**Anywhere But Here** 

**XAVIER** 

I stumbled through the hotel lobby toward the elevator. Two older women were on their way out, shushing and whispering as they threw judgmental glances my way.

Steve, that stupid fucking cunt.

I glared at them as they passed, and they stared at their garish high heels, hiding their faces behind the high collars of their fur coats as they rushed away.

That shut them up.

I groped the wall for the elevator button, fighting through the haze of whiskey and smoke that filled my brain. I

slammed the button repeatedly until the doors dinged open. Once again, I collapsed drunk on the elevator bench.

time was?

How many fucking times was I going to do this? I'd shown up to the interview a little drunk.

It wasn't my fault. *They* were the ones that delayed the damn thing for two hours. Didn't they know how valuable my

Besides that, I knew for a fact that Steve and Stephen Stevenson did most of their deals with cocktails in their hands. It was basically a requirement to close deals with a drink.

Fucking hypocrites.

A time and place, they'd said.

Please.

Why were they so pissed that I'd shown up tipsy?

Who were they to lecture me about the proper time when they couldn't even stick to their own goddamn schedules? The interview had gone to shit.

"Fuck off, I just need a drink."

Obviously.

They'd told me to sober up; I'd told them to go fuck themselves. Then I did what any sensible businessman would do: I walked down to the closest bar and drank myself silly.

I still had the presence of mind to go to my favorite shithole to keep the prying eyes of the press away. Homeless

Popeye had looked at me like I was a flea-bitten dog that just wouldn't go home. "Back for round two?" he asked, his voice nails on a fucking chalkboard.

"Pull up a chair. I'll drink your sorry ass into the ground."

That bastard could drink, I'd give him that. There I was, Xavier Knight, billionaire, going shot for shot with some loser in a dingy bar.

I sat next to Angela, staring at the cold dim sum. I couldn't even bring myself to look at her. I didn't feel like her

I picked up the cold wontons, shoveling them into my mouth, not bothering with chopsticks. They were tasteless. Still, I ate them, mindlessly shoveling them down my gullet.

**ANGELA** 

Safe. He was looking down at the table, his eyes on the empty plate before him.

I could smell the whiskey coming off of him. I felt myself get dizzy once again, my stomach churning uncomfortably, but I forced myself to stay. Xavier needed me here.

At least he's eaten.

this funk.

smooth them over.

"What?" His voice was raspy.

forest, and the golden pagoda!"

"Okay."

He didn't reply to me. He didn't even look at me.

I leaned against him, resting my head on his shoulder.

We sat there for what felt like forever, not saying a word.

I don't know where the idea came from, but I ran with it.

He sighed, scooting down to rest his head against mine.

him to say no. We were so distant lately.

"Thanks, Angel," he said.

"For what?"

in my inbox.

salt on the ocean breeze.

"Yup, sorry, doll," he said.

"Don't call me that."

to decompress."

He winked.

I glared back.

performer.

and stared at his smiling face.

*A little too much*, I thought.

People began to show up late.

Work began to pile up.

His impatience.

His anger.

"Oh, Brad," I sighed. "What have you gotten me into?"

When he left, everyone seemed to unclench.

Some stole a few minutes to leave early.

It had brought all of his worst qualities to the forefront.

seemed like tough love was the only thing that could help.

All he demanded was that you laugh at his bad jokes.

Henry sure wasn't any help, either.

the tank afterward.

I eyed the papers on my desk.

"For being here."

"How'd the interview go?" I asked gently.

I felt him stiffen at my touch, and his hands closed into fists on the table.

Nothing.

I reached out to place my hands over his, and I was relieved when he didn't push me away. I turned over his hands, gently prying his fingers loose from his tight fists. His fingernails had left deep grooves in his palm, and I tried to

I could only hold his hand, filling in the empty spaces between his fingers with mine. "Come to Japan with me," I said suddenly.

"Besides, you always surprise me with trips. I think it's my turn to take you on one for once." I turned my head, kissing his shoulder. "Let's get away from New York for a little bit, okay?"

I wrapped my arms around his waist and squeezed like I was lost at sea, holding onto a piece of driftwood. I won't lose you.

"Always." **PENNY** 

I shook my head, smiling as I led him toward our room, his hand in mine.

A knock on the door sent me crashing back to reality. "Come in," I called.

