

## A Belated Date

### ANGELA

**Xavier**  
Hey

**Xavier**  
U home?

**Angela**  
Yes, why?

**Xavier**  
This may sound crazy but

**Xavier**  
I have a surprise

**Angela**  
...

**Angela**  
You mean for me?

**Xavier**  
No for Lucille

**Xavier**  
Of course for u!

**Xavier**  
Marco will be ready w/the car in 30

**Xavier**  
Wear something nice ok?

**Xavier**  
☺

**Angela**  
Um...okay!

I stared in disbelief at my phone. Had Xavier Knight actually just sent me an emoji? A winky-face emoji, no less?

The world must've turned upside down while I slept because this did not resemble the man I called my husband one bit. Ever since I'd learned the wonderful news about my father's health, I'd barely been able to think straight.

I had returned home and spent the day pacing and cleaning, trying to calm myself. But I couldn't believe it. The arrangement had paid off, and now my father had a bit of good health.

That meant he was safe, he would live, he would continue to cook his ridiculously greasy turkey dinners every year, but it also meant ...

My fake marriage with Xavier, at last, could end. There was no need to continue to pretend anymore, not if my father was healthy. As for the medical bills, I could repay them myself over time, I figured.

Surely Brad would understand, but would Xavier?

I didn't know how to bring it up to him. I was sure he was going to go mad with rage. I needed to prepare myself and put on whatever mental armor I had left to withstand what was sure to be one curse and insult after another.

Then this text had showed up, surprising me even more. What was Xavier possibly planning to surprise me with tonight?

I decided, even if I had to break some bad news, that I should look good. He had told me to dress up, after all. So, rifling through my closet, I chose a dress that Dustin had picked out for me personally.

A 1990 Christian Dior vintage fringe dress made of black and white silk with black wedge boots and a striking red blazer. It was possibly the most bold outfit I'd ever seen, one I was sure I couldn't possibly pull off.

But when I'd stepped out of the dressing room, Dustin's jaw had practically hit the floor.

"Girl," he'd said, "you look like the definition of sex itself. Seriously. Grab a dictionary. Look it up. Under sex will be a photo of you in that outfit. Hot DAMN."

I'd blushed, of course, but now looking at myself in the mirror, I could see what Dustin was saying. I did look good.

I didn't know about the definition of sex, seeing as I knew little about that subject anyway, but it made me feel good to dress up as someone confident.

Even if that wasn't exactly how I felt on the inside, sometimes you had to project it on the outside to fool yourself or others. Or something like that.

Again, I was quoting Dustin.

Finally, when I'd finished applying makeup, a minimalist blend of lavender eyeshadow and a hint of mascara, I stepped outside and approached the car.

Marco held the door open and nodded, grunting. It was the closest he came to a smile.

"Ms. Knight."

"Thanks, Marco."

He shut the door as I stepped in. When he got into the driver seat, I leaned forward. "Did my husband possibly tell you where he's taking me?"

Marco eyed me cautiously in the rearview. "You know I can't tell you that, Ms. Knight."

I sighed and leaned back in my seat. "It was worth a try."

I always appreciated the fact that Marco called me Ms. Knight, not Mrs. Even though technically I was a married woman, it made me feel closer to my age.

Most importantly, it reminded me that my marriage with Xavier was not 100 percent authentic. After tonight, I would never have to be called Mrs. Knight again if I didn't want to, I thought.

I watched the car take us through Manhattan and was surprised when we glided so close to the river along 29th Street. The night sky was becoming a beautiful bruised blue shade, and around us, the city lights were twinkling on.

"Marco, are you sure this is right?" I asked as he parked beside a large fancy restaurant.

"Just following orders, Ms. Knight."

He stepped out and opened the door for me. *What is going on?* This place looked like a place you might take a not the wife you were forced to marry.

...date.

"Angela, you're here."

I turned, surprised to see Xavier sitting on a bench, dressed in one of his nicest suits. He stood up and approached, smiling.

"I hope you're hungry."

"You mean ...we're going in there to ..."

"To eat, obviously. Is that surprising?"

It certainly was. I didn't know what to say. I just gawked at Xavier as if he were a stranger, a completely new person. And, in some ways, that was what he resembled.

There was a softness behind his dark eyes I'd never recognized before. He took my hand and led me toward the door.

"C'mon, I can't wait for you to see the view."

The restaurant was one of the most beautiful, ornate spaces I had ever been in. The view of the East River, coupled with the modern-chic decor of the restaurant itself, was absolutely breathtaking.

