Family Man

ANGELA

Hamptons in my life, but I'd heard so many stories about the area over the years that I had a mental picture of what the area might look like. My wildest dreams couldn't have prepared me for the sight.

The beautiful countryside was flying past us as we made our way along the Sunrise Highway. I'd never been to the

The beaches, the farmland, the eighteenth-century shingle homes, all gargantuan and immaculately kept up, was all too much to process for a small-town girl like me.

move that struck me as uncharacteristically charitable. Not that I was questioning it. If anyone had earned some time with his family, it was Marco, maybe my favorite of Xavier's personal staff.

I looked over at Xavier. He was driving, which was a first. He'd decided to give Marco some much-deserved time off, a

Xavier wore driving gloves and designer sunglasses, so focused on the road that he hardly seemed to notice our gorgeous surroundings. I guess he was used to them.

But then he noticed me watching him and gave me an amused glance.

"Something on your mind, Angela?"

"You really want to know where we're going, don't you?"

"All right, so that we don't embarrass ourselves walking in blind, I'll fill you in," Xavier said, smirking. "This time."

I blinked at him, confused. *Who?*

me closely.

"Do you remember Aunt Heather?"

Was this his attempt to flirt? I didn't know what to make of it. I just waited for him to tell me where we were going.

"No?" he asked. "How about her sons, Liam or Cole? Or my other aunt, Stella? Or

He continued to say stuffy-sounding names that all blended together, and I continued to stare at him blankly. Finally,

"Hey," he said. "There's nothing to be worried about. My relatives are nice. A bit stuffy, sure, but nice. And I'm pretty sure they like you. A lot."

It made me shudder just thinking about it. Xavier noticed my expression, because he took off his glasses and looked at

"Remember," he said, turning back to the road, "they think we're married. Really married. So we'll have to play it up a bit. Think you can manage?"

"Angela, I'm aware you're not the worst person. I used to think that. But, uh, now This struck down my negative thoughts. Xavier was actually trying to be decent for once. Maybe just so he could get me to go along with this ridiculous trip. But still

"I still don't understand you. I don't understand why any woman would marry a stranger. It doesn't matter now. It's

done. We're a married couple, so we have to act like one."

I could still end the arrangement.

away from home."

"Thanks, Brad," I said, still a little stunned.

direction, slightly amused, as if to say cheers!

always gave everyone the benefit of the doubt.

"So, Xavier, tell me. Are the rumors true?"

rightfully mine.

"Watch it," I growled.

"XAVIER, ENOUGH!"

before he was carted off into the house.

I turned to my father. "What?"

would confer in private.

A whore.

A bitch.

A monster, even.

out of the girl.

covered my shirt.

Had she been physically hurt before?

Anyway, it was true. I'd called Angela a slut.

To be punished for being so disgusting, so cruel.

his face.

been as short-fused as it used to be.

Now, he wasn't *calling* me a gold-digging slut, but I guess he was still ~thinking~ it. Big improvement.

Instead of bringing any of that up, I just nodded solemnly.

When we finally arrived at the Knight estate, I felt like my tongue had swelled up, making any conversation impossible. It was either the result of my anxiety or my awe.

"I understand, Xavier," I said, remembering that I still had one ace up my sleeve.

helping themselves to gourmet appetizers and bubbly. I recognized only one of them, and I was beyond grateful he was there.

"Everyone wants to talk to you, of course. They hardly had a chance at the wedding."

"Angela, darling!" Brad exclaimed, walking over and pulling me into a warm hug. "Welcome. Consider this your home

I turned to see a plastic-looking woman with an overly large, if friendly, smile approaching me. She grabbed my hand as if we were old chums.

"Aunt Heather, darling," she said, reminding me. "Don't worry. I didn't expect you to remember. Unlike this lot, who

She took my arm before I could stop her. I turned to see Xavier grabbing a glass of champagne and holding it up in my

all think they are the center of the universe. Come, let me show you around."

"Those are her brothers, Ethan and Henry. Ethan's a doll. Henry

Perhaps this was just Aunt Heather's catty influence rubbing off on me.

"And that over there is my niece Rochelle. Only eighteen, but according to the grapevine, our town's local bicycle. If you catch my drift."

...not so much."

at the gazebo. "He was in the running to take over the family company. It was between him and your husband. Needless to say, Xavier won."

"There's a little rumor going around about Henry, you know," Heather said, nodding as I watched him approach Xavier

I watched the two men talking and wondered what they could possibly be discussing. Not that it was any of my business, but learning all this family history from Aunt Heather had piqued my curiosity. What else are you hiding, Xavier?

XAVIER

"At least I have a company, Henry," I responded coolly. "Because Daddy is handing it to you. Be honest, Xavier. When have you ever built anything on your own?"

times what it once was in two years while all you can do is twiddle your thumbs."

"It would have been twenty times with me in charge," Henry responded with a sneer.

"Would have, could have, should have. You want the truth, cousin? I pity you."

what had changed to make me less goddamn angry all the time ...but I had an idea. I looked over at Angela again, busy chatting with Aunt Heather, and a strange feeling welled up inside me. I actually *liked* seeing her around my family.

The fact that I was even able to disregard an insult from Henry of all people was a big improvement. I wasn't certain

could tell his needling was working. Because he stepped closer. "Could it be that she's one of those mail-order wives? Or something more simple perhaps? A lowly prostitute you found on the street?"