Henry waltzed in, his blazer hung over his shoulder, a stack of papers in the crook of his arm.

"Decompress?" I asked. "Have any of you even completed your work for the day?"

You're starting to sound like He Who Must Not Be Named."

"Yikes, maybe you should go home, too," he said. "No sense of humor." "Is that all?" I pressed.

Xavier might have ruled with an iron fist, but it had kept everyone efficient and on their toes. He'd been the glue that held Knight Enterprises together.

His intense need to perform—the well-being of himself and those around him be damned.

But while Xavier may have been holding the company together, doing so had been tearing him apart.

But looking at the endless work piling up on my desk... Maybe giving him one more chance might not have been such a bad idea.

He'd been appointed as interim CEO, at least until we found a suitable replacement.

God knows I'd tried being nice...and that had gotten me absolutely nowhere.

If I chipped away at it, I'd probably be done by...

Hopefully everything works out like you wanted, Brad...

Normally, I would've ignored someone like him, but I was just riled up enough to accept his challenge. I pulled up a stool, the damned thing wobbling violently underneath me. "I'm going to wipe that gap-toothed grin right off your face," I said. The next few hours were a blur.

He roared with laughter. He downed his beer, froth dripping down his scraggly beard.

My eyes fluttered open, and I woke up to find that I was still at the dinner table. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes before realizing that someone was sitting next to me. "Xavier," I said, relief flooding over me. He was home.

It was as if he was carved from stone.

I felt tears well up in my eyes, but I blinked them away. I had to be strong. I had to find a way to guide Xavier out of

way to help him.

I tried to think of something that I could do. The love of my life was in so much pain, and it seemed like there was no

Xavier didn't reply, but I could feel that he was mulling it over.

Warmth flooded through me at his touch. I let go of a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. Part of me had expected

"Come with me to Marlena Marlboro's gala. It'll be beautiful. You could use a change of scenery," I said, picking up

steam. "After the event is over, we can tour the country for a little bit. We can go to Tokyo. We can go see the bamboo

"Let's get you out of those clothes and into bed," I urged. I pulled him up, and Xavier groaned as he clutched his head.

*Is this what Xavier always had to deal with?* I collapsed into my chair, trying my best to ignore the piles of folders on my desk and the hundreds of unread emails

I closed my eyes, imagining myself by the sea, the sun on my skin and a Bradlini in my hands. I could almost smell the

"Don't tell me..." I groaned. Henry plopped the papers down on my already overflowing desk.

He shrugged. "I'm taking off for the night. A few of the boys wanted to swing by The Hatchback for a couple of drinks

"We're making headway," Henry assured me, though I believed him about as far as I could throw him. "Relax, Penny."

"Yup," he replied. "See you tomorrow, Penny." He walked out of the office, a bounce in his step.

When the door closed behind him, I sank even deeper into my chair. I picked up the photo of Brad I kept on my desk

The first couple of weeks after Xavier was ousted as CEO had gone fine. The office actually seemed brighter, calmer.

Xavier had held everyone to an impossibly high standard, and everyone felt his relentless pressure to be a top

Deadlines loomed, then were missed. Our stock, slowly but surely, began to dip down.

I thought back to that fateful day ...to when I'd decided not to stick up for Xavier. He was clearly on a path to self-destruction.

Brad's words of wisdom echoed in my mind, and at the time I'd been certain I was making the right decision.

Xavier had to find his own identity. One that wasn't attached at the hip with a "legacy" at Knight Enterprises. And it

He waltzed around like he owned the place, spending more time around the water cooler than he did at his desk. Everyone at the office loved him. He didn't make sure that things were running smoothly. He didn't demand any work to be done.

It was like he'd just gotten the keys to his dad's new car, taking it for joyrides all across town but never bothering to fill

What? Next year?

I returned Brad's photo to its spot on my desk, giving it one last look before turning to my laptop screen.

What has the world come to? The elevator doors opened into the penthouse, shaking me out of my thoughts. I dragged myself inside and found Angela asleep at the dining table. There was a plate of food in front of her, barely touched. I checked my phone. 5 missed calls, 1 new voice message. Guilt reared its ugly head. "Hey babe," Angela's voicemail played. "I'm just wondering where you are husband; felt like an imposter. You don't deserve her. Angela bought them for me. The least I could do was fucking eat them.