

The Truth About Angela

ANGELA

A few days later, Marco drove me to Heller, even though I insisted I could take the train. Lately, he'd been doing all these little favors for me, like waiting outside Dustin's café, even when I told him I'd be happy to run back home.

I didn't know when exactly I'd won him over, but I was grateful to have an ally. Lucille, as nice as she was, would never put anything or anyone above her loyalty to Xavier.

Right now, having Marco there to get me home as fast as possible was extremely appreciated. He must've noticed the distress on my face, because he was hitting the gas a little harder than usual today.

That or he could see how I kept nervously checking my phone every five minutes, waiting for Danny to update me.

The idea that something might be wrong with my dad's health ...again ... I didn't know if my heart could take it.

"Damn it, Danny," I said, throwing my phone into my purse and putting my head in my hands. "Just respond to me. Please."

But my phone remained silent.

How could this happen?

After everything I'd invested to make sure my father would be okay. After trying out this new experimental treatment. After agreeing to marry Xavier Knight, of all people ...

It couldn't all be for naught, could it?

I thought again of that horrible necklace I'd found in my room and wondered what Xavier was playing at. Could it have been an honest mistake somehow?

Knowing how cruel he could be, I doubted it.

My phone buzzed, and I lurched toward it, hurrying to unlock it, hoping it would give me some answers about my father.

But it wasn't Danny who texted ...

Xavier

Where r u?

Xavier

Why did you leave?

Angela

It's okay. You don't need to do this.

Xavier

?

Xavier

Do wut?

Xavier

r u ok?

Angela

You don't need to pretend to care.

Angela

I'll be okay.

Angela

Bye.

I shut my phone. It hurt to shut out Xavier, but I needed to right now. I could only deal with so many crises at once.

It was weird to hear how ...concerned he was. It wasn't a side of him I was used to, but again, I told myself to clear my mind.

Right now, I had time for only my dad.

When Marco pulled over beside my childhood home, I jumped out of the car as fast as my feet could take me, I threw open the front door.

"Danny? Lucas? Dad?!"

"We're in here!" I heard Danny shout.

I ran into the living room, expecting to see something terrible. But to my surprise, the boys were sitting on the couch, watching the football game, passing chips and queso back and forth. Beside them was my dad, looking happy and fit as ever.

"What ..." I started, out of breath. "What's going on?"

"What do you mean?" Danny asked. "Are you talking about the good news? Did my texts not go through or ...oh."

Danny fished out his phone, realizing that it was dead. He gave me an apologetic look.

"The last text must not have gone through."

"Why didn't you just call her?" my dad asked.

"I thought she got my texts, Dad."

"Guys, can we keep it down?" Lucas asked, eyes glued to the screen. "The Giants are at the ten-yard line."

"Someone please explain what's going on!" I nearly shouted, flabbergasted.

Finally, Dad got up and walked over. He was smiling, his eyes twinkling. "Guess what, sweet pea. Your dad is going to be okay."

"You mean ..."

Danny came over and gave me a hug. "That's right. It worked, Angie. The treatment. It ...it saved him."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I looked from Danny to my father's face. Finally, Lucas stood up, and though it pained him to stop watching the game, he joined in the huddle as well.

"It's true," Lucas said. "He's going to be running circles around all of us."

"And kicking your ass at cornhole again, Lucas," Danny said.

We all laughed, but I could feel tears, the happiest tears in the world, brimming at my eyelids. "Dad, I can't believe it. I was so scared. I thought ..."

"I know," he said. "You'll never have to worry again, sweet pea. I promise you."

Without another word, I flung myself into my father's arms and cried. No, I didn't cry. I sobbed. I was so overwhelmed with feeling I shook.

And my father and both my brothers held me for who knew how long. We were the most grateful family in the world.

At last, we pulled apart, and Lucas glanced at the TV, wincing. "We missed the touchdown, damn it!"

And again we all laughed. And I knew that, when it came to my family, there would be a lot more laughter and a lot fewer tears from here on out.

XAVIER

I knocked on the door to my father's office. It was located in a massive glass corner of the forty-third floor with a stunning view of Midtown Manhattan.

When I stepped inside, he was just finishing a call with his typical aw-shucks demeanor on full display. It was the man's secret weapon—the ability to disarm anyone with his straightforward charm.

There were no games, no *bullshit* when it came to Brad Knight. He was the real deal. And his kindness, coupled with a calculating capitalist's mind, made him the strongest CEO in the whole damn city.

Murdoch, Soros, Musk—they had nothing on my father.

Sometimes I wondered why I hadn't inherited the "nice" gene. Why was I always such a surly bastard all the time?

It served me well in business, don't get me wrong, but where was my father's open heart? Had it been crushed, along with everything else, in that car crash over a year ago?

