The Apple & The Tree

Angela

I felt like my phone was about to burn through my hand, then burn through the ground, and then burn through the earth, down to its core.

I hadn't responded to Brad's texts. I couldn't bring myself to face the dilemma I'd put myself in. But now, he was calling me.

RING! RING!

The teller stared down at me, looking increasingly suspicious.

"Are you going to get that?" she probed. I didn't know how to answer, or even if I *could* answer.

I opened my mouth to speak, but gasps, instead of words, fell out.

RING! RING! RING!

I was petrified. I could feel the dread creeping up my flesh like frost, freezing me into a state of inaction. Damn it!

"I think there's a problem here," the teller called out to her manager.

The burning fear that this random woman would be the one to tell Brad—or Xavier—instead of me ... That was what it took for my body to get back to reality, for my mind to start functioning.

"Nothing's wrong...I ...I got it," I mumbled to the teller and the manager, trying to force the sweetest, most secure smile I could.

I picked up the phone.

"Hello?" I said, failing to sound calm.

"My dear Angela, is everything all right? I just got an email from Bank of America," Brad answered.

"Oh...well, I'm actually here now, yes. It's ... it's me."

"So you *were* making the withdrawal?"

"Yes. I was," I responded, trying to sound normal in a far-from-normal situation.

Brad knew I wasn't one to spend egregious amounts of money shopping, or going out, or really anywhere.

I was an old jeans-and-T-shirt girl, through and through. Regardless of the money I had access to.

But this withdrawal ... I knew it was going to have to be explained. Somehow.

"Why? What do you need that type of money for, dear?" Brad asked. He didn't sound annoyed or displeased, not in the slightest. He just sounded genuinely concerned.

I wondered if he could hear my heart pounding like a malfunctioning bass box over the phone. I could feel my body heating up, my ears throbbing, fingers trembling, as if every inch of me was infected with pure panic.

"Uh...I really, um, needed to..." I said, stumbling over my words.

"Is your father okay?" Brad asked. "Please, Angela. You can tell me."

"He's all right. I'm all right too, Brad. Really. I just...I don't know what to say. I

I looked up into the teller.

In her narrowed eyes, I was a thief.

"You know what, you don't have to say anything, Angela," Brad said firmly.

A wave of shock ran through me. "What do you mean?"

"I trust you. I've always trusted you. If you need the money, it must be for a good reason. Plus, it's so little."

I forgot that to a Knight, sixteen thousand dollars wasn't outrageous.

"Thank you, Brad. Really. As soon as I can explain what's happening, I will," I promised.

Brad laughed. "Don't worry about it, Angela. Just get to work on making me grandchildren!"

And just like that, the heat returned to my cheeks, lighting my face on fire.

Not this again.

"Brad, I mean, I—" The phone line cut.

A WHIRRRR emerged from the teller's desk. The money shot out from the machine, as if it was putting on a show, just

I couldn't believe it.

I'd done it.

for me.

Everything would smooth out for Sophie, for Claudia, and Xavier wouldn't find out the truth from some midtown bank. He'd find it out properly, when the time was right.

The teller stuffed the money into a pristine envelope. She was in just as much disbelief as I was.

"Thank you." I smiled at her as I took the envelope from her hand. As I left the bank, merging with the other

pedestrians onto the sidewalk, I couldn't help but feel a smidge of pride.

I was making a difference in this little girl's, in Xavier's daughter's, life.

No matter how messy everything was about to get, that put a real, honest-to-God smile onto my face.



Claudia \square Claudia can you drop by my place Claudia I have so much to do atm Angela Okay, send me your address Angela As Claudia opened the ripped screen door of her apartment, it became obvious that she'd needed the cash weeks ago. In her vivacious, perfectly tailored clothes, Claudia didn't match the apartment at all. I reached for the envelope of money, finding the scent of fresh sizzling beef in the air. "You like burgers?" Claudia said, gauging my interest in the delightful smell. She walked into the kitchen. Catching me frozen in place, she waved me over. And that was when I saw her—Sophie, bubbling with joy in her seat. Obviously, she was adorable; any three-year-old was. But Sophie was the spitting image of Claudia, with maroon curly spirals springing from her tiny head. Her eyes, vibrant and alert, darted around the room with curiosity, engaged with every nook and cranny in her vicinity. Claudia flipped the burgers over. She nodded to the buns. "Do you mind?" she asked. I pulled them out and laid them out on plates. "Sorry, all we have is plastic. It's easier with a toddler." Claudia laughed. "I bet. It's very ... it's very homey in here," I told her. It was meant to be a compliment, but I could see her wince. Being *homey* wasn't exactly what Upper East Side girls dreamt about when they envisioned their futures. "Dig in," Claudia said, handing me a burger. "Hey, pumpkin spice!" Claudia cooed to Sophie, intertwining the toddler's tiny fingers in hers. She moved Sophie back and forth in a little dance, making her erupt in irresistible giggles. Claudia placed the burger down on Sophie's plate. However, Sophie's flailing arms knocked the plate off the table. Thud. I closed my eyes, bracing myself for the unavoidable shriek. It didn't come. I lifted my eyelids to find Claudia cleaning up beneath Sophie, who looked as tranquil as a teahouse on the coast of Japan, undisturbed. Wow. If she could make Xavier's daughter into a monk, Claudia must be the best mother in history, I thought. "I always make an extra, just in case!" she said while returning to the stove. What didn't she do right? If Claudia was Xavier's type, his type was flawless. The kind of woman who instinctively knew how to be a mother, how to control a boardroom, how to light up a room with a story. I couldn't do that. I was never good at being around people. It was just... never me. I suddenly felt hot. Too hot. Uncomfortably hot. Like the weight of expectation was draped over me. I needed to get out of here. I dropped the plate onto the counter, having only taken a single bite from the burger, and then pulled the envelope out of my purse. "Here," I said to Claudia, softly placing the envelope down beside the plate. "I'm sorry, I have to go."

