

Under Attack

ANGELA

It was a blur. They were laughing, all of them, and I felt like I was on a stage with a giant spotlight over me, the audience able to see my weakest spots, able to point out my vulnerabilities, without much effort at all.

I’d never been the subject of such bullying before. Not that I’d been popular in high school—not by a long shot—but I was never the one who the cool kids focused their attention on.

I was quiet and faded into the background easily, so making fun of me wouldn’t have been very entertaining.

But here, in a place like this? I stuck out like a sore thumb. I knew that in this gown, with this crowd, I looked like I was desperately trying to fit in. And I’d married Xavier Knight, who was the pièce de résistance of the elite.

So I was an easy target. But still, I couldn’t believe they were treating me like this. We were out of high school. Shouldn’t they know better?

I was in the bathroom, in the handicapped stall. I usually would never take this stall because that wasn’t fair to the wheelchair-using women who really needed it, but this was an emergency.

The tears had started coming when I was running as fast as my heels could carry me out of the ballroom, and the only thing I could think about was that I needed a safe place to hide.

The handicapped stall was the only open one in the bathroom, so it was my only option. I couldn’t have any more of the gala attendees tear into me, so I hopped inside and locked the door as fast as I could.

Em
Yes at store

Em
Just helping a customer are u ok

Angela
Em

Angela
U there?

Angela
Yeah ...

Angela
I’m fine

I didn’t know why I didn’t tell Em the truth, that I was the laughingstock of the whole city. That I obviously didn’t belong, like I’d been saying the whole time.

That my own husband would’ve poured pig’s blood on me if that was part of the plan the girls had plotted.

But then I realized it was because I’d never been humiliated like this before. I’d never been so embarrassed and ashamed simultaneously that even talking about it overwhelmed me.

I’d thought my moral compass, and my adherence to following it, would make sure I could always stand tall and be proud of my actions. But here I was, in a handicapped stall, sobbing because I’d eaten some bread.

I took some tissue off the roll and dabbed my cheeks. I was sick of feeling bad about myself. And it felt like the entire time I’d known the Knights that was all I’d been doing.

I blew my nose with the toilet paper and decided it was enough.

No more feeling sorry for myself.

I was done with the self-pity.

I was here for Brad, and it was just one night. I got to wear a fabulous dress and be surrounded by gold everywhere I looked.

So I’d push the humiliation to the side and I’d plaster a smile on my face, and maybe if I tried hard enough, I could trick myself into having a little bit of fun.

I reapplied my lip balm, and then I walked out of the stall. The bathroom had been full when I walked in, but now it was empty. Maybe that was a sign that nobody would mess with me anymore.

I walked right up to the mirror, and putting my hands on the cold marble of the counter, I looked myself in the eye. “You are Angela Carson.” I shook my head. I’d have to be real with myself.

I started over. “You are Angela Knight,” I said. “And you will get through this.”

I said it with such a calm intensity that I, surprisingly enough, believed the words. I made sure there was no mascara under my eyes, and then I walked out of the bathroom.

Brad, looking spiffy in a tuxedo, walked out of the men’s room right as I emerged. I saw him first.

“Hi!” I exclaimed, and he saw me, a massive smile growing on his face.

“Angela,” he declared, taking me by the hand and spinning me around. “You’re simply ravishing.”

“Thank you,” I said, blushing again. But the good kind this time.

“No, thank you. For coming. I know Xavier’s grateful you’re here.”

I bit my tongue before I could tell him any tales about my tablemates. “Of course,” I said instead. “I’ve met some of his friends.”

“Oh, the ladies? Yes, he’s known them since prep school. France’s finest. Come, come, I’ll walk you back to the table.”

My stomach lurched, but I held my head high and accepted Brad’s elbow as we weaved through tables. When we got to mine, Brad cleared his throat.

There was a chorus of “Hi!” “Brad!” and “Nice to see you!”

And after he’d leaned over each woman and had a brief conversation with her, Brad patted Xavier on the back, kissed his hand and waved, and then he took off to talk to another attendee. The women turned their attention back to me.

“Where’d you go?” the ringleader asked.

The woman beside her tapped her nostril a few times then raised her eyebrow at me, like she was implying something I didn’t understand.

“A drug girl, too?” the woman beside Xavier asked him.

“Ah, yes,” the ringleader answered. “That makes sense. She uses the money for the drugs. Classique, no?”

Everything I’d told myself in the bathroom flew away. I couldn’t be at this table anymore, not for one more second.

So I yanked my purse off the back of the chair and stormed away, hearing the women and Xavier’s laughter behind me. I didn’t know where I was going, but I knew I needed to get out of there.