There wasn't a single person seated other than Xavier and me—he had clearly rented out the whole restaurant for the occasion—and as the servers greeted us and took us to our table, I had the sneaking suspicion that this was, in fact, a date.

"Xavier," I said as we took our seats, "this is really nice, but what's going on?"

"Can't a husband take his wife out for a nice meal?"

I blushed. As sweet as the sentiment was, it was also exceedingly *weird*. I understood pretending to be married in front of his family and colleagues, but when it was just the two of us?

We were surrounded by lit candles and fresh flowers. It looked like the set of *The Bachelor*. Overly romantic, almost manufactured.

Just like our marriage.

I looked at the menu. Everything was in French and impossible to understand. I put it down and took a deep breath. "I really appreciate that you're, um, being so nice but ..."

"What's wrong?"

"I just don't understand why all of a sudden—"

"You're right," he said, interrupting me. "You deserve an explanation, Angela. There's so much I want to say, but I guess I'll begin by saying that ..."

*Is he about to apologize?* Xavier's face looked conflicted. It clearly went against his every instinct to be that self-aware.

"I realized that I never really thanked you for saving my life, Angela. On the island."

"Please," I said, looking down. "I only did what anyone would do."

"No!" Xavier exclaimed fiercely and then again more gently. "No, Angela. I don't think that's true at all. I think you might be the most selfless person I've ever met."

Whoa. *Where is this coming from?* I felt overwhelmed, and the setting, pretty as it was, certainly wasn't helping.

"And all this?" I asked.

"I thought it might be a nice way to repay you. It's only a start but ..."

"Xavier," I said, shaking my head, "this is really kind of you, but you hardly know me. If you knew me, you'd know that I don't feel comfortable in big fancy restaurants."

"Oh...You don't?"

I shook my head. I didn't mean to disregard what was clearly Xavier's idea of romantic, but he had a right to know.

"If you actually stopped to have a conversation with me," I said quietly, "you might know that what I really like is simple stuff. Like a hole-in-the-wall pizza place."

Xavier nodded, understanding, his eyes gleaming with an idea. What was he thinking now? I was too nervous to ask.

The waiter approached. "Sir, madame, have you decided what you would like to eat?"

"Nothing," Xavier said, standing up and throwing his napkin on the table. "C'mon, Angela."

He offered me his hand, and I stared, dumbfounded. The waiter looked equally confused.

"Mr. Knight, forgive me. Is something wrong? You have paid to have the entire establishment to yourselves for the evening."

"I'm aware," he said with a smile. "Treat yourselves to a night off. The tab's on me."

Before I knew it, Xavier had taken my arm and we were heading out the door.

"What are we doing?" I asked, embarrassed.

Xavier winked. "You like pizza. Let's get some pizza."

And with that, he led me to the car. Marco started the engine, and we left the fancy riverfront restaurant behind.

I hated to admit it, but it was perhaps the most spontaneous, romantic thing anyone had ever done for me

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We were at Joe's Pizza in Greenwich, both ridiculously overdressed, taking a bite of our second slice when we burst into laughter.

Every normal New Yorker who walked in gave us an unhappy glare as if to say, *Great. Yuppies. There goes the neighborhood.*

It was so funny I could hardly eat. Xavier took my hand.

"Xavier, don't," I said, trying to pull away. "I'm greasy!"

"I don't care," he said.

I felt the butterflies in my stomach flurry as my heart swooned, and I looked at Xavier in a completely new light. To think I had begun this night planning to announce our divorce.

How was I possibly going to bring that up now?

I couldn't.

Not when he was being so sweet.

*I'll just have to wait for the right moment*, I told myself. Surely this night would end and everything would go back to normal, like it always did.

"Angela," he said, interrupting my train of thought, "you're right. I hardly know you. And ...I want to know everything. So, Tell me something about you."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. What do people usually talk about on dates? Turn-ons, pet peeves? Favorite ways to spend a Sunday afternoon? Are you a long-walks-on-the-beach sorta girl? Or more of a shopper?"

Xavier sounded nervous. He actually *looked* and sounded nervous. It was adorable. I found myself grinning, and he stopped rambling to look up at me.

"What?"

"You said date," I pointed out.

"Well, isn't it?"

I nodded. I guess it was. He sighed, looking a little melancholy.

"I'm sorry it took so long, Angela. If I had known ..."

I wanted to ask him what he meant. *Known* what? But I never had the chance. Because Xavier grabbed the last piece of pizza from my plate and took a huge bite.