The longer I stayed here, the smaller I felt. Because the one thought my mind kept circling back to was...

Xavier didn't choose me.

Brad did.

For the longest time, Xavier had hated that decision. He didn't even want me in his life. I was a breathing inconvenience.

But Claudia ... He'd wanted every inch of her, right from the beginning. She was a firework, and I was just a star in his sky.

A text went off in my pocket.

Xavier where are you?	
	Angela
	I'm shopping
Xavier send marco your add	ress
	Angela I'm kind of in the middle of something
	Angela is everything okay?
Xavier you'll find out soon	
Xavier did you send your lo	cation?
	Angela I can just meet you there
	i can just meet you there
Xavier no	
Xavier can't	
Xavier it'll ruin the surprise	
	Angela I promise I won't look it up
	Angela Just put it into Uber
Xavier fine	
Xavier did you have lunch?	
	Angela Not really
Xavier perfect	
	Xavier
When I asked Angie to renew our vows, I was, of course, excited for the meaning behind the ritual. The promised love, the promised unity, the promised <i>future</i> . But more than that, I was excited to see the smile on her face as we did things right. Really right.	
And more than <i>that</i> ?	
I was really, really goddamr Waiting at the most exclusiv	excited for the cake. e bistro in Manhattan, I made sure they'd laid out every kind of cake for us. Chocolate
Raspberry Truffle, Salted Caramel, Cappuccino, Southern Hazelnut Praline, and even the girly kinds, like Lemon Summer Berry and Strawberry Shortcake.	
When Angela walked into the rosy in all the right ways.	e store, she looked like a princess. Her face was flushed by the cold, her lips and cheeks

She saw the dessert spread before she saw me, and her eyes lit up. I walked over to her, wrapping my hands around her. "Hi," I whispered into her ear, giving her a soft kiss.

"Hey, you." She smiled back at me.

"Are you ready for some serious business?" I asked her. "I can't re-marry you if I don't know if you're a red velvet or dulce de leche girl."

She giggled, letting me guide her to the table. We took our seats.

"How does this work?" she asked.

"Well, it's a very serious method. Like a biology lab. Many grueling steps," I told her, grabbing a forkful of caramel glaze and lifting it toward her mouth. She took a bite, practically moaning in delight.

"You like that?" I asked. She nodded, and then she grabbed a spoonful of the Death By Chocolate, gliding it into my mouth.

Damn.

Hot chocolate-ly damn.

I scooted closer to her as we went through all the delights, feeling the warmth radiate from her body.

"I just can't choose. They're all so perfect," Angela said, looking over all the potential cakes. She looked up at me through her eyelashes, licking a smidge of cream off her lips.

"You know, there's one thing we haven't considered," I answered, running my fingers down her thigh. She was wearing tight jeans and knee-high boots, and the boots never failed to drive me crazy. "Which flavor would make you the most satisfied on our wedding night?"

As I gazed into her eyes, I could tell she was getting nervous with the direction of my flirting. The boldness of it. But still, she didn't look away.

Could it be that I was finally corrupting my wife?

Angela

Before I knew it, we were back at the house, Xavier's lips slamming against mine, his fingers under my bra straps as he kissed up and down my neck.

He peeled my teal bra off of me and shoved me down against the couch.

He cupped my breasts in his fingers, rubbing against my cleavage.

Then he pressed his tongue against my nipples, circling, in bliss.

"I want to make you scream," Xavier whispered. Something about the loving tone of his voice and the brazen words he was saying drove me further over the edge.

I needed him.

He helped me out of my boots and then pulled my jeans down, leaving me in nothing but my panties.

Xavier kissed up my thighs, sliding his fingers closer and closer to inside me. I could barely breathe I was shaking so much, so hungry for him—for all of him.

How does he know how to do all of this? To make me moan? To make me quiver? I wondered, watching as he took off his shirt.

That was when it hit me.

Claudia.

She taught him.

They did this together.

He did this for her.

"Stop, stop...I can't," I got out, moving away from him. Xavier froze, watching as my nearly naked body stepped across the hall. I could see the disappointment splashed across his face.

"You can't what, Angel? What's wrong?" he asked, concern mingling with frustration in his voice.

"Nothing," I managed, hiding my face in my hands.

"Angela ..." He trailed off, closing the space between us. He gently removed my hands from my cheeks and looked me right in the eye.

"What's going on?"

I took a deep breath. "I can't stop thinking about her. And you and her ... together ..."

"Me and who?"

"Claudia," I said, my voice shaking. "Are you sure you aren't still in love with her?"