"Son, I'm glad you're here," my dad said, throwing his phone aside. "I wanted to ask how the dance lessons are going."

I rolled my eyes. "Please, can we talk about anything other than my private life for once?"

"We have a five-p.m. meeting to talk business. So what else could this be about?"

As usual, he had seen right through me. I sighed and sat down in a chair, facing him.

"I wanted to ask you ...about Mom."

My father frowned, surprised. This was a subject we avoided at all costs. I knew he wanted to talk to me about her, but that was what he paid three therapists for.

Brad Knight and Xavier Knight didn't talk feelings, not usually.

"What about her?" he asked. "Go ahead. You can ask me anything."

"How ...how did you know she was the one?"

I'd almost asked my dad this question once before, but thankfully, I had resisted. The woman I'd been in love with then wasn't worthy of the comparison.

But Angela ...

Somehow, lately, I was finding myself more and more obsessed with her. I wanted to know if this was just some ridiculous fucking side effect of the strangest wedding arrangement in history or ...

Or something real.

My dad smiled kindly. "Son, I knew the moment I first laid eyes on her."

"Really?" I asked, surprised. "You knew Mom was the one from the first second?"

It was hard to believe, like a stupid fairytale. *Love at first sight*. Just thinking those words made me want to vomit rainbows.

"No." My dad shook his head. "I wasn't talking about Amelia."

"You mean ..."

He nodded. He'd known from the first moment he laid eyes on Angela that she was the one for me?! I wanted to scoff. I wanted to get up and storm out of his office. I felt like he must be making fun of me.

From the sincere expression he wore, I knew he wasn't.

"Amelia and I, it took us time to click. All real couples, the ones that last, take time too. It was sometimes difficult, but when we finally saw each other for who we really were, it made all the difference in the world."

I wondered if the same could be true for Angela and me. Was our story like my father and mother's, a slow burn built on misunderstandings and anger and mistrust?

"Dad, I'm so confused about how I feel right now," I admitted. "I never really believed I could ...um ...again."

I didn't want to say the word that lay between "could" and "again." Saying *love* out loud would make it real. And there was still so much to be unsure of.

Why would she have married me for my money if she was worth loving? I finally asked my father the question I'd been dying to ask him for weeks.

"Where did you find her, Dad?"

My father turned from looking out the window, his eyes swimming with feeling. "We had a deal, she and I. We weren't supposed to talk about this. But ...I think it's time you knew."

"Knew what?" I asked, frowning. "What deal?"

"Son ...Angela didn't marry you for your fortune. She didn't agree to marry a stranger because you happened to be a Knight. She married you because her father was sick and I offered to help pay his medical bills in return."

My mouth dropped. My eyes bulged. My stomach felt like it was tightening into a knot. This couldn't be the truth, could it? All along ...Angela had been acting out of a selfless desire to save her own father?

And my father had kept it from me?!

"Tell me this isn't true," I said, voice low and quiet. "You wouldn't."

"I did, Xavier," my father said, meeting my gaze. "And I'm sorry for misleading you. But I knew that if you were to be informed, you would have seen it as charity and never given her the time of day. I had to lie to you. So that you might learn to love again."

I stood up, suddenly dizzy. My head was spinning. My surroundings seemed to be melting. All the times I had screamed at Angela came rushing back to me.

All the horrifying things I'd called her. For nothing.

"How could you do this?" I asked, and then I felt my voice rising. "HOW THE HELL COULD YOU DO THIS TO ME?!"

I had never yelled at my father before in my life. It went against my very nature. Anger was reserved for my enemies, not my family, but I'd never felt so betrayed by anyone in my life.

To think ...all this time, Angela really was an angel after all.

"I know you're angry," he said. "You have every right to be."

"I can't even fucking look at you!" I spat, throwing my hands to my head. "How could you do this to me? To her? Do you know how cruel I've been? What I've said?"

"I've guessed," he said, nodding sadly. "But I knew she would stay. Because I knew she was pure and would care for you, despite everything. Don't you understand, son? That is what love is."

I turned for the door. I needed to go to Angela. I needed to make this right, but I stopped when my hand met the handle.

"How ..." I began. "How am I going to win Angela, Dad?"

I turned and looked at my father once more. I didn't want his advice. I didn't believe a word he'd say, but I also knew, without him, I was doomed.

He smiled and shrugged, as if what he was about to say was the most simple task in the world.

"If you want her, Xavier," he said, "tell her how you feel."

Tell her how you feel.

I didn't have the slightest clue as to how I was going to achieve that. But I knew I had to try. Angela deserved that much.

I threw open the door and hurried out of the office without another word.

I didn't mean it, Angela. Forgive me, Angela. I'm crazy about you, Angela.

But would Angela ever believe me?