

More Than a Show

Dustin
Im freaking out

Dustin
Doors open in 2

Dustin
Where r u

ANGELA

I saw my phone light up with new messages and ran over to the desk, where it was lying. I knew I was running late, which was unlike me.

But after the stress of the conversation with Xavier in his office, I'd needed something to relax me, so I'd taken a hot bath to try to exfoliate my anxiety away.

I hurried to climb into the little black dress I'd bought with Dustin, the only thing I'd found in the store myself. It was beautiful in its simplicity: a classic A-line skirt with a fitted top and a conservative neckline.

Then I put a pair of ballet flats on and ran from the penthouse, luckily finding a cab right outside.

I'd forgotten to order a Town Car when I was upstairs and didn't have the time to take the subway, so taxi it was.

By the time I got to SoHo 149, I was fifteen minutes late. But when I glanced through the floor-to-ceiling storefront windows, my guilt dissipated. The place was packed.

I paid the cab driver and hopped out, walking over to the security guard by the door. It was a nice fall evening, and the nighttime sky created the perfect backdrop for the well-lit party happening inside.

"Hi! I'm a friend of Dustin's," I exclaimed. The security guard just eyed me, holding his clipboard.

"Name?"

"Angela. Angela Knight." He moved aside immediately, opening the door for me as he did. As soon as I stepped through the door, I was hit with the warmth of a packed room.

Well-dressed and interesting-looking people moved about the gallery, holding glasses of wine and laughing with each other. The paintings hung on the walls, and groups of people stood in front of each, pointing and appreciating.

My heart soared. I couldn't believe we'd pulled it off. He'd pulled it off. I was so happy for him, so proud.

"Angela! Over here," I heard Dustin's voice from across the gallery. I turned and found him, clad in an army-green blazer and black shiny pants, by the bar in the corner. He was talking to an older man in glasses. I walked over to them.

"Hi!" I exclaimed, kissing his cheek. "This is amazing!"

"I know, right!" he said, clearly giddy. "Angela, this is Mr. Sorento. Mr. Sorento, meet Angela Knight."

"Hi," I said, shaking Mr. Sorento's hand.

"Lovely to meet you."

"Mr. Sorento is the manager of the Garage in Tribeca."

"Oh?" I said, trying to be nonchalant about the fact that I had no idea what that was. Suddenly, a stylish woman in a leather jacket and coral lipstick appeared behind Dustin.

"Mr. Stirling, Tina Carlyle of the *Times*. I was hoping I'd get a word with—" Dustin shot me an ohmygodohmygod look and then turned to the woman.

"Tina. Darling. I was thinking you'd never ask," he said, his charm at level 1,000 as he guided her by the elbow to a quieter part of the room.

That left Mr. Sorento and me by the bar. My introverted self willed me to say goodbye and take in the artwork alone, but there was something inspiring about seeing Dustin get out of his comfort zone and do so well.

Maybe it was time for me to do the same. So I took a deep breath and turned back to the man before me.

"Mr. Sorento, tell me about the Garage?"

It turned out the Garage was the up-and-comer of modern art galleries in New York. It wasn't quite as established as Bird in Williamsburg or The Juniper on the Upper East Side, but it was getting steady attention from press and buyers anyway.

Mr. Sorento was the manager, which meant he was in charge of finding the art that the gallery brought in. So it was a pretty big deal that he was here at Dustin's showing, and an even bigger deal that he'd actively sought out Dustin to speak to.

He said that Dustin had talked to him about his inspiration for painting and his difficult childhood and he'd felt drawn to him for both explanations.

I was overjoyed for my friend. Sure, I knew we'd pack the gallery—thanks to my husband—but I had no idea that we'd get such a positive response from industry people.

"How'd you find him?" Mr. Sorento asked me.

"What do you mean?"

"Dustin," he said, and I thought back to the day we'd met at the coffee shop.

"I was out jogging in the park, and I stopped for a coffee. Dustin was working at this cute little coffee shop, and we started talking," I said, giving him the whole story. Mr. Sorento was nodding.

"You have such an eye," he said, and now I understood. He thought I did what he did. He thought I found artists and gave them opportunities.

"Oh, I'm not in the business. Dustin's just a friend of mine," I explained, and Mr. Sorento eyed me quizzically.

"You were friends before you saw his art?" I nodded. Mr. Sorento downed his wine and shrugged.

"I guess that's smart. Dustin's a rare bird, but usually the better the art, the worse the friend. It was nice to meet you, Mrs. Knight," he said, giving my elbow a squeeze before turning and finding a new group to talk to.

It turned out Mr. Sorento's notion of me as a talent recruiter or manager or whatever the job title was wasn't all that novel.

Over the course of the evening, I talked to a couple other gallery managers, some press critics, and many serious buyers.

They'd all commended me for a job well done, as if Dustin's artwork was a direct result of my initiative. While I had wanted a job I could be good at, to make me feel competent and strong, this wasn't exactly what I'd had in mind.

XAVIER

I walked into the gallery and was honestly surprised by how filled it was. And filled with quality people, too.

I recognized Tina and Marc from the *Times*, Sylvia from The New Yorker, and those annoyingly esoteric critics Paul and Benny, wearing the same tweed they always wore.

