

## Out In The Open

### Brad

"Angela, darling, you've outdone yourself!" I said, embarrassing my daughter-in-law. I stepped back, holding her at arm's length. "And you look divine!"

"You always say that," Angela beamed and then kissed Penny on the cheeks.

It warmed my heart to see the two together, amicable. Happy even.

After dinner the other night, I knew it would be a risk to bring Penny as my date tonight, but I refused to keep her hidden.

I loved her, no matter what the world, or even my own son, believed. And she deserved to be loved.

I looked around at the busy hall. The room was filled with New York's finest, dripping in furs, silks, and diamonds. They laughed and clinked glasses of champagne in the refurbished postwar-era ballroom.

Between the glittering chandeliers and the sweet smell of orchids hanging in the air, the party had an old-luxury feel that would have made Audrey Hepburn or Grace Kelly feel at home.

And then there was Penny, in her sweats and oversized hoodie.

"You know they shouldn't even have let you inside," I teased her. "There's a dress code."

"Sure, but I'm *with* the Brad Knight," She laughed, flapping her arms up and down as her sleeves flip-flopped in the air. "That comes with its own set of perks."

"Like showing up to a formal event in your pajamas?" I wondered.

"I'm so sick *of wearing dresses all the time*," Penny insisted. "*I do that enough whenever I have to sing.*"

I smiled, shaking my head in wonder.

Even in her casual clothes, Penny outshone everyone else there.

And I had to admit that I kind of preferred it when she wasn't all glammed up for the stage.

She looked more comfortable.

Natural.

*Beautiful.*

Penny noticed me staring. She blushed and looked down, suddenly finding her Converse shoes to be incredibly interesting.

Angela cleared her throat with a small laugh.

"Um, hi," she teased. "Still here."

I smiled and looked at my daughter-in-law.

"Where is Xavier?" I asked Angela.

"Getting us some drinks," Angela said, holding up an empty champagne glass. "I just thought I'd pop over and say hello before the bidding starts."

"I can't wait to see what's up for auction," Penny said at my side. She had an affinity for what she called "retro" furniture. Her whole apartment looked like something from my childhood.

"There are some great pieces, if I may say so," Angela said, her signature blush painting her cheeks red.

A familiar pair of slouched shoulders caught my eye, making me turn.

"Ron," I called, spotting my old assistant as he snatched a canapé off one of the waiter's silver trays. With a tight smile, he approached our group.

"It's great to see you. I'm so glad you decided to come," I told him, shaking his hand. "I still feel terrible about how my son treated you."

"What did Xavier do?" Angela asked, her brows puckering in concern.

"He fired Ron!" I told her, throwing my arm over the poor boy's shoulder. "Said he would feel like I was watching his every move with Ron there."

"I understand the choice," Ron said. "I've had intimate access to every aspect of the Knight business and private life for years. Xavier needs a fresh start to feel confident in his new role."

"You were always an honorable man," I told him, clapping him on his back.

"Oh!" Angela said suddenly, throwing her hand into the air in a little wave. "There is my boss."

Her enthusiasm was endearing.

"You must introduce us," I said.

Angela gave me a confused look. "Don't you already know each other? You're the one who connected us."

"I've worked with Animas for years," I told her. "Barbra, their head of marketing, retired a few months before I did. I haven't met her replacement."

"Well, you'll love her. I'll go grab her and be right back." I watched Angela dart through the crowd to a woman's side.

As the woman turned toward us to embrace Angela in a hug, my heart stopped in my chest. The auburn hair, the loud clothes...it couldn't be.

"Brad," I heard Penny say. Her voice sounded far away. Like we were on opposite sides of a tunnel. "Brad, what's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Oh no," I whispered, shaking my head. "What have I done?"

### Angela

As I curved through the crowd toward Didi, the emerald sheen of her dress flashing like the skin of a snake under the light of the chandelier, I couldn't help the flutter of nerves that filled my stomach.

The event had gone perfectly so far.

People were drinking, smiling, chatting, and the room looked just as I'd pictured it, the hors d'oeuvres tasted amazing, and bidding was going to start any second.

Everything looked great, but without Didi's stamp of approval, it would all be for naught.

As I approached her and the group of Animas board members she was speaking to, I reached out and placed my hand on her shoulder. "Sorry to interrupt."

"Angie," Didi said, taking my hand in hers and air-kissing my cheeks. "The place looks great! People are already buzzing about how much better this year's auction is, and the auction hasn't even started yet."

"I'm so happy to hear that," I told her, squeezing her hands tight. "I have some people I would like you to meet. If I can steal you for a second."

"Of course, of course." She ripped one of her hands free and waved it. "Lead away."

As I turned to lead Didi back toward Brad and Penny, a loud bang rang through the hall, making everyone look to the front of the room.

The auctioneer stood on the stage at the far end of the room, the gavel she'd just banged still in her hand.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," she said. "The auction is now open. We will begin bidding on the first item."

Two men carried a large rectangle, draped with fabric, onto center stage.

"This painting is an original piece by the artist Dustin Sterling. Bidding will start at ten thousand dollars."

The sheet was ripped from the painting, and the room erupted into a collective gasp.

My blood ran cold in my veins.

My empty champagne glass shattered on the floor.

"Oh my God," I heard Didi say. "Is that       ..."

All I could do was nod my head and stare at the stage where, in lifelike detail, was a perfect depiction of Xavier. Masturbating.

### Xavier

A full mouthful of negroni blew out of my lips, and I burst into a coughing fit.

