

Three's a Crowd

XAVIER

Not only was she ignoring the lockdown rule but she was also ignoring my texts. It took a fucking acquaintance of mine seeing her at Iceberg for me to figure out where the hell she was.

By the time I pulled up, I felt like the fucking Hulk.

I was surprised my Calvin Klein button-down hadn't ripped right off me.

I jumped out of the Town Car before Marco could get the door open and walked right up to the rope, barely waiting for the door guy to release it before I stormed through.

I wasn't interested in wasting any more time.

I marched up the stairs to the VIP section, where the socialite I barely knew, the one not hot enough to sleep with, had told me she'd seen her. I looked around, trying to squint through the darkness.

I hated being in clubs sober. It was like being on a battleground with no adrenaline.

You started questioning all of it.

I was walking through writhing bodies, pushing off any hands that tried to grab me. I wasn't here to socialize—that much I made clear. Then, a familiar-looking girl caught my eye, sitting at a table with what looked to be professional athletes.

Football, maybe. She had dark hair with bangs, pale skin, and what seemed to be a permanent smile on her face.

She'd definitely been in the first pew at the wedding.

I walked right up to the table and tapped her on the shoulder. "Angela?" I asked.

"What?"

"ANGELA!"

She heard me that time, and it looked like she recognized me too. She just rolled her eyes and shrugged her shoulders then went back to the football players' conversation.

I shook my head and let out a growl, but the music drowned it out.

I kept looking. Kept weaving through dresses and suits, high heels and loafers, until I found myself at the bar. I was about to order a drink when I saw blonde hair out of the corner of my eye.

I whipped my head toward it, and there she was.

My beloved wife.

Laughing with another man.

I couldn't explain the rage to you if I tried. It was all-consuming, like a betrayal. Not because she was flirting with a man, of course.

I couldn't give a fuck what this girl did with other men.

I wasn't jealous.

No, it was about respect. It was about her not embarrassing me at the most exclusive club in the city, the one that she wouldn't have been allowed into had she not thrown my name out at the door.

"ANGELA."

She turned immediately, her flushed face going pale.

"Let's go," I said, putting her nearly empty drink on the bar counter and grabbing her shoulder.

"No," she whimpered.

"Hey, man." The blond dude she was with put his hand on my arm. "The girl doesn't wanna leave yet."

"Take your fucking hand off me, man," I said, almost hoping I'd get to fight.

No, scratch that. I had to think about my image. I turned back to Angela. "We are going. Now."

"But I'm having FUN!" she said, sounding like a goddamn child.

Before she could say anything else to piss me off, I took her hand and grasped it as tight as I could without hurting her, leading her out of the room, down the stairs, and onto the sidewalk.

"But—" she started.

"Get in," I said, pointing to the door Marco held open for her.

"No," she said, her arms crossed. "If I have to go, I want to walk."

"You wanna walk? It's November."

"I don't care," she said. I hadn't heard this type of defiance in her voice before. Not wanting to make a scene in the middle of Meatpacking, I let her have her way.

"Fine," I snapped. "I'm coming with you."

She took off down the street, and I had to chase after her. By the time we were at 32nd, we still hadn't exchanged a word.

And her eyes kept closing. It looked like she was going to fall asleep mid-step.

Xavier
33rd and 6th

Marco
On my way

Marco came up 6th Avenue with perfect timing, and as soon as she saw the car, she slid inside.

We'd been riding in silence for a few minutes when she looked at me.

"Why are you so mean to me?" she asked, in a voice that sounded so genuine it caught me off-guard.

"What?"

"Why are you so mean to me?" she repeated. It wasn't a question she meant as an insult. She just wanted to know.

I looked back at the woman sitting beside me, and she didn't look like the type of girl I'd envisioned her to be.

She looked young, and innocent, like she hadn't seen all that much of the world yet.

I found myself softening. Maybe it was because she was drunk and wouldn't remember anything tomorrow, or maybe it was because saying it out loud was actually kind of therapeutic.

But, in either case, I gave her an answer.

"I don't trust people."

"Why?"

"I have in the past. And it always ends up ...being a mistake."

"You don't deserve that," she said, her words so sweetly simple.

"I would've given myself to her," I said. I stared ahead, letting the truth come out. "I would've given her it all. But she she had other ideas." ...

Then I felt a cold hand cover mine on the seat. I flinched, looking down and seeing the hand of my wife. When I looked at her face, I saw her gazing out the window.

It was like she knew to give me space, to let me have a moment to myself.

When we pulled up to the building, I waved Marco off and helped her out of the car myself. She had somehow gotten drunker since we'd left the club, and she was stumbling all over the place.

Rather than wait for her to fall, I decided to take matters into my own hands and swept her up into my arms. I carried her like a child through the lobby and sat her down on the bench once we were in the elevator.

When the doors opened, I again lifted her up and walked her to her bedroom, opening the door and dropping her onto the bed. She was out for the count, her eyes closed and her mouth slightly ajar.

She looked peaceful, and I didn't want to wake her up. If she wakes up, someone's gonna have to deal with her vomiting.

So I left her like that, head on the pillow, shoes still on, and I went to pour myself a goddamn drink.

