

The Arrangement
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Ill Expectations

XAVIER

The bartender was still on her knees, peering down at me in her lingerie when I heard the elevator ding.

“Who the fuck is that?” I gumbled, sitting up.

She put a hand on my chest. “The maid will get it, won’t she?” she drawled, her accent worsening my headache.

I was still thinking about the dream I’d had, the one where I was engaged in an intimate and passionate, long-lasting sex scene with my wife.

The wife I hated.

“ANGELA! XAVIER!”

Shit. That was my dad’s voice. In the hall. Outside the bedroom where I was currently sharing a bed with a mostly-naked bartender while my wife slept in a different room.

I jumped out of bed and scrambled to put on the closest pair of jeans I could find. “You need to go,” I said to the bartender, barely shooting her a glance.

“Are you ...are you serious?”

I nodded. “Now.”

“KIDS, IT’S TOO NICE A DAY FOR YOU TO SLEEP SO LONG!”

He was still in the foyer by the sounds of it. I threw a T-shirt on and, finding the bartender’s dress on the floor, tossed it to her.

“Come on, let’s go.”

I was trying to think of a way to get Angela into my room—for appearances only, of course—when I saw the phone on my nightstand light up.

Angela

Your dad’s here

Xavier

I know, I hear him

Angela

He’s gonna know we sleep apart

Xavier

I know

Xavier

I’m trying to think

Angela

There’s a girl with you isn’t there

Xavier

I have to hide her

Xavier

Where’s dad?

Angela

I think by the elevator still

Xavier

But how do we get him there

Xavier

We need to get him to focus on something

Xavier

Other than us

Angela

Lucille is here

Angela

She can help

Xavier

I’m thinking

Angela

I can hear him pacing

Xavier

I KNOW

Xavier

Still thinking

Angela

He can’t see the girl, Xavier

I was thinking about how to answer that when there was a knock on my door.

Fuck.

“One minute, Dad!” I shouted, racking my brain for a way out. But then I heard Lucille on the other side.

“It’s me! I come with towel!” I ran to the door and opened it a crack, enough to see her face and take the towel. “Ms. Angela has idea. You, make yourself look sick. Like dog. And go to her room. I take care of girl.”

She peered past me when she said that, looking right at the bartender trying to zip herself back into last night’s dress.

I had no other solution, so I nodded and took the towel. Before Lucille let me close the door, she whispered, “Act big and your dad will follow you.”

I shook my head. Here I was, hungover and taking acting advice from my maid. Who knew this day would come.

I closed the door and padded into the en suite bathroom. I splashed hot water onto my face and rubbed my eyes until they looked red, and then I used both hands to mess up my hair. I slapped my face a few times, hard, turning my cheeks pink.

Then I slid off the jeans I’d just put on and found a pair of old sweatpants in my closet. I stretched the collar of my T-shirt until it looked haggard.

And I took a glance in the mirror. Good.

I walked back into the bedroom. The bartender looked up, shock covering her face.

“What happened to you?” That was the response I’d been going for. Now I’d convince my dad and the girl wouldn’t feel so upset about getting kicked out.

“I’m sick,” I said, walking her purse over to her. “Here’s what’s gonna happen. You’re gonna need to be as stealthy as a fucking spy—”

“What? Why?”

“Well. I’m married,” I said. “But you already knew that, so save the dramatics.”

Her eyes widened. I didn’t like being cruel to girls that didn’t deserve it, but lately the line had been blurring for me.

She’d willingly slept with a married man, so how innocent could she be?

“I’m going to run into the living room, and Lucille is going to put you in the elevator. You keep your head down until you’re on the street outside. Clear? Want me to repeat it?”

She looked like she was going to cry.

Whether she was innocent or not, I didn’t have time for tears, so I took her hand in mine and looked her right in the eye.

“I had fun with you. You’re a great girl. Now I need you to help me out. Can you do that?”

She softened, looked at the ground, then flashed her eyes back at me. She was definitely hot, so why didn’t I feel anything?

“Okay,” she said softly.

“Good girl,” I said, and I kissed her cheek.

“Until next time.” And then I hung the wet towel around my neck and opened the door, letting out a massive cough.

ANGELA

The second I heard Xavier’s cough I opened the door to my bedroom. This was going to have to be the performance of a lifetime.

I didn’t want to do anything to hurt Brad, and if he found out the truth about our living situation, about his son bringing home different women every night, he’d definitely be hurt.

So I ran into the hall.

“Xavier! I’m coming!” He looked terrible. His face was sweaty and red, and I’d never seen him in such raggedy clothes before. He kept coughing.

“I don’t”—he stopped to cough—“know what’s happening.”

“It’s okay,” I said, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him closer to my room. “You’re gonna be okay.”

“Oh dear,” I heard Brad say from behind us as he followed us into my room. I felt his eyes watching. “Can I do anything?”

