next words should have shocked me. They should have surprised me, angered me, anything.

But I felt nothing.

"They're going to vote you out of being CEO."