

New Territory

ANGELA

Come on. Pick up. Please.

"Hello?" she finally answered.

"Hi, Em," I said, holding my breath for her reaction. It'd been a couple weeks since we'd last spoken. Not because I hadn't been trying to reach her—I must've sent her ten texts a week—but because she had had no interest in responding.

It wasn't like the other times where we'd gotten in stupid fights and one of us was mad, but then we made up the next day and laughed about it over chocolate chip cookies.

No, this was much different. This didn't feel like Em was mad. It felt like she was ...over it. Over me.

She was waiting for me to say something. To prove there was a point for me to be calling, even after her clear avoidance of my earlier attempts.

I wished I was better at this stuff.

You know the saying that over-excited parents say about their fast-talking kids? How they'd be able to sell ice to a polar bear, or something like that?

Well, I never had that ability.

Lucas, sure. He was always talking his way out of trouble, with teachers and Dad and everyone else.

But me, I had no safety net. I couldn't rely on myself to spin a web of excuses at the drop of a hat. As a result, I became very good at following rules.

If you don't get in trouble, you don't have any need to get yourself out of it.

But now, here I was, my mind swimming in circles. Where could I even begin? How could I verbalize how much I wanted my best friend back, without explaining anything else?

"Em, listen ...," I started, and then had an urge very similar to the one I used to get as a kid, when Lucas was talking his way through an animated story and I was watching Dad's face, not buying it.

No, the neighbor didn't kick the soccer ball through Dad's truck window. And so I'd spit out the truth.

"Em, Dad's sick," I said, thinking that was a good place to start.

"I know, Angie," she said, her voice softer. "Lucas's been updating me." Lucas? But that slipped out of my mind as fast as it entered because I was already gearing up for what I was going to say next.

"His bills, his treatments ...there was no way." I was choking back tears, surprised at how disgusting the whole thing sounded when I said it aloud.

"There was no way we'd be able to afford it."

"But you're married to a Knight for Christ's sake," she said, and then halted immediately. Like she was getting it.

I took a deep breath.

"I met Brad Knight without knowing who he was. He looked so ...said. He was all by himself on a park bench the day I found out I'd made it to the next round of interviews, and I was handing out those lilies in the park. I asked if he was okay. We talked, very briefly, and I kind of forgot about him. But he tracked me down, Em, right after dad had the first stroke. And he ...he proposed this ...arrangement."

"Arrangement?"

"If I helped him fix his son's heart, he'd help me fix my dad's health."

I heard a sharp inhale of breath through the phone.

"I know. I know. But there's Dad, Em, and he's all alone in the hospital bed. There are these tubes ...sticking out of him. And he's so frail." I started to sob.

"Shhh, Angie, shh. It's okay." And I could almost feel her stroking my hair.

I squeezed my eyes shut. "I hate him, Em."

"Your dad?"

"Xavier. He's awful. He's so cruel to me. He thinks I married him for his money, or to be a Knight. He has no idea about Dad."

"Why don't you tell him?"

"It's against the rules. I signed this contract with Brad—"

"A contract?"

"He's a billionaire. I'm sure he makes everyone around him sign contracts."

"That's true." Em laughed. And I felt relief flood my body. Maybe she was finally understanding. "So if you can't tell him, you also can't ..."

"Tell you." I finished. "But I had to. I couldn't keep ...keep lying about it. I'm so miserable, Em. So lonely. Everyone thinks I'm this monster who would marry for money, and I know I shouldn't care about what people think, but it's hard to be so hated by everyone, especially when your naked upper-half is flashed on every blog—"

"Yeah, can I ask about that?"

"Mr. Lemor," I said, and she again gasped.

"NO!"

"Yes."

"That little bastard," she growled. "But how?"

"I have no idea," I sighed. I'd thought about it so much but still couldn't figure it out. "It was taken in the gym at Gelsa. In the locker room."

"You went to the cops, right?"

"Brad made me promise I'd let him handle it. I'm actually supposed to be on lockdown in the penthouse now. Having paparazzi or whatever take a photo of me outside right now would just make it worse. For the Knights and for me."

"You're on lockdown?"

"It's for my safety."

"Do you hear yourself, Angie? Get up. Get dressed," Em instructed. "I'll be outside in thirty."

"What?"

"You heard me. Put your ass in something cute."

"Em, it's not a good idea. I don't want any more gossip columns talking about me. Can you just come over? I can make us cookies, chocolate chip like we used to—"

"Angela. You don't need a chocolate chip cookie. You need a martini. Now, repeat after me: I am leaving lockdown."

"I am leaving lockdown," I said, trying to sound more convinced than I felt. But if it meant Em was back in my life, I guess I was going to drink the martini.

Em picked me up in a cab, and we sped downtown. We were weaving our way through the Meatpacking District when Em smacked the passenger seat in front of her.

"Here, sir! This is great!"

She gave the driver cash and pulled me out of the car. We were standing in front of Iceberg, the city's newest and hottest club. The line looked like it was a mile long, and everyone in it was scantily dressed and beautiful.

I turned to Em. "We can't go in there!"

"Not only can we"—she smiled at me wickedly—"but we are."

"But, Em! Look at them." I looked at the line, then down to my own outfit.

Sure, I was in my new jeans, the ones that Dustin claimed 'made my ass a centerpiece,' but that wasn't enough to turn me into them.

