Playing the Game

XAVIER

water and found a Fiji on my nightstand. Lucille, I thought, vaguely remembering her walking me to my bedroom last night. What a goddamn angel. I had dreamt about her ...the one who broke my heart, the one who had ruined me.

I woke up with a killer fucking headache. Ears ringing, head pounding, mouth tasting like cotton. I looked around for

I hadn't had a dream about her in a couple weeks, and it wasn't making my hangover any easier. In the dream, she

was beside me in my car. We were racing down some airport runway, nothing but miles of pavement before us. But my eyes weren't on the road; they were on her. She was twirling a strand of her long hair around her finger, and her eyes were glistening back at me. And then she turned to me, and, in her soft voice, with her judgmental tone, she said, "You're drunk."

And then my eyes flashed open and I was awake.

over my custom-made charcoal-gray leather interior. When I got to the office, Dad was sitting on my couch. "This is a surprise," I said, finishing the rest of my Fiji and taking a seat in the chair across from him.

I got dressed for work and left the building, almost punching Marco in the face for asking me if I wanted to stop for

breakfast. Did I look like I wanted to stop for breakfast? The thought of food alone was enough to make me puke all

"Jesus, Xavier," he said, shaking his head. "You reek."

"I didn't have time to shower this morning."

"Well, you smell like you showered in Grey Goose last night."

I was about to say something back, but I thought better of it. I smiled. "What can I help you with this morning, Father?"

He put his hands on his knees. "I just wanted to let you know I arranged a dinner for you, with Mr. Graden and his wife." Mr. Graden was the owner of a hotel in Soho that we were trying to buy and rebrand, and we'd been in discussions with him for over a year. But he was getting more and more on-board with the idea recently.

"Oh, he bit?" "Not a full bite, but he's more interested in smelling the meat now, sure. You'll have to do your best work tonight."

name is. It'll humanize you."

"I understand. Yeah." This was going to be interesting.

Angela. More of last night came back to me: me grabbing her, calling her a gold-digging slut. Great. I was sure she'd be eager to make a good impression. "You understand?" My dad looked at me expectantly. It was clear he wasn't going to leave until I confirmed his plan.

Xavier

for the couple joining us.

He needed the treatment; it was the only option.

was a 'very important' dinner with 'very important potential business associates,' and I was expected to go. He said it'd be nothing but fun for me. My only job would be to use my charm to make the evening as entertaining as possible

ANGELA

But the idea of being anywhere with Xavier, of having to pretend we were not just amicable but in love, was simply preposterous to me. But think of Dad, I reminded myself.

I had just gotten off the phone with Brad when I got Xavier's messages. Brad had given me the low-down, that there

any explanation about Dad, which meant I hadn't been in violation of the contract. I shook my head at myself. How could I have been so out of it that I'd thought that was a good idea?

I looked through my closet and found my most stylish outfit: an emerald-colored silk jumpsuit with a tie around the

And, as hard as it was for me to admit, I was kind of grateful Xavier had been so drunk. It meant I couldn't give him

I walked over to my desk and opened the drawer, pulling out a business card Brad had given me on the day of the wedding photo shoot. "If there's anything you need, anything at all, they can help you here," he'd said, handing the card to me. Carlyle Studios was written at the top, and underneath it read: Hair. Face. Style.

I punched the phone number into my phone. "Hello?"

"I was hoping to...to get my hair cut."

that what was on the inside was what mattered most, but I couldn't help thinking that, sometimes, when my insides were in coils and I felt lost, having my outside put together might be the next best thing.

"Wow. You look incredible," Pete the doorman said as I walked through the door he held open. It was seven forty-five,

the restaurant's lights.

"Hi, doll," he said loudly.

beautiful ladies."

you should drop by."

Probably said some shit I shouldn't have."

right?"

"Perfect," Xavier said.

dumpling shop in the city, actually."

"A mechanical engineering position. At Curixon."

"Great," I echoed.

I looked at Xavier.

to-go orders by mistake and

waves, the layers making the locks look like they were always in motion. I'd even made an effort with my makeup, too. And the jumpsuit really fit like a glove. The silk clung to all of my curves, and my small waist was on display thanks to the cinched-tie waist, and the neckline showed off just enough cleavage.

Pete waved down a cab, and I got in, rolling the window down and watching as the bright lights passed me by. When we pulled up to the restaurant, I climbed out of the cab and walked right up to the hostess.

When I got to the table, I saw I was the last to arrive. Xavier looked dapper in some fancy suit, like a prep school's dream alumnus.

Across from him were the very important business associates, I assumed. The man was probably around forty-five,

with salt and pepper hair and an attractive, friendly face. He was in a navy blue suit, and his watch sparkled under

When they saw me, each of the men stood up. Xavier put an arm around my waist and kissed my cheek, playing up the

with a plunging neckline.

husband role well. I flinched, but I don't think anyone noticed.

"Hi," I said, instructing myself to just get through the meal.

"Jay Graden," the man across from Xavier said, holding his hand out.

but lift up your family's legacy—" Xavier started, but was interrupted.

"We'll add it to the list, doll?" Xavier asked, directing the question to me.

"Xavier Knight's table," I said, surprised at my own confidence. It must have been the haircut.

