

The Morning After

Angela

I was having a baby.

Or at least the world thought I was having a baby.

Apparently, the world included the people in my life who should have definitely known I wasn't.

The headlines were like shots fired, marking the beginning of interrogating phone calls racing into my voicemail. Each second, another phone call was flailing in my direction.

Now everyone who I had ever given my number to had me on speed dial.

I had my phone on mute. I could barely hear my own thoughts over the sounds of news alerts crashing onto my computer screen like commercial jets falling from the sky.

I flipped through the voicemails, deleting concerned messages as if it could erase the chaos.

BEEP.

"OMFG. Your eggo is preggio?" Dustin said into the machine. "*In Touch* called me, and I was wondering if I could give them a comment about your emotional state, being that I am your numero uno, bad hombre who has your nombre—"

BEEP.

"Angie, why didn't you tell us the amazing news?" Dad chimed in. "I can't believe I'm finally going to be a grandfather and I had to find out from *Us Weekly*. We need to celebrate—"

BEEP.

"Hey, darling, it's Brad. I figured this is probably just the tabloids. I swear they tried to print that I was pregnant a few years back. Some weird narrative about aliens, you know, garbage. But just in case this is not artificial insemination from Neptune, call me quick before I bankrupt a media company—"

BEEP.

"Angela, this Lucille. As soon as I come into the house, I'll make my special prenatal stew—"

BEEP.

"SIS! You need to call me right now, okay? This is really huge, and you just can't keep ignoring everyone's calls—"

I knew I couldn't keep neglecting what everyone was saying. But I could overlook it for now, right?

Xavier was already off on a flight to Japan for a weekend business function, 2,000 miles above the crisis. I was alone, and—according to the news—with my unborn child.

I couldn't bear to get out of his satin sheets and face the world, especially because they still held his musky scent.

It was nearly noon, and my stomach ached for something, anything, to eat.

But I was hungrier to be close to him, close to the feeling of his body leaning over me, pressing my hands down, his chest against my breasts. The way he kissed me while unzipping my dress, slipping in between these sheets

Now I knew how unbearable it had been for him, having to wait all those months for me. He'd only slipped away from my grasp this morning, and it already felt like I might implode from *desire*.

I couldn't help remembering how, afterward, I'd fit perfectly into the nook between his chest and shoulder. How his trimmed arms wrapped around me like velvet scarves. I hadn't been able to understand how he could be so firm yet so soft, like a trembling chick shielded by titanium hands.

But now, the outside world had already crashed our party.

Our romance was a news alert.

The report was that Xavier and I, who had only just become a real couple, were becoming parents.

The headlines whisked the question of *Am I pregnant?* inside my head like sugar through egg whites. It was all fluff, but thick and bright. It clogged my brainwaves, making me unable to think about anything but— it—

How did the tabloids know to report on my "pregnancy" right after Xavier and I had finally done it? The timing was disturbingly perfect.

I reached down to my belly. I was bloated, fine, but *that* bloated?

I woke up feeling nauseous, but I also woke up to a thousand websites analyzing my gynecologic state. That was enough to make anyone sick.

With my luck, I'd probably become pregnant exactly when I didn't want to be...and I wanted to be thinking of last night.

I wanted to be curled up beside him, breathing in his essence with each inhale. I wanted to be quaking from him bursting inside me, his body washing over me like a spectacular meteor shower.

It was as if his fingernails were still digging into my back, his lips still dancing along my collarbone...I gave him all of me, and he gave me a new person back. Every cell in me had been reborn, awakened, and craved him more and more.

But instead of Xavier, my hands were full of voicemails.

Everyone wanted to know what was up, even if I was barely awake, still trapped in the memory vibrating through my mind.

Well...not everyone.

BEEP. BEEP.

My phone jolted with a text from Em. Em!

It was about time.

I normally spill out all my messy emotions on her as soon as possible. She was probably confused as to why I hadn't filled her in yet. I picked up my phone, ready to vent to her about Xavier, about the headlines, and about Didi.

Em
what the hell is going on

Angela
Where have you been?

Angela
I have so much to tell you

Em
doubt I want hear it

Em
ugh, this is so unfair Angie

Em
I can't believe u

Angela
What do you mean?