Like they were bankers in the Depression or something.

Then I saw my dear wife, in a basic black dress that made her skin look unfathomably pale in comparison. Not a sickly pale, but a pale that looked like it hadn't seen sun in about a year.

Sure, she was good-looking, objectively, but I couldn't help my gut reaction every time I saw her. Rage. Just pure, always there, always growing, rage.

I locked eyes with her, and I'm pretty sure I saw her lip quiver in response. Good.

"Darling!" I yelled across the room, and everyone around me turned to see who I was calling to. I saw their expressions fill with recognition—"Oh, his wife!"—and Angela's expression fill with worry. Realizing that if I waited for her to step over to me I'd be waiting a damn long time, I started striding toward her.

"What a show," I exclaimed, hoping she'd pick up on the sarcasm in my voice.

She embraced me and kissed my cheeks, and I could feel her lithe body shaking, like a small dog fresh out of the shower.

"Thank you for coming," she said, loud enough for those around us to hear. She was playing the same part as I was, and whatever guilt I may have felt for causing her shakes went away, just like that. She knew what she'd signed up for.

"Where's the man of the hour?" I asked, scanning the room.

Just then, I felt a hand on my shoulder and spun around to find Benny, the tweed-wearing critic.

He held his hand out for me to shake. "Mr. Knight," he said, "always a pleasure."

"Hi, Benny boy," I responded, giving him a hard ol' shake. The three glasses of whiskey I'd had on my way over to SoHo 149 had calmed my temperament, sure, but they'd also given me an urge to have a little fun.

"You're looking for Dustin? He's by the finale piece, around that pillar right there," Benny pointed.

"Wonderful," I said, slapping Benny's back a little harder than I had to. "Just wonderful. Oh, Angela!" I sang, and all eyes again fell on her. Her cheeks were visibly red. Man, she's good at pretending she doesn't like the attention.

She stepped toward me, and I grabbed her hand, and together we walked to the finale painting. "And this must be Dustin!"

Dustin, the man who'd embarrassed me in the public eye, who may or may not have ruined the highest-grossing potential deal I'd ever locked in on my own, stood in front of me.

We were about the same height, both with sturdy jaws and the kind of eyes that have seen their fair share of shit.

He didn't cower like most people did. Instead, he held a hand out. "Xavier Knight," he said simply. "Thanks for coming to my show."

I heard a camera go off, might have seen a flash or two. "Anything for Angela," I said, and threw in a smile for good measure. I wasn't sure what Dustin knew, or what he wanted, but there was a lot going unsaid here.

It was pissing me off, making me want to grab him by the stupid jacket he was wearing and shove him against the wall until he begged me to let him go.

But I couldn't. There was press here.

BRAD

Xavier had mentioned to me that he'd be going to a gallery showing at SoHo 149 this evening, which was out of character for him. He had never liked going to any cultural events, not unless I dragged him there. Or his ex-fiancee had.

There had been a time when, if she mentioned she missed watching opera, he'd buy her tickets for that evening.

So I made a few calls. I had to know what my son was up to. And it turned out an old friend of mine, Alfred Kent, used to be in business with Mr. Johnson, the gallery's owner.

It took not more than a minute on the phone with Mr. Johnson to learn that there was a showing of a new artist's work tonight and that the whole thing had been orchestrated by an Angela Knight.

As soon as I heard her name, my heart swelled with joy. Not only was she helping an unknown talent find exposure but she was helping my poor boy out of the darkness.

No more drinking liquor in grungy nightlife bars, no sir.

My son was going out on the town with his wife.

And that ... Well, I just couldn't miss it.

I entered SoHo 149 and tried to be a fly on the wall. I saw my son and Angela walking hand-in-hand, and then saw the both of them talking to a young man in an outfit that made him look every bit the artist. They exchanged a few niceties.

I couldn't hear much, but I saw their smiles and knew.

Then Xavier strode toward the bar and picked up a glass of wine, and I saw Angela follow.

So I walked over to the both of them.

"What a night!" I exclaimed, not able to contain my excitement. They'd both done wonderfully.

"Brad, what a surprise," Angela said upon seeing me. She wrapped her arms around me and kissed me on the cheek, and I was certain that my beloved could feel the young woman's warmth all the way in heaven.

"I wouldn't miss it."

"I didn't know you'd be coming," Xavier said, bringing the glass to his lips.

"You both look like such a handsome couple. So charming, so thoughtful. I'm proud of you, son," I said, holding my hand out for him to shake.

He did, and it really felt like he was back. The son I always knew he was.

I turned to Angela, the one who'd gotten him to come home.

The angel that had graced my life and the life of those I care about most.

"And Angela. You. Your talent, your generosity. I heard that you found the young man with his artwork on the walls. Your tenacity and your eye, darling, you really are something. I am so proud. So, so proud."

I pulled her into another hug and felt her relax into my arms. I realized how hard it must be for her, with her father tremendously ill. I must have been the closest thing she had to her dad.

Over the top of Angela's head, I looked at my son. He was watching me hug the young woman with such a deep intensity, I didn't quite understand it.

Maybe he was so consumed with the two people he loved most embracing, it was almost too much to watch.

I glanced at him once more and offered him a smile. He smiled back, and I inwardly nodded.

That was it. It must be,