"Hey!" I shouted playfully. "I was going to eat that."

"That's a pet peeve of mine," he admitted between bites. "Letting food get cold."

"What if mine is sharing meals?"

"Then ...I guess we're screwed."

Again, we laughed. And it was the most wonderful feeling in the world. It felt easy, without any strings attached. It felt honest.

As Xavier continued to eat, I wondered if I was wrong to make him wait.

Maybe when he was this happy, this kind ...maybe this was the best time to bring up ending the arrangement.

But now, when I looked at him, I wasn't certain that this was what I wanted.

"Xavier," I said quietly, "I need to tell you something ..."

He nodded patiently. I took a deep breath, opened my mouth, and closed it again.

I couldn't tell Xavier I wanted to end our marriage. I didn't have it in me.

I chickened out and told him that I was nervous about the upcoming Jubilee instead.

As he comforted and reassured me, I hardly heard a word he was saying.

Who was this man?

And why did I want to throw my arms around him and kiss him?

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Xavier and I were dancing again, practicing for the big show, only a week away now. But something about this lesson felt strange.

For one thing, there was no sign of Kiki. In fact, as I looked around the studio, there was no sign of an instructor or dancer anywhere.

Xavier and I were completely alone.

He spun me, the bolero's seductive beat propelling us forward and back, as we turned away then toward each other. I could feel the heat emanating from his chest every time we were a hairsbreadth apart.

How I longed to rest my head against him, to feel the muscles I had admired for so long.

Angela, I chastised myself, what's gotten into you?

I noticed then that the usual overhead LED lights were off tonight. Instead, a spotlight seemed to be illuminating us as we pushed and pulled, resisting, and then giving in to each other's movements.

We felt coordinated tonight. We felt like we'd been doing this dance for centuries, this sensual tug of war, this strange love-hate relationship, this dance.

"You're not always an angel, are you?" Xavier asked, eyes looking dark and mysterious.

He shaved me gently, and I felt, expecting to feel the hardwood floor, but to my surprise, beneath me was a bed of throw pillows.

*Where were these a second ago? How did they get here?* I had so many questions, but as Xavier slowly lowered himself on top of me, every thought fled my brain.

He was trailing his fingers along my bare flesh, making me tingle with delight. I pushed his hand away, bashful.

"Xavier, don't ..."

"Is that what you want?" he asked, smiling. "Do you want me to stop, Angela?"

I said nothing. I couldn't admit that I so *wanted* him to continue. To move even closer to me. To breathe against my neck and ...and ...

"A devil in disguise ..." he said with a smirk. "I knew it."

And then, before I knew what was happening, Xavier kissed me. I had only tasted his lips once before—on our wedding night—it had been forced and unnatural and wrong.

But this ...this was everything I'd ever hoped for. The tug of his hungry lips. The hint of teeth as he gently bit my lip. The soft moan escaping my own.

It made me forget myself. It made me forget that, only seconds ago, we had been practicing a dance. The music was continuing, provoking us, urging us to go further.

To explore each other's bodies. To ...

"Xavier," I gasped, scared. "I don't know what I'm doing. I ...I..."

"Trust me," he said. "I'll take care of you."

I looked into those dark eyes and nodded. There were a million reasons I should have resisted, but there was an irresistible sway to Xavier's words right now.

I couldn't ignore it. I couldn't fight it. I had to give in. *I wanted* to give in.

He kissed me again, but this time, his tongue entered my mouth, slithering against mine, cajoling me to do the same.

With every playful lick and taste, I felt myself moisten in places that had never been so hot before.

"I want you, Angela," Xavier whispered. "Only you."

"Xavier ..." I sighed, closing my eyes.

Then he was kissing my neck and I was arching my whole body toward him as if begging him to trespass upon other parts of me.

I heard his belt unbuckle. I felt him slowly pull my panties down.

Oh my God.

It was finally going to happen. I was going to lose my virginity to Xavier Knight, right here in the middle of the dance floor, illuminated by a spotlight as the slow rhythm of the bolero serenaded us.

"Are you ready, Angela?" Xavier asked.

I opened my eyes and looked at him. I pulled his face close to mine and kissed him. Yes, I silently communicated to him. "Take me."

And just as Xavier pressed forward, and my eyes rolled back in bliss, and an explosion of feelings overtook me

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I sat up in bed with a start, hyperventilating. I was alone. It was the middle of the night. I was in my bedroom where I belonged.

Everything I had just experienced was a dream ...

A sex dream. I had just had a sex dream about Xavier.

What.

The.

Hell.