ANGELA

I woke up with a start, hearing the chirping birds right outside my window. My head was pounding.

What time was it?

Why was the window open?

Why did it feel like I was wearing shoes?

I slowly opened my eyes, wincing at the light that filled my vision. After a moment of adjusting, I slowly tilted my head down until I was looking at my body.

It appeared I was, indeed, still wearing my shoes. And my jeans and my camisole and my blazer, and probably the full face of makeup that I'd wore out.

Ah. It was all coming back to me.

Em and I, at the Iceberg. The sweet, sweet cocktails. The mysteriously gorgeous man ...

And Xavier. Coming to find me, ordering me out of the club. Allowing me to walk and, when I couldn't walk anymore, asking Marco to pick us up.

The way he looked at me in the Town Car, like he was really seeing me for the first time. And the way he talked about the woman that had hurt him.

He was so honest, so raw. I didn't remember much after that, but I'd somehow made it to my bed safe and sound.

Assuming that I didn't get here by myself, which was more than likely, given how intoxicated I was—which was a whole other issue—Xavier had gotten me into bed and left me clothed.

I'm sure if he'd wanted to, he could've tried ... or done ... his worst, like I was one of his other girls.

But he hadn't. It felt like I was seeing a different side to Xavier, the side that Brad had promised me existed.

I climbed out of bed and, hearing voices in the hall, opened my door. I was walking through the hallway with every intention of thanking Xavier when he heard my footsteps and turned around. He was fuming.

"...And YOU!" he bellowed, and I instinctively covered my ears. That was way louder than my hangover could take. "You had me running around like your goddamn BABYSITTER all night! It is NOT my job to take care of you."

"I was just coming to say thank you," I meagerly got out. That didn't help. Marco, who'd been the recipient of his screams before I entered the room, just looked at his feet.

"I don't need your THANK YOU! I NEED MY WIFE TO NOT RUN AROUND NEW YORK CITY EMBARRASSING ME EVERY FUCKING DAY. What is so complicated about that?"

I was shaking now, willing myself not to cry.

I was wrong.

I knew exactly who Xavier was.

I was staring straight ahead, trying not to look at him directly, when he stepped closer to me. This time he spoke at a normal volume, in a softer voice, "Is it not enough for you to take my money and my name? You need to take my image and stomp it out, too?"

There was so much venom in his voice I thought it might actually poison me. So I ran to the elevator, staving my sob's off until the doors shut behind me and I could cry in peace.

When they opened again in the lobby, I wiped my wet cheeks and hurried through. Then I was outside, on the sidewalk, and I started walking.

And then I found myself outside the door to Dustin's coffee shop, pulling it open before I could convince myself not to. It was empty, like always.

When Dustin saw me, his expression turned dark. "I thought you weren't allowed to talk to the likes of me," he said.

"Dustin, it wasn't about you. It was because Xavier's colleague's wife saw me shopping with another man, and in his weird elite circle, that's bad. I'm sorry, okay? But it wasn't about you. It was about punishing me. Taking my only friend away."

He softened then eyed me with a serious look.

"You know, when you first came into the shop, I knew who you were. And I didn't care about being your friend. I just thought hanging around you would get me some ...publicity."

The color drained from my face. "Publicity?"

He looked down. "I'm not proud of it. But I thought anyone that's married to Xavier Knight has got to be a prick. So what's wrong with using someone that deserves it? But then ..."

"You were trying to use me because of my last name?" Xavier was right.

"Right at the start, yes. But it changed! Believe me, I didn't give a shit about publicity when we were really hanging out. Well, that's a lie. Of course I cared about publicity. But your friendship was more important to me ..."

My mind was tumbling. "Dustin, stop. Publicity for what?"

"My art," he said quietly. I'd never heard him say a word so quietly in his life.

"Your art?"

"I'm an artist. A struggling one, that's why I work here. I didn't want to hurt anyone, most of all you. I just thought people want to know what the wife of Xavier Knight is doing. Who she's hanging out with. So if they saw me, they'd be interested in seeing my work." ...

I looked at Dustin. I knew what it was like to talk yourself into using someone for a greater good.

And he was being honest with me now. His eyes looked genuine. And helping people always gave me an endorphin rush.

"If you had told me that at the beginning, I would've helped you."

"I know that now," he said. "But before I thought you were just another money-hungry ditz. No offense."

"Show me."

"Show you what?"

"A piece of your art."

Dustin pulled his phone out and swiped until he found a picture of a painting he'd done. It was good. Good enough to have me opening my mouth before I could think the words through.

"If you promise me no more lies, then I'll help you."

"Are you serious?" he asked, shocked. I nodded before I had time to consider how I could help, or if it was the smart thing to do.

Before Xavier's face filled my mind and I knew I'd have someone else to answer to.

I was on my way back to the penthouse when my phone rang. It was Brad.

"Hello?"

"Hi Angela, darling. There's something I'd like to speak with you about. Can you meet me at the Plaza?"

"Sure thing," I said. At least now I knew the Plaza wasn't an actual plaza. "What about?"

"It's about Mr. Lemor," Brad said, his voice cold.

My blood turned to ice.

"We have a way to take him down," Brad went on. "And we need your help."