Dinner hadn’t even been served yet, but it was just too much. The tight dress and these damn shoes were making it hard to move beyond a walking pace, but I was determined to get out of the room as fast as I could.

I finally pushed my way through the doors and was back by the elevator bank, but I stopped, seeing Brad speaking to one of the earpieced men in front of the elevators.

He was having an animated conversation, and I didn’t want him to see me leaving.

I turned back to the doors that held the gala inside. I couldn’t go back in, no way. I looked around, trying to keep my movements slow and subtle so Brad wouldn’t see me out of the corner of his eye.

I saw a door. I didn’t know where it led, but at this moment, I didn’t care. I opened it as quietly as I could and closed it in the same manner.

I was in a hallway now, and I followed it to another door. I pushed that door open and entered what looked like another ballroom, only this one was smaller and undecorated.

There was a smattering of tables and chairs, a small stage, and a bar. It was dim, but it was empty. And an empty room was all I really needed.

I sat down on the floor, against the wall, and let the tears fall. This time, I didn’t try to stop them.

A few moments later, the door to the ballroom opened, and I flinched as light streamed in.

When the door closed and my eyes readjusted to the dimness, I realized it was the man in the turtleneck.

“Hello,” he said, coming closer to me. “I saw you leave, and you look so ...so sad, I thought I come to make sure you are okay.”

He kneeled down in front of me, and I guess he saw the tears. “Oh no! Oh no, beautiful lady, why the tears?”

“I’m okay,” I said, sniffing. I tried to get up, but he put his hands on my knees and pushed me back to the ground.

“You’re in no state to leave, mademoiselle,” he started. “Tell me. Tell Jacques what is wrong.”

“It’s just ... I’m not feeling so well,” I said, noticing his hands were still on my knees.

His thumbs were moving in circles now, slowly moving up my legs. I again tried to stand up, but his hands were so heavy, pushing me down.

“Really, I’m okay. I’ll just go find my husband now.”

“Oh, your husband? Is that why you will not have the drink with me?”

“What? Oh ...no ... I just ... I wasn’t very thirsty.”

“You don’t lie to Jacques,” he said, staring at me with the same intensity as before.

I was more than uncomfortable now. His dark eyes looked haunting, and this room was so empty. I felt his hands reach my thighs.

“Please ...please stop,” I said, trying to push his hands off.

“Stop what?” he said, and he licked his lips.

“You are so magnificent. You radiate. From the moment I saw you, mmm,” he said, and with no forewarning, he lurched forward, pressing his body into mine.

His lips were on my neck, and I was craning my head against the wall, away from him—

“Stop! STOP!” I shouted, but it was no use.

His whole weight was on top of me, and then his hand came to my face to yank it back down so his lips could meet mine. I felt like I was underwater, drowning, watching the scene play out in slow motion somewhere outside of my own body.

“MMMMMM,” I tried to yell, but it was like his lips were glued to mine.

I was feeling around the floor for something, anything. I could use to get him off me. That was when I remembered my shoes.

I reached forward as much as I could, and he just moaned in response, as more of my body pressed into his. I could almost reach it, and then I was reaching it, my fingers closing around the stiletto and lifting it from my foot.

He was gyrating and moaning, and every cell in my body was screaming with agony.

I lifted the shoe up and, with as much strength as I could muster, sent it heel-first into the back of his neck.

His eyes went wide, and he let out an, “AAHHHH!”

His hands moved to the back of his neck to check for damage, and I pushed him off me with everything I had, sprinting for the door.

I didn’t look back, not as I was running through the side hallway, not as I ran through the first door and into the elevator bank, and not as the elevator doors closed, keeping me safe inside.

I couldn’t process what had just happened.

All I knew was I had to get back to the suite, now.

The elevator finally got to my floor, and I ran through the hall until I was in front of the suite door.

I jammed the key card into the lock and jumped from foot to foot until the green light flashed.

It was only then that I realized I’d left one of the shoes in the ballroom.

Once I was inside, I collapsed against the wall, sinking to the ground. I was shaking like crazy, my mind was spinning, and I felt like I would throw up at any second.

I felt my body for injuries. My lips felt swollen from the contact, but other than that, I was okay.

Suddenly, I had this overwhelming urge to be as far from this gown as humanly possible. It was making me claustrophobic, its figure-hugging shape and the thickness of its fabric.

I needed out.

I unzipped it myself, right there, and left it in a puddle on the floor.

In the middle of the suite in my underwear, I finally felt like I could breathe.