She grabbed me by the shoulders and looked me right in the eye. "Angela, you need this. We need this. So take my hand and let me use your new last name to get us into this club."

There was something so natural about following Em's directions, like my mind had just rebound back to high school.

She always had a way of knowing what was best for me, even when it felt like the scariest decision I could make.

So as her eyebrows rose, waiting for my okay, I gave her a swift nod. And just like that, she took my hand and walked us past the beautiful people, up to the door.

XAVIER

You'd have thought, in this day and age, people wouldn't be so interested in seeing a pair of tits. But for the past twenty-four hours, the only conversation-starters I'd heard were oriented, directly or indirectly, around the ones that belonged to my wife.

The ones plastered all over the internet, the ones talked about in every press outlet, gossip or not.

Because the picture was real, and real pictures don't lie.

Unlike her.

She put on that "I'm so classy" act, the one that made you feel almost sorry for her. She dropped Harvard's name like that was enough to justify all the shady shit she did. Like just because she had an ivy-league degree, she could gold-dig in whatever circles she pleased.

And cause hell to run loose on the unlucky sanofabitch she was bound to.

So, yeah, work today wasn't great.

Even my colleagues couldn't help themselves. They kept asking me if I was 'abreast' of different situations. One of their assistants tried to join in, and I fired his ass.

It was best not to test a man who had to deal with his wife's leaked nudes.

When I'd spoken to my father, he said he'd talked to Angela and she was clear with everything, that she was not to talk to press, that we'd be handling everything from PR to legal. And that she was to remain in the penthouse until the story died down.

While the plan annoyed me even more at first, thinking about how I'd run into the girl more often if she was locked inside the condo than if she had free rein of the city, I realized my reputation had to come above my personal space.

If it came to her embarrassing me in public or giving up a little breathing room, the choice was pretty clear.

Marco opened the car door for me in front of my building, and I got out, strolling through the lobby and into the elevator. I wondered if I should give her another stern talking to, or if my dad had covered all the bases.

Why not? I thought. Better to have her scared than think she could get away with something like this again.

That was the problem with girls. Even the ones that looked trustworthy and normal always had something up their sleeve.

It was the ones that you didn't suspect who were the ones you should.

The doors opened, and I walked into the penthouse.

"ANGELA!" I called out. There was no response. I walked straight to her bedroom, pounding on the door. "ANGELA," I yelled again, holding my ear up to the door.

Even if she'd fallen asleep at 9 p.m., there was no way she could've stayed asleep through my volume.

"She out," Lucille said, scurrying through the hall to me.

"What?" I snapped, then felt bad. Lucille didn't deserve my anger. "Sorry, but ...what?"

"She left." Lucille shrugged. "You want supper?"

"No!" Then I caught myself again. "No, that's all right." And then I was storming back through the hallway to the elevator. I was going to find my wife.

Xavier
WHERE ARE U

Xavier
UR SUPPOSED TO BE IN THE PH

Xavier
THIS IS NOT FUNNY

Xavier
ANSWER ME!!!

ANGELA

I took the vibrating phone out of my back pocket and, seeing it was Xavier, put it right back in. I was feeling good and didn't need him bringing me back down.

I took another sip of the Jack and Coke Em had passed me, surprised at how sweet it was and how smoothly it went down.

"It's so good!" I squealed to Em.

"What?" she asked, her hand to her ear. It was crazy loud in here.

The DJ was playing something called trap music, and the beat pulsated through the entire club. We were in the VIP section.

As soon as Em mentioned my last name, the doorman ushered us through, right to the closed-off area upstairs. We had our own bar, our own bathrooms, and even a 'concierger,' should we need anything at all.

I turned to Em quizzically when the concierge said that last part to us upon our arrival, but she just waved me off.

"Don't worry about it," she said, in a way that made me think he was referring to drugs or other illicit things.

But now, instead of bothering to repeat myself again, I just took another sip of the delicious drink. Em was dancing, her hips swaying in time to the rhytm of the song.

She looked so effortless, so graceful, and I wished I could be more like her. More in the moment. I took another sip, and another, until nothing more came out of the straw.

I squinted down at the glass, realizing it was empty.

I needed more. I was feeling good for the first time in a long time, and I didn't want it to end.

"I'm gonna ...," I said to Em, and then was motioning to the bar, but just then, I felt someone grab my waist.

"Need a refill?"

I turned around to see who was talking to me, and I'm pretty sure that I audibly gasped.

He was beautiful, like some sort of Hercules. Golden hair, emerald-green eyes, tall and muscular. He wore a crisp white shirt underneath a black jacket, and carried the confidence of someone who knew they resembled a Greek god.

"I'm Carrey. Oliver Carrey," he said as he kissed my cheek.

I giggled. "I'm Angela."

"Shall we?" he said, and I nodded, so he laced his arm through mine and guided me to the bar. I shot a look back at Em, but she was still dancing.

I smiled, feeling in the moment for the first time.

Xavier's face flashed into my mind, but I pushed it away just as quickly.

He was always so mean to me. So cruel and untrusting...

I was here to have a good time after a stressful day. What was wrong with that? So what if I talked to a hot guy?

I felt his hand rest on the small of my back as he led me towards the bar. I looked up at him and he flashed me a brilliant smile.

What if this doesn't stop at just talking? a small voice in my head whispered.