Dead Candles

ANGELA

I took a few steps back, admiring my handiwork.

I bounced from candle to candle, lighting each one, humming a happy tune under my breath.

Home-cooked dinner?

The steak was sizzling hot, cooked medium rare, just the way Xavier liked it. Tortellini skewers drizzled with pesto decorated the plates, grilled prosciutto-wrapped peaches with burrata and basil paired with *Château Margaux* wine

Check.

his eyes would gaze into mine, and

He's here!

the air.

"Welcome home!" I smiled.

But worst of all were his eyes.

and bloodshot.

Had he been crying?

sat underneath the shimmering candlelight. Check.

Music?

I hit the play button on my remote, the surround sound speakers hidden throughout the apartment playing soft,

romantic lounge music. Check.

Black-laced lingerie?

I peeked into our bedroom, the floor and bed littered with rose petals, the most revealing lingerie I'd ever seen resting atop the silk sheets.

I blushed.

I skipped over to a mirror, checking my reflection. I wore a simple white dress, my hair coiffed as it tumbled over my shoulders. I wore minimal makeup, opting for lip balm over lipstick.

I felt more comfortable this way.

I glanced at the clock, my stomach flipping nervously. Xavier would be home any second now.

I can't wait to tell him the news. I'd planned it all perfectly in my mind.

The elevator doors would open, and the first thing Xavier would see was me in my dress, the tantalizing scent of a

He'd be over the moon, naturally, and he'd carry me off to our bedroom where he'd see the rose petals, the lingerie

I reached into one of the folded pockets in my dress, squeezing the little object tucked away inside.

I bit my lip in an attempt to keep my smile from splitting my face in two.

I walked forward to hug him, but stopped short, my smile freezing in place.

progress up the building, the anticipation unbearable.

over, maybe even tried pulling it out from the roots.

I stepped up to him, concern exploding within me.

I reached up with trembling hands, cupping his face.

"Xavier?" I said, my voice shaking. "You're scaring me."

"Come on," I said, gently tugging him inside of our apartment.

gently next to him, my arms wrapped around his waist.

I squeezed, trying to pour my love and support into him.

The candles began to burn low, the food going cold.

I placed my hand on his face, turning him so he'd look at me.

He looked at me, and I saw guilt wash over him.

Slowly.

Agonizingly slowly.

I couldn't take it anymore.

"What happened?"

"I'm sorry," he said.

aloud.

about get hurt?

Was he cheating on me?

My mind conjured up scenario after scenario.

"It's about the meeting at work," he began.

kind of partner was I to be relieved at that?

Judging by his reaction ...

offering what little comfort I could.

Anger began to build within me.

position meant to him?

This was Xavier's *legacy*.

And they took it all away from him.

"What if it was?" he asked, looking up at me.

"Then I'm gonna go kick his ass," I vowed.

Xavier laughed once, a short, bitter sound.

to break.

Penny ...

I had to be strong for both of us.

more than just a company to you."

"Now what?" I asked.

I felt Xavier tense in my arms.

What did that mean for our future?

It wasn't just Xavier and me anymore.

There was a little one to be taken care of.

How could I possibly tell him I was pregnant?

She was just doing what she thought was right."

now, and that realization felt like a knife in the gut.

The candles slowly burned out, leaving us sitting in the dark.

"I'm so sorry," I said.

"You can tell me anything." I gave him another encouraging squeeze.

home-cooked meal welcoming him home. We'd have a romantic candlelit dinner as he told me about his day, and after he'd been wined and dined, I'd tell him the surprise.

And ... I squealed, feeling like a little girl fussing over her first crush.

I can't wait to see his face when he finds out! A chime sounded, telling me that our elevator was on its way up.

Ding. The elevator swung open, my husband on the other side.

I bounced over to my spot in front of the elevator, my heart pounding in my throat. I watched the elevator's slow

I swayed, side to side, my energy bubbling over. I watched my dress twirl gently around me, the light fabric dancing in

Something was wrong. Xavier looked shell-shocked.

He was downright haggard, his tie crooked, his hair a frazzled mess as if he'd run his hands through his hair over and

Usually brimming with confidence and mischief, they looked dark. Dead. Devoid of emotion. They were rimmed red

He didn't respond. He just stood there, staring off into the distance, his mind far, far away.

"Xavier?" I panicked. My hands fussed over him, unsure of what to do. "Are you hurt? What's wrong?"

The elevator door began to close, bumping into Xavier before opening again. Still, he didn't move.

I watched him blink, a flicker of life, of recognition in his eyes as he finally looked at me.

We sat in silence for a while, and I thought maybe he'd speak up first. But the minutes bled by.

"Angela," he said, his voice coarse. It broke my heart, seeing him like this.

I led him into the living room, past the kitchen and our candlelit dinner. I sat him down on the couch. I took my place

"Xavier?" I tried. Nothing.

My stomach dropped, dread clutching at my heart. "For what?"

"I haven't been completely honest with you, Angela." He spoke slowly, like each word brought him physical pain to say

I cringed, preparing for the worst. What could he have lied about? Was there another disaster? Did someone we care

"The meeting was about my position at the company," he said. "They wanted to vote me out of being CEO." I gasped, horror washing over me.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him down so I could cradle him against my chest. I stroked his hair,

"They kicked me out, Angela." He sounded so defeated. So broken. "I lost Dad's company."

Relief flooded through me, followed immediately by shame. Whatever happened had clearly shaken Xavier. What

Xavier didn't reply. He just let me hold him. "I tried to apologize to everyone," he said eventually. "I tried to make amends..."

How could they have hurt Xavier like this? Sure, he'd made some mistakes, but couldn't they tell how much this

"Who did this?" I practically growled. "Was it Henry?" That brought some life back to Xavier.

It wasn't just about being the CEO of a company worth billions.

One of his strongest remaining connections to Brad.

"Maybe if I hadn't been such a dick to her. Maybe if I hadn't said so many horrible things ... She said it was *for the* best." Xavier buried his face into my chest. A small sob escaped my throat, and I choked it back.

"The worst part is, I don't even blame her," he whispered. "Dad asked her to help ensure the security of the company.

"But it's not right," I insisted. "Xavier, you're the only one who knows what's best for Knight Enterprises. It's so much

I just hugged him tighter. I'd never felt so helpless before. There was absolutely nothing I could do for Xavier right

The New York City lights filtered in through our windows, but the skyline didn't look beautiful to me at this moment.

"I didn't do a very good job of showing it," he lamented. "Especially towards Penny."

"I don't know," he replied. The words chilled me to the bone. "I don't know."

Xavier wasn't the CEO of Knight Enterprises anymore.

The positive pregnancy test burned a hole in my pocket.

"Partly," Xavier admitted. "But it's mostly on me this time, Angela. Even Penny wouldn't stick up for me."

My heart shattered for what felt like the hundredth time. I was surprised that there were even any itty-bitty pieces left

It looked distant. Cold. Unfeeling and uncaring. I felt a question bubbling up to my lips, and I couldn't stop it from escaping no matter how hard I tried.

I still loved Xavier. I'd stick with him no matter the circumstances, I had no doubt in my mind. My hand wandered to my stomach, resting over the little life that was inside of me.

Our future. Our family.

I gazed at Xavier, the love of my life. He looked so vulnerable, so broken in this moment.

How could I drop the weight of that responsibility on him now? I swallowed the secret, my announcement dying on my lips.

I couldn't tell him.

Still, that one question nagged at me, burning a hole in my heart. I closed my eyes, the weight of uncertainty crushing me like a lead weight.

Now what?

Not yet.