Angela
I'm sorry

Angela
Can we meet up?

Em
mmmokay

Em
where?

Angela
How about some retail therapy?

Em
I need comfort food

Angela
🍷🍷🍷

Em
maybe

Angela
The gelato place on Fifth?

Em
see u there

Angela

As I walked between the lush boutiques and eateries, I was careful to stay clear of any maternity shops. Heck, I didn't even want to be near a baby.

We met at the uptown center, where even the towels were couture. Fairy lights frosted the outside of each mesmerizing display. I followed the tree-lined path, realizing that people were looking at me—recognizing me.

That was impossible. People knew my last name, not me.

But now, they knew my face. I felt their eyes on me as I headed to the gelato stand, where the one person I was there to see couldn't be bothered to look at me.

Em was already shoveling down her hazelnut mocha delight, not even acknowledging I was there.

I checked my watch. I was five minutes early. She'd ordered before I got here?

We always went halvesies, because I could never make up my mind about a flavor and she always wanted to try two.

"You didn't wait for me!" I joked, squeezing Em into a hug. She didn't wrap her arms around me. Em scowled, her eyes swollen with contempt.

"Well, Angie, you didn't wait for me."

What was she talking about?

"What do you mean? I'm five minutes early," I explained.

"I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about what everyone is talking about, Angie," she said, rubbing my stomach. I brushed her hand off it.

"Listen, about the whole pregnancy—"

"I didn't even know you and Xavier were having sex!" she blurted out.

I glanced around in panic. It didn't look like anyone had heard, but the thought of someone finding out I was still getting to know my husband made me feel like a soda being shaken, ready to explode into a dark watery mess.

"Well..." I grinned, feeling my cheeks flare up red with the memory of last night. "We just did. Once."

"You had sex *once*, and now you're knocked up? You've got to be kidding me. Lucas and I have been trying for months to get pregnant," Em replied. "I can't believe this. I feel... What's wrong with me?"

"Oh, Em, nothing's wrong with you," I said, realizing that this possibility in my life was a giant neon arrow pointing out what hadn't happened for her. "Maybe it's...your partner?"

"You mean my husband? Aka your brother?" Em fired back.

My nose wrinkled in disgust.

"Ugh, don't remind me. I can't believe you have sex with him!" I groaned.

"Oh, honey, I bang his brains out," she emphasized, shooting me a wink, happy to serve me vengeful discomfort.

"Em, stop that before I vomit on your ice cream!" I squealed. Yes, I was grossed out but happy she wasn't mad at me for her pregnancy news. I certainly needed my best friend to help me get through mine.

"Listen, Em. The only people who are saying I'm pregnant work for tabloids. It's a news story, not the story," I explained.

"So, you're not pregnant?" Em said, her eyes gleaming.

As much as I think she wanted to be supportive, she couldn't be. She needed the supporting.

You couldn't be a bridge and the car driving over it at the same time.

"No, I never was pregnant," I admitted.

I would need to say this a hundred times, to all the people who mattered.

Who cared what a bunch of strangers thought? In nine months, they were up for a lot of disappointment.

But for Dad and Brad, and just about everyone else who knew me before I was worthy of headlines, this disappointment was coming as soon as I got home.

"So wait, I was so obsessed with my useless uterus I didn't process something you said," Em said. "You and Xavier sealed the deal?"

"We made love, Em," I whispered, so thrilled to finally tell someone the real monumental news.

"Girl, you GOT LAID! I'm so happy for you!" she exclaimed, laughing as I got increasingly hot, and probably red.

I grabbed her ice cream and took an enormous bite.

"Get your own, Angje!" Em scolded playfully.

"Oh...sorry. I just needed to cool the air down." I laughed back.

Em, still impressed with my brazenness, started to squeal.

"All right, goddess. It's time for a going-away party," she teased. What was she talking about? Who was leaving? I shot her a perplexed look.

"For your virginity," she explained and ordered me my own ice cream sundae.

Things had finally gone back to normal.

I checked my phone for the time. Em and I still had a lot of talking to do, but then my eyes caught on the notifications on my phone.

I had texts waiting for me.

Didi
Listen, Angela, I need to explain myself

Didi
Can we meet up?