Henry could see that I was getting pissed. He wanted to goad me into a fight. He stepped closer, a shit-eating grin on

I froze, mid-punch, looking up to see my father staring at me, aghast. "He ..." I said, panting. "You didn't hear what he said about Angela."

Henry was a bloody mess, lying there and holding his nose. "Jesus, I think he broke it! ASSHOLE!"

"Oh, shut up, Henry," his mother, Stella, scolded. "We all know you brought this upon yourself."

"It's no excuse," Brad said, looking at me sternly. "Someone help him up. Get him out of here."

"You know what, Xavier," he said, seething, "that anger of yours will be the death of you, I swear."

"I don't care what he called her. From what Marco has told me, you've been known to call her some cruel things yourself." I looked down, ashamed. I always forgot that Marco used to drive my father around, too, and that sometimes they

anger and bitterness had festered there for years. But now, when I looked at Angela, I saw how all my anger, my violence, was affecting her. I had scared the living shit

I looked once more at Angela, who was being comforted by Aunt Heather now, and then turned away. What the hell had come over me?

She was cowering like I had physically assaulted *her*, not Henry. Was she that empathetic or simply that traumatized?

I didn't want her to see me this way. Not now. Not ever. My knuckles were bloodied, and speckles of Henry's blood

"Oh, no. I was just ...admiring how beautiful it is out here." I nodded. In truth, the suspense was killing me. Surprises with Xavier rarely turned out to be good.

he realized I had no idea who any of them were. "They're my extended family. You met them briefly at the wedding." That explains it. There were few days I could remember less clearly than my wedding day. It had been a blur of excitement and horror and confusion. All the faces, the names ...none of them had stuck. Only Xavier's whispered words to me at the altar were what I could remember. "I'm a powerful man. I get what I want. And what I want is to ruin you."

Unlike you, I thought, but I was so surprised by how nice he was being for a change. I nodded, but I was nervous. I hated having to fake anything. It went against my nature. And pretending to love a man who didn't love me sounded especially difficult.

The whiplash I was experiencing right now couldn't even be put into words. He was nice one second and cold the next. He was gorgeous and sexy and flirting with me one moment, and then he was a total jerk.

I had never seen a home so beautiful in my life. A *home*. Who was I kidding? You could fit fifty homes onto the property. It was sprawling and dotted with stunning Colonial Revival architecture. It felt like something out of a dream. Xavier and I stepped out of the car, and a chauffeur quickly took the keys, nodding to Xavier and me. "Mr. and Mrs. Knight, welcome!" They took our bags, and Xavier led me toward a small gathering of opulent-looking people gathered beneath a gazebo,

I nodded, once again feeling my nerves take over and my body stiffen. How was I going to be able to place a name to the face if they greeted me? Luckily, as it turned out, I didn't have to worry about that. "Well, isn't she absolutely radiant!"

I didn't understand half of the words that were coming out of Aunt Heather's mouth, but at least she was introducing me to everyone. She nodded to two similar-looking slick guys.

Henry eyed me up and down and sneered. The immediate dislike I felt for him was powerful and confusing. I almost

This was news to me. I had always thought Xavier was the only potential heir to the company and fortune. "So it could've been Henry instead?" I asked, surprised. Aunt Heather nodded. "And he's still bitter about it to this day, if you ask me."

satisfaction of a response. "Is the board really so concerned with your competence as a CEO that they're forcing you to compete in the Silver Jubilee? To prove yourself through dance? What is this, *Footloose*? If I were you, I'd be ...~humiliated~."

I shook my head, feigning sympathy. "It must be hard, Henry. Sitting on the sidelines. Watching the company grow ten

It always felt good to rub salt in the bastard's wound. Years ago, he'd tried everything in his power to steal what was

If it weren't for the fact that we shared blood, I would've killed him in his sleep. Lately, however, my temper hadn't

Henry, the piece of shit, the little swine, was trying to goad me into an argument. But I wasn't going to give him the

I *liked* bringing her out to the Hamptons. I was starting to really *like* her as a person, and in turn, I guess I was starting to like myself more. Henry insulted me? So what? I could take it. Angela was teaching me a thing or two about compassion, I suppose.

I was about to turn away—no longer interested in anything Henry had to say—when he grabbed my arm.

overnight. One second, a stranger, and the next, you're married. Seems almost

"How much?" he whispered. "I want to find out if she's a good enough fuck."

bastard suffer for the filthy words that had come out of his mouth.

"There is another rumor, y'know," he said, smirking. "About you and your wife. The wedding seemed to happen

My fists were clenching, and my teeth were bared. Talk shit about me, okay, but talking shit about my wife? Henry

...manufactured."

I didn't know what happened next. I saw red. And the next thing I knew, there was blood everywhere. I felt hands grabbing and pulling and tearing at me, trying to make me stop. But I couldn't. I wanted to make the

"He called her—"

Ethan, Henry's brother, called to the help, who hurried over and took Henry away. He shot me one last hateful glare

"Look at your wife, Xavier," my father said. "Look at her face." I turned and looked at Angela. What I saw made my heart ache, a heart I hadn't known was capable of aching. Only

~when I was punching him, I was really imagining what it'd be like to punch myself.~

I'd called her names far worse than any that had slipped out of Henry's mouth, that was for sure. *Maybe*, I thought,

"I..." I said, not knowing what to say to my father. "I'll go change." "Do it," Brad said. "Change, Xavier. For Angela's sake."

Since when did I care enough about the girl to defend her honor?