

Heart in Disguise

XAVIER

I couldn't fucking believe it. I thought the girl had understood what I was saying the other night, when I made it pretty damn clear that she was to stay out of the limelight.

I thought even a baby seal would've been able to understand me.

But apparently not.

Either she hadn't understood me, which meant she was as dense as a block of wood, or else she had purposely sought out the worst way she could screw with me. And not just me, but my business.

Which meant she had screwed with my father's business. The press could call me what they wanted—selfish, full of myself, full of shit, whatever—but the truth was that I never wanted my father to get hurt as a result of anything I did.

I didn't know if this was her retaliation from the night I was drunk, or the day I'd smashed the vase onto the floor, or something else entirely, but it was clearly a response to something.

Or else it wasn't, and she was just so desperate to get her face out into the world, to become famous at any cost, that she'd released her own nudes.

That would be the most psychotic explanation. I knew some pretty attention-seeking socialites, but none of them would go this far.

I was livid. Regardless of her rationale, the picture was out there.

And it was fucking everywhere. Wasn't it enough that she had somehow conned my father and married into the Knight name?

Why did she need to ruin everything else for me, too?

I was pacing the floor in my office when my father walked in. I wanted to jump up and jam my finger in his face, to yell, "This is YOUR fault!"

But I couldn't talk to him like that, not even now. Maybe he was a bit too trusting sometimes, but he was still the man that had looked out for me my whole life.

So I tried to control myself as he stepped closer to me.

"Son," he started, his face grave, "I can't imagine what you're feeling."

"I'm goddamn pissed," I said, pounding my fist into my hand for emphasis.

He took a breath. "The bastard who leaked those pictures is going to be taken care of," he said.

And that was when I realized I'd never even considered the possibility of someone else leaking the pictures. But I trusted my gut.

If it looked and smelled like a gold-digging, attention-seeking whore, then it probably was.

"First things first," I said. "Damage control."

"We have Frankie's team in PR handling the online outlets, and Steph from publishing will handle print. Donnie's throwing slander around to anyone that'll listen. This'll be wiped under the rug by day's end," my dad said, his eyes earnest.

"Jesus. Okay," I responded. "Thanks for having a handle on it."

"You're my son. And she's my daughter," Dad said.

I could feel the blood start to heat up in my veins, and I knew I had to get him out of my office before I blew up.

"I need some time alone."

"Of course," he said, and with one final sympathetic look, he left the room. I made sure to close the door behind him.

ANGELA

I had turned my phone off on the train, and it had stayed off all day. Other than my journey from Penn Station to home, I'd been all alone. And for the first time, I wasn't complaining. Alone meant no prying eyes, no questions.

It meant safe.

When I got to Penn Station, I draped my hair in front of my face and bought the first I <3 NYC hat I could find.

Then I used the car service number Brad had given me weeks ago, the one I'd never needed to use before. I usually preferred the subway, but today I needed the privacy that tinted windows brought.

When my Town Car pulled up, I climbed in and let the silence wash over me. When we pulled up to the building, I got out and didn't so much as look at the doorman I scurried past. I couldn't.

I'm sure everyone and their mother had seen the picture, had formed some sort of opinion about the girl who would take it. And release it.

I didn't want to see that opinion in anyone's eyes.

I ran through the lobby, allowing myself to finally breathe as soon as the elevator doors shut. And when I got to the penthouse, I stepped to my room as quietly as humanly possible in case anyone else was home.

I didn't need Lucille or Marco—or, God forbid, Xavier—having the chance to ask me any questions. I couldn't take it.

I shut my door quietly and climbed into bed, finally letting the emotion out. The tears came hard and fast, and I shoved my face into the pillow to mute the wailing sounds.

Then the rage came, and my cries turned to screams.

It isn't fair. It isn't FAIR!

I was punching the pillow now, a locked fist shooting into the squishy surface.

My life had gone from normal to terrible, from typical to the furthest thing from typical, in a month. And it had all started with Brad Knight.

It had all started because I was offered an easy way to fix my problems, and I had taken it without considering the consequences. I was sure that Mr. Lemor had seen pictures of me and Xavier in the news, or heard that we'd gotten married, and that was why he was popping up like this now.

He didn't want anyone else to have me.

If I had just asked the bank for a loan, or found another job in a different industry, one that Mr. Lemor couldn't interfere with, I would've been able to pay for Dad's treatment.

But I knew I was lying to myself. His treatment cost was already almost fifty thousand dollars, and that was before the trial. This was the only solution.

But was it worth the total destruction of my life?

As long as I was locked away in this ivory tower, I wouldn't know what I could be capable of doing on my own. Maybe getting out of here and getting my life back on track was the key to finding a real job and helping my dad myself.

