The Rift Between Us

ANGELA

I nodded as I braced myself, squeezing my eyes shut. I couldn't watch. The needle stabbed into me, and that horrible

"Hold still for me, okay? You'll only feel a slight prick."

sensation of drawn blood crept up my arm and into the base of my skull. "Okay, all done."

I sighed with relief.

I hated needles.

I opened my eyes and stared into the startling green eyes of Dr. Carmichael. He smiled at me encouragingly as he

Dr. Carmichael's a looker, she'd whispered mischievously. ~Try to remember that you're a married woman.~

taped a cotton ball to my arm. Looking at him now, I remembered Em's words before I'd left her in the waiting room.

She'd sniggered at me when I rolled my eyes, but she was right.

Dr. Leonard Carmichael was Em's prenatal doctor, so she'd recommended him to me enthusiastically. He was also *very* handsome.

He was very young for a doctor, with swept-back blond hair and a blinding smile. He had a well-defined jawline, and I could tell he had an athletic build even through his doctor's coat.

Still, as easy-on-the-eyes as he was, I felt nothing for him. I was married to the most amazing man on the planet, even if he was going through some hard times right now. Xavier ...

"I'm surprised your husband isn't here with you, Angela."

I was startled out of my thoughts, caught off guard at the eerie coincidence of Dr. Carmichael's statement. He smiled again, giving a pointed look at the ring around my finger.

"Usually the hopeful parents-to-be are here together."

"He would've loved to be here," I said, quick to come to Xavier's defense. "He's just been really busy lately." It also would've helped if he even knew you were here, I admonished myself. ~He doesn't even know that you could be

pregnant ...~

He stood up, collecting my blood sample.

Dr. Carmichael put a gentle hand on my arm. "I'm sure he would have," he said. "I didn't mean to assume anything."

"I'll walk this over to the lab now. We'll have the results for you in a few hours."

"Call me Leo," he flashed another smile at me.

I could see why Em had recommended him. He seemed level-headed and trustworthy. I couldn't be happier about

"Thanks, Leo."

having him as the doctor to help me through my potential pregnancy.

"Doesn't mean I can't look," she said, turning up her nose.

like a dying animal, but it could still get us from point A to point B.

I walked back into the waiting room to find Em wiggling her eyebrows at me.

"Well?" she asked. "We'll know for sure in a few hours, so we can head home," I said. "They'll give me a call with the results."

I couldn't exactly call Marco for a ride either. The Knight beamer would stick out like a sore thumb. So, I borrowed my dad's truck. It couldn't accelerate past 45 miles per hour, and the engine coughed and spluttered

to a hospital in Manhattan. It would be a fiasco if the press caught wind that I might be pregnant.

In a weird way, driving the old pickup was calming. Something about the busted radio, no AC, and manual, roll-down windows grounded me.

I found myself gripping the steering wheel a little harder. "I should."

"Angie, this is messed up." I could feel Em frowning at me, but I kept my eyes on the road. "I'm glad that you told me,

but you shouldn't keep this a secret. Not from Ken, and especially not from Xavier." Blood rushed into my face, my cheeks going a bright red.

Em scoffed.

"It's not that simple," I said. "It was never about the money."

I sighed, feeling a knot in my chest.

Em was right, of course.

He had to. *Right?*

could hardly look after himself.

rich."

when he was stripped of his position. It had been a month, and I'd be hard-pressed to say that he was doing any better ...

It was true. Xavier's title as CEO meant so much more to him than his paycheck. It was like he'd lost a part of himself

"Sure, it sucks that Xavier lost his job, but he needs to get his shit together. I mean, you guys are *still* filthy, stinking

"He's got to shape up, Angie. Not just for your sake or his, but for the baby's."

"He'll get better," I said.

Xavier was the love of my life, and the father of our future children. But right now, he was in no state to be a dad. He

My hand drifted down to my stomach. "He'll get better," I repeated.

knuckles against the wooden bar, and the gruff-looking bartender glared at me. "Another," I slurred.

The man reached below the bar and grabbed an unlabeled bottle, pouring more amber liquid lazily into my cup. It

sloshed around in my glass, some of it spilling onto the countertop. I pressed my finger onto the darkening wood,

looking bastards keeping to themselves in opposite corners, staring darkly into their drinks. A single flickering light bulb lit the space. Splintered wooden tables were surrounded by lopsided bar stools that

I'd found a real shit hole.