"The fuck?" I muttered, wiping my chin on the back of my hand and looking down to assure that I hadn't spit up all over my Valentino suit.

A few of the other party guests turned to look at me. Whether because I'd just showered them all with Negroni or because of the life-size replica of my naked body displayed on stage, I couldn't say for sure.

All I knew was that I had to find goddamned Dusty so I could wring his scrawny neck.

How could Angela have let this piece in the auction?

How did Dusty even know what I *looked* like?

As I pushed my way through the crowd of people, still holding two drinks, paddles began to fly into the air.

"Ten thousand dollars. I have ten-thousand dollars. Do I hear fifteen thousand dollars?" the auctioneer called.

I felt the prickle of rage tinged with embarrassment heat the back of my neck. Who the hell was going to want a painting of me yanking my cock hanging over their mantle?

"Twenty thousand dollars. I have twenty thousand dollars. Do I hear thirty thousand dollars?"

This was getting out of hand. Where the hell could Dusty be?

I stopped at the center of the hall, craning my neck, using my height advantage to peer over the crowd.

I froze for a second, as a familiar-looking head of red hair caught my eye, but then I shook my head.

No, it couldn't be.

She didn't come to these sorts of things.

She knew better than that.

I was pulled from my thoughts a second later when my eyes landed on someone else, someone better, and they were heading right for me.

"Xavier!" Angela said, her eyes wide as she crashed through the crowd and into my chest.

"Bellini?" I offered her one of the glasses in my hands and then said, "What the fuck is that?"

"I had no idea," she said. "He didn't tell me. You have to forgive me."

"Just help me find Dustin and get that piece off the stage," I told her, stepping toward the auctioneer.

"What? No!" Angela cried, catching my forearm. "We can't take it down. You've already raised five hundred thousand dollars for Animas."

"Five hundred thousand dollars? Someone is paying five hundred thousand dollars for a painting of me jacking off?" I repeated, stunned. I glanced back at the painting. "I actually look pretty good."

"Xavier," Angela said again.

"What? I never realized how good of an artist Dustin was before."

Angela rolled her eyes.

I shrugged. "You said we can't pull it from the auction. What am I supposed to do?"

"Bid on it," Angela suggested, pulling my paddle from my suit pocket. "Unless you want a stranger to buy your naked portrait?"

"Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars?" the auctioneer called.

Angela lifted our paddle into the air.

"I have seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Do I hear eight hundred thousand dollars?"

A fresh handful of paddles shot up, making me groan. Angela moved to raise ours again, but I reached out, grabbing the paddle.

"It's no use," I told her. "There's too much competition. I'm not going to pay a million dollars for a painting of my own hard dick. Let's go find my dad. He'll know what to do."

*If he's willing to help       ...*

I hadn't spoken to my dad since that night in the restaurant. I'd said a lot of stupid stuff. Stupid enough that I wouldn't blame him if he wanted nothing to do with me.

"I left them over there," Angela said, leading me toward the other side of the room.

The crowd burst into applause around us as the bidding on the painting closed and the next piece was brought out onto the stage.

"Brad!" Angela called ahead of me, and my dad and Penny came into view. "Brad, the painting."

"I know, darling," he agreed solemnly.

"I'm so sorry," Angela told him. "I had no idea that the painting was of...Xavier."

"It's all right, my dear. No harm done," Dad assured her, pulling her into a one-armed hug.

"No harm?" I asked. "Someone just bought a painting of me yanking off."

"I bought it," Dad said.

I raised my eyebrows. "You? Why?"

"I couldn't have a painting of my son flipping his eggs and bacon loose in the public," Dad said. "Especially not after the bad press earlier this week."

I felt an uncomfortable feeling rise in me. One I wasn't used to feeling. One that only my father and Angela could make me feel. My eyes dropped to the ground as though I were suddenly fascinated with the design of my oxfords, and heat began to crawl up my neck.

Shame.

Guilt.

Regret.

I swallowed thickly and then looked up, looked my father in the eyes. "Thank you."

"It's all right, son," he said, reaching out and placing his hand on my shoulder.

There were more words bubbling up now, like once I'd said one nice thing it was impossible to stop. "And I for how I behaved the other night. I'm happy you've found someone, Dad."

...I'm sorry

Dad's smile grew tenfold, and he wrapped me in a hug. "Thank you, my boy."

I turned and looked at Penny over Dad's shoulder. "I apologize to you as well. It's clear you're making my father a very happy man."

The defensive line of her shoulders dropped, a small smile playing at the edges of her full lips. She nodded once, accepting the apology, her eyes dancing between Angela and me. "I'm glad you found your someone too."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of red, and my heart stopped in my chest.

Again, I shook my head.

No. It couldn't be. I was mistaken.

She wasn't here.

"How about another drink?" Dad suggested.

I found myself nodding.

"Ah, one second, I've just spotted Didi again," Angela said. "I want to introduce her to everyone."

"Didi?" I frowned.

"My boss," Angela said and then called, "Didi!"

"Oh no," my father whispered beside me, pulling Penny close to his side.

My eyes flicked to him.

"I had no idea," he told me fervently. "Believe me, Xavier."

My vision turned red as Angela pulled another woman into our little circle.

Suddenly, my tie was too tight. I couldn't get enough air in.

My pulse hammered in my ears.

The room began to spin around me.

"Claudia," I found myself saying, looking her right in the eye.

Angela turned to me. "No, this is Didi."

I shook my head. "I think I would recognize the woman I was engaged to."