Without any billionaire interference. I was sure there could be some sort of payment plan. Something.

I turned my phone on, ignoring all the texts and missed calls that flashed across the screen. I wanted to talk to one person, and one person only.

Angela
Can I come to you?

Brad
Of course.

Brad
I'll meet you outside.

I changed my clothes and padded out of the penthouse. I'd called the Town Car back, and it was waiting outside. I was walking through the lobby, still keeping my eyes cast down, when I heard a voice a few feet away from me say something.

When my eyes went up to see who had spoken, the voice repeated itself.

"A shame," Pete the doorman said. He opened the door, and I couldn't tell if he was blaming me or pitying me. I looked back at the ground and got into the Town Car.

It pulled up to the office building where the Knight company was housed, and Brad was waiting outside. He saw the car and slid in immediately.

"Darling," he said, engulfing me in a hug. I thought I'd had a handle on my emotions by then, but the tears just kept coming. "It's okay. It's okay. Let it out," he said, rubbing my back.

"I'm...I'm sorry," I cried into his shoulder.

"It's okay. We're on it. It's all being fixed as we speak."

"Fixed?"

"We have the best-of-the-best PR team, Angela, and you better believe you're priority number one. The next outlet, online or print, that shares that photo or so much as mentions your name, will be sued and sued again. Do you understand?"

I nodded. But the weight on my shoulders was still there, reminding me how hard it was to stand tall when I was standing with the Knights.

"Brad, I have to...talk to you." I sniffled, and he handed me a handkerchief.

"What is it?" He looked at me with such kindness, such genuine worry, that I felt bad saying what I was about to say. But I had to get it off my chest.

I wiped my nose and then started.

"I can't be a part of the arrangement anymore," I said. "It's too much. It's too hard. Xavier thinks so little of me, I know he does, and the rest of my family and friends, they don't understand this world. And neither do I, Brad. I feel like a foreigner in my own home. I don't know how to speak, or how to act, and eyes are always on me. There's so much pressure. And now, this ..."

I exhaled, surprised I'd gotten all of it out. "People are after me."

I was expecting Brad to open the car door and push me out, to chastise me, or scream at me, or call me stupid. But, instead, he took my hand in his.

"Sweet girl, there is something so honest about your heart," he said.

"Thank you for being so open with me. You know, there are a billion girls who would kill their own mothers to be in your position. It's true," he said at my shock.

"I apologize for the morbidity, but you have access to the wealth and status that most only dream of."

"But I don't ...I don't want any of it."

"Exactly," he said, and he touched the tip of my nose. "The world, I know how it must seem to you now. But you'll adapt. You're a smart girl. You'll come to learn that today's news is already yesterday's news. People are after you because you have what they want."

"But what you also have is an army of people ready to protect you. And as for Xavier ...," he said, shooting a quick glance out the window, toward the building where his son was.

"There's a lot you don't know about him, my dear. Quite a lot. I know all the faults that are splashed across the gossip columns are true. That he's a party boy, a womanizer. That he spends money like it's water in a rainforest."

"I'm not trying to insult your son, Brad," I said softly. "I just don't see how we ...could ever work. We're so different ..."

"Ah," Brad interrupted me. "But that's where you're wrong. It's true that your heart is pure and his has been around the block. But let me assure you that his heart is very much present. It's just hiding, at the moment."

I squinted, unsure Brad really knew his son at all.

"Let me tell you a story. A story about a young man who fell in love with a young woman. A young man who was so out of his mind in love that he offered the young woman anything her heart desired. The world. And they were set to be married, and he had never been filled with so much joy.

"And the day before the wedding, the young woman took off. Disappeared. With the engagement ring that could buy her a new life, and the young man's oldest friend."

I let Brad's words sink in, shocked.

Xavier had his heart broken, his ring stolen. He was betrayed by his fiancée and his best friend. His partying, his yelling, his inability to trust anyone outside of those he really knew, it was all starting to add up.

"Please, sweet girl," Brad said, still clutching my hand. "Give my son another chance. Give the arrangement a shot. He's in there somewhere. I know you can help bring him out."

I looked at the selfless billionaire before me, who wanted so desperately to see his son become the man he knew he could be.

And I saw my own dad, lying in the hospital bed, proud of his daughter and about to start a trial treatment that could save his life.

Maybe the weight was still on my shoulders, and maybe I had no idea what new horrors tomorrow would bring. But sitting there, in the back of the Town Car, parked outside the fancy office building, I felt like I at least had some purpose.

Like there was something I could do. And it dawned on me that I wasn't just there to help my dad.

I was there to help my husband, the man with the broken heart.