"Nice to meet you," I said, and when we shook hands, his other hand came to cover mine. It felt warm, like I could trust him.

magazine. I sat down, and a waiter immediately filled my glass with white wine. I took a sip, knowing I'd need it.

"So, shall we talk shop? I know you're looking to find a new property owner, and our rebranding would do nothing

"Stop, Xavier. We haven't even ordered our appetizers yet. Let's hold off on the business talk. For the sake of the

"Hello, darling," she said, and I hung onto every word. Everything about her seemed like she'd stepped right out of a

"Absolutely," Xavier adjusted, not showing so much as a sliver of annoyance. I was impressed. "Tell me, how was Milan?" "Ooh, it was divine," Mrs. Graden moaned from her seat. "The fashion, the vino, all of it. Divine." I had never heard

"Oh, yes," I got out, hoping my surprise wasn't noticeable. "Definitely. Added to the list." I felt my cheeks burning. Maybe it was from the wine, or maybe it was the attention. Or maybe it's the lie you're telling, sitting at the table like everything between you and your husband is jolly, I thought.

"Excuse me," I said, and I pushed back my chair so I could stand. Before I could see any of their reactions, I headed for

When I walked out of the bathroom, I felt a hand grab my shoulder. "Hey," the voice said, and I turned to find Xavier. "Look," he started, "I know last night was fucked up. I was drunk.

"All right," I said, and I turned on my heel and walked back to the table. When we sat back down, Mr. and Mrs. Graden were staring into each other's eyes. It wasn't until Xavier cleared his throat that they realized we were back.

"Ah, welcome," Mr. Graden said. "I hope you don't mind. We ordered some antipasti."

...instantly ..." Xavier looked at me. "Well, I met Angela, and we I saw he was drowning. I knew he knew nothing about me.

"He always gets choked up telling the story," I said, jumping in, and the Gradens' eyes shifted to me. "We met in a

"I had just left an interview and needed a pick-me-up, and Xavier was having a bad day, too. We grabbed each other's

...started talking. The rest, it all fell into place."

"And what were you interviewing for?" Mr. Graden asked.

"I know Curixon. Mechanical engineering?" He looked dumbfounded. My dear husband did too.

"Yes," I said. "My degree was in that, so that was mainly the position I was looking for."

Xavier, who was trying to swallow his own shock.

"I always do my best work," I said. "We'll see about that." He stood up to go. "Oh, and bring Angela. Graden will be bringing his wife. Jessica, I think her

Il Mulino Xavier 8:00 PM

waist. I had purchased it with Em a couple years ago to wear to my class's graduation party at Harvard. But, at the last second, I'd decided to wear a plain old black dress instead. Tonight would be the night of the jumpsuit. I took the hanger out of the closet and hung it up on a hook on the wall. Then I ran a brush through my hair, marveling at how long it had gotten. Too long. I needed a change.

"Hi, this is Angela...Angela Knight." I heard muffled whispers in the background. Then: "Oh! Hi, Mrs. Knight. How can I help you?"

When I left Carlyle Studios, my hair fell two inches shorter, in layers that made it look voluminous and shiny. I knew

and I was ready to head downtown. My hair looked the same as it had when I left Carlyle Studios that afternoon. It splashed over my shoulders in soft

"Thanks, Pete," I said, and I meant it. It was nice to have a vote of confidence before walking into dinner with the man who'd verbally accosted me last night.

"This way," she said, with not so much as a smile.

His wife sat beside him and looked like a model. She was all elegant angles and soft features, and wore a peach dress

And then I walked around the table to Mrs. Graden, who also offered her hand to me. But her movements were slower, and we didn't shake so much as hold each other for a moment.

anyone talk like her before, not in real life. It was like she knew all eyes were on her, and that was what gave her the momentum to keep going.

"Wonderful," Mr. Graden chimed in. "We were there for—what, fifteen days, babe? Couldn't get enough. The two of

the restroom. I splashed water on my hands, wishing I wasn't wearing as much makeup so I could do the same to my face. I looked at myself in the mirror, and I tried to recognize the girl I knew from before all this. I wasn't sure I could see her.

I was stunned. Here I was, thinking Xavier only cared about Xavier. But now it was clear he cared about his dad's company, too. That didn't mean I'd forgiven him, but I didn't want to do anything to hurt Brad, either.

you to just sit quiet and laugh when they tell jokes, okay? Whatever you need to say to me, do it after we leave. All

His eyes were darting around, like he wasn't used to apologies. "But this dinner, it's really fucking important. So I need

Mr. Graden clasped his hands together. "So, Xavier. Tell me about the woman that swept you off your feet. It's nice to finally see you settled down."

Mrs. Graden clapped her hands together, moaning again. "So beautiful."

"I see. And where'd you get your degree?" "Harvard."

"You, sir," Mr. Graden said, turning to Xavier, "have found yourself a treasure of a wife." Xavier's eyes stayed on me, and I couldn't read the expression on his face anymore. But when he spoke, for the first time in perhaps the entire time I'd known him, his words sounded genuine. He said, slowly and simply, "It appears so."

"You studied engineering at Harvard?" Mr. Graden asked, not even trying to hide his surprise. He looked from me to "I was really fortunate. It was a wonderful experience," I said honestly.