“That’s okay. I’ll grab the cough syrup—” Xavier let out another huge cough, and I cradled him in my arms, rubbing his shoulders. I used to take care of Lucas when he was sick, so this wasn’t new to me.

Xavier didn’t seem like Xavier. He just seemed like a boy who needed my help.

He coughed again. “Xavier, I’m just going to run into my bathroom and grab the—”

“Nonsense,” Brad said. “I’ll get it. Tell me which drawer.”

“It’s in the medicine cabinet!” I said, and Xavier and I locked eyes. Brad was almost in my bathroom when I saw Lucille sprint from the kitchen to Xavier’s bedroom.

She was no doubt guiding the poor girl into the elevator.

I heard the faint sounds of the elevator doors opening and closing, and a few seconds later, Brad came back with the bottle in his hands. “Bull’s-eye!” he said.

I couldn’t help but smile.

We all moved to the living area, and after the performance we’d just pulled off, being near Xavier didn’t feel as hostile. He kept giving me weird looks, looks that lingered, but I just shrugged it off.

Maybe he’d never been taken care of by someone he wasn’t paying before—even if he was just fake sick.

“The reason I came,” Brad started, sitting in a leather armchair across from us on the couch, “is to give you both a dollop of good news.” He looked from me, still in my pajamas with my hair in a ponytail, to his splotchy-skinned son.

“You both look like you could use it.” He let out a chuckle.

“Sorry you came on such a rough morning,” I said. “Xavier asked me to sleep in the guest room last night so I wouldn’t catch his virus.” Xavier looked at me, like he was searching my face for something. Then he turned back to his dad.

“Didn’t want her getting sick on account of me.”

“My lovebirds,” Brad cooed. “Okay, here’s the deal. Xavier, you know about the gala Wednesday.”

Xavier nodded. “I’ll be better by then.”

“Of course you will! Angela, you’ll be joining us too.”

Xavier’s head shot up. “What? I thought it was just you and me at the table.”

“It was,” Brad said. “But then Grant, you remember Grant, he decided to bring his wife along. And the rest of the boys followed suit. So now it’s less of a business table and more of a social table. So, Angela will be coming along. If that’s okay with you, dear.”

“Of...of course,” I stuttered. A gala?

“Wonderful. It’s this Wednesday. Xavier will give you the details. I’m sure he’s just dying to show you off.” Brad stood, clapping his hands together once.

“I’ll take off now, let you get back to health.”

I walked over to him and kissed his cheek. “Thanks for coming by,” I said.

“You’re gonna love it. Paris in the winter. There’s nothing more romantic.”

What did he just say? I looked at Xavier, but his head was down, looking at the floor. So I turned back to Brad.

“Paris?” I whispered.

“Xavier didn’t tell you? That’s where the gala is, dear.” He kissed my other cheek and let Lucille escort him to the elevator. When the doors closed, I looked at Xavier, still in shock.

“We’re going to Paris?”

“Why didn’t you say no?” he asked, immediately after I’d spoken. He looked mad.

I was so confused, I’d thought we were getting along. We’d just used teamwork to convince Brad we were indeed in love, so I was at least expecting us to be civil when he left.

But he wasn’t gone five seconds before Xavier started yelling at me, like he’d forgotten everything I’d just done for him. This was the Xavier I was most accustomed to seeing, the one that tilled me with nerves.

“You wanted me to say no?”

“Why would I want you to say yes?” he yelled, standing.

“This was supposed to be a business trip. To sign a very important deal. And after the deal that you ruined, you and your artist friend, I need this one to go through.”

I took a few steps backwards. He wasn’t making any sense. I didn’t know how to respond.

“I’m... I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?”

“It’s not like this was my idea,” I said quietly, looking at the floor. “I have stuff to do in the city on Thursday. I have an interview for a job. Now I won’t be able to go to that.”

Even though I was trying to make a point, it was true. I did have an interview. At a technology start-up called Jumper.

It was a small company, but it had been making a name for itself in the tech world. When I reached out to them, they hadn’t heard of me or my boss.

It helped that I’d used my maiden name, of course, but still. I was excited for the interview, for the chance to make myself useful to a company that was doing great things.

But now I’d have to cancel so I could help the Knights. The more I thought about it, the more frustrated it made me. Another instance of me putting my life to the side so the Knights could take what they needed from me.

And no thank you in return. It was like all the things I’d done for them just went unnoticed.

Worse than unnoticed. I got screamed at.

“Oh, you poor soul! You won’t be able to go to an interview! I won’t be able to nail a multi-million-dollar rebranding partnership because Graden hates you! Because he knows you’re a cheating little gold digger! So I need this Paris deal to make up for ALL THE SHIT YOU’VE RUINED!”

I felt the tears coming. I tried to squeeze my eyes to hold them in, but it was no use.

“You have the audacity to complain about getting invited,” Xavier said, his tone level now. “You should be fucking grateful.”