Perfect.

Good man.

"Ay, fuck you too, buddy."

looked like they were scavenged from a dump.

No damn reporters would find me in this place.

Recently, I'd made the fucking headlines again.

could demand another drink, the bartender was already filling my cup.

hooked nose that looked like it had been broken way too many times.

toothed grin peeking out from his tangle of facial hair.

"Not a drop wasted," I muttered.

licking what little whiskey I could off of my finger.

Knight Enterprises Without A Knight!

The floors were sticky, and there was so much marker graffiti on the walls that I couldn't tell their original color.

I've got another headline for you, I thought to myself. I raised a middle finger up in the air to no one and to everyone.

I turned to see one of the patrons glaring at me, beer dripping off of his scraggly beard. He had beady eyes and a

"What, you wanna go?" His voice sounded like he had swallowed an ashtray. He turned his nose up at me, a gap-

"Take it out back," the bartender droned, sounding absolutely bored. He must've been used to this. I looked around the

I'd been kicked out of my own fucking company.

Angela was working while I stayed home.

Rhetorical question, obviously.

I knew why I was here.

I'd lost my birthright.

Jobless.

Useless.

So, I drank.

I didn't feel angry when I drank.

I didn't feel anything.

It'd been a month since. The first week I stayed in my penthouse, cooped up and feeling sorry for myself like a schmuck. I stayed at home while Angela went out, planning for her next event.

helped. I was just so fucking angry.

I'd found peace and quiet, even if it was in this trash heap of a bar.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I didn't need to look at it to know who was calling.

Just thinking her name sent pain stabbing into my heart like a knife. She was probably worried sick.

Angela.

I kicked the door open, the rusty hinges groaning in protest before I stumbled out into the cold night air. I looked left and right, my mind in a fog. Fuck, which way was home again?

We need to talk.

"Thanks, Doc," I said. I smiled back. He was really friendly.

"I know that," Em pressed. "I'm talking about the doctor! Is he a hottie or what?" I rolled my eyes, laughing at her absurdity. "You do know that *you're* married, too. To my brother, no less!"

Em slid into the seat next to me, and we chugged our way down the road back to Dad's house. "So, are you finally going to tell everyone if it's official?" Em asked.

We walked outside of the New Jersey clinic, my dad's old pickup waiting for us in the parking lot. I couldn't risk going

"I know, Em, but I just need a little time to sort myself out before I tell Dad. And Xavier hasn't exactly been in a healthy state of mind lately ..."

now, but we both know you're pregnant." I nodded. I felt it in my bones—that little life inside of me.

"Fine, whatever," Em said. "But he's probably going to be a dad soon. Sure, we're waiting for the official results right

I pictured our penthouse. Lately, it was mostly dark and empty. I doubted that Xavier would be home. He was probably somewhere out in the city, at the bottom of a bottle. My heart ached.

XAVIER I scowled at the empty whiskey glass. How the hell was this thing already empty? I just ordered it. I rapped my

I looked around at the dingy bar. It was mostly empty, which was good, because the place was cramped as hell. There were only one or two sorry-

Billionaire's Blunder Costs Him His Company! Xavier Knight—A Fall From Grace.

I downed my drink in one go, hoping the whiskey would douse out the angry fire burning in my stomach. Before I

room. A little brawl wouldn't have made this place any worse for the wear. I turned back to my drink, ignoring that homeless Popeye. "Yeah, that's what I thought," the bastard crowed. I downed my drink again, watching glassy-eyed as the bartender automatically filled it. How the fuck did I end up here?

I couldn't stand it. How the fuck could I just sit there? How pathetic was I as a husband? As a man?

I didn't know what to do with myself. I pumped some iron, I ran fucking marathons around the city, but nothing

I drowned myself in alcohol until my mind went blank, until the angry voices in my head were silenced.

You don't deserve her. I dragged myself to my feet, throwing a wad of bills onto the counter.

"Keep the change," I muttered.

I stumbled bleary-eyed through the street when my phone vibrated again. I read the text from Angela, four little words sending me into a spiral of guilt: