

Past and Present

XAVIER

Dad
Xavier, what's going on?

Dad
Ron just informed me that the Paris contract is off.

Dad
That's months of work up in smoke.

Dad
Meet me at the office at 6am to discuss.

Dad
To make things extra clear, it's a MANDATORY meeting.

"Morning, Boss," Ron greeted as I walked past his desk the next day. It was still dark out, hardly daylight yet, and the office was empty.

Happy fucking Monday to me.

"Thanks for the coffee," I replied, grabbing the steaming cup from his hand. "Is he in there already?"

"You bet. Will you need me to take notes?" Ron asked, always eager.

"No. I need you to get everyone from the Paris project together. I'll speak to them at eight a.m. sharp."

I didn't wait for Ron's reply, simply pushed open the door to my office. Dad was standing in the middle of the room.

He was supposed to be semi-retired, whatever the hell that meant, but he had a habit of showing up in my office like he still owned the place. I supposed I should be grateful he was so happy to "help out," but most of the time, it just pissed me off.

"Dad—" I began, only to have him cut me off.

"I'm not interested in your excuses, son."

I dropped into my chair and rubbed my temples, feeling a migraine coming on. I didn't have time for a lecture this morning. I hadn't gotten enough sleep for one.

"You dropped the ball big time," Dad continued, pacing in front of my desk. He always moved when he was mad, like the problem was some sort of tiger or bear he could scare away by making himself bigger.

Only I'd been on the receiving end of his hand gestures and loud words too many times to get scared off.

"I couldn't believe it when I heard that you had terminated our contract with Jacques last night. My son, my new son doesn't do that sort of thing. That's what the old car-racing, money-burning, irresponsible Xavier did. Not the Xavier who I entrusted Knight Enterprises to."

I took a sip of my coffee and tried again. "Dad, I—"

Dad crossed his arms. "How could you sabotage the project like that, Xavier? That's months of work just gone out the window. It will take weeks to get things up and running again, to find another partner."

Tired of the old man's verbal assault, I gritted my teeth together and shouted over him. "JACQUES TRIED TO RAPE ANGELA!!!!"

Dad's face dropped immediately. He fell into one of the guest chairs on the opposite side of the desk. "What?"

"Jacques tried to rape Angela," I repeated, quietly this time. It fucking hurt to say the words, to know that I had failed her.

Last night had been a fucking testimony to how much I'd been working on my temper. I'd sat quietly as Angela told me the extend of what he'd done to her and the texts he'd sent her.

How he'd cornered her. Touched her. I'd let the fury wash over me, build in my stomach. Then, after Angela was asleep, I'd channeled the fury into something powerful.

"When? How?" Dad asked.

"Paris. He stalked her. Trapped her in a side room at the venue," I told him. "I already called the hotel and had them release the security camera footage to me."

"Have you called the authorities? Do I need to get my team involved?" Dad pulled his phone out of his pocket. He was the epitome of calm now, all business and determination.

"Yes, yes of course," I replied. It stung a little, his lack of confidence in my abilities, the lack of confidence in my desire to protect my wife.

It stung even more knowing that I deserved it.

"The police are looking for him now. It looks like the bastard caught a private plane back to France. Interpol is waiting to catch him at the airport."

Dad leaned back in his chair, eyebrows raised. "You did a good job, son."

"They haven't caught him yet."

"They will. Do you have any idea what his motive was?"

I'd hoped he wouldn't ask that question, but no one became as powerful as my father without asking tough questions.

I cleared my throat and looked down, unable to hold my father's gaze as I admitted, "I think it might have been for revenge."

"Revenge for what, Xavier?"

I felt shame heat the back of my neck. "Me sleeping with his girlfriend."

Dad held up his hand. "I don't want to know more. Just tell me you've ended it."

"I have."

"And is the girl okay?"

I nodded. "I put her up in one of our hotels. I didn't want her to get hurt because of something I did."

Dad nodded. "You did good, son. Now get out."

"What?" I balked, hand tightening around my mug.

That was it? Good job, now get out while I handle it?

"You need to be with Angela right now. She's extremely vulnerable," Dad explained.

Yeah, no kidding.

That was why I had stayed up all night holding her until she fell asleep. Why I had been making calls to hunt the slimy French fuck down. Why I had ripped apart the biggest contract the company had ever had in my time as CEO.

"I need to be here, see this through. Not sitting at home, hoping it will all end well," I said, seething. "He laid his hands on her, Dad. Hurt her. I can't let him get away with it."

"We won't," Dad replied. "But there is more to the story you don't know, Xavier. This isn't the first man who's threatened Angela."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

I felt the fury begin to build again as Dad told me the truth behind the nudes of Angela that had leaked. How her old boss had stalked her, threatened her, how they had kept it from me at Angela's request.

She hadn't trusted me with the truth. Why would she? I had berated her when the pictures made the news. I had called her an attention-seeker, a gold-digging whore, a lying slut.

I couldn't have been further from the truth.

"I was a fucking bastard," I breathed when Dad finished.

Dad's lips turned up in a small smile. "Yes, you were. You have a chance to redeem yourself now. Go to her, I'll take care of everything here."

I found myself nodding, standing. "Thank you."

I'd failed Angela in more ways than I had known. I wouldn't let that happen again.

"And, son?" Dad called as I was halfway out the door. "I'm proud of you. You did a good job."

ANGELA

"Did you find the pictures of the venue?" I heard Em ask.

Her voice sounded far away, like I was underwater.

I shook my head, pulling myself from my thoughts. "Ah, no, sorry."

Em frowned and pushed down the screen of my laptop. "Everything okay, Angie? You look like hell."

I probably should have made myself look more presentable before she'd arrived. The truth was I was simply too tired to try. It would have been kinder to her to cancel our date.

A little girl time had seemed like the perfect thing to get my mind off of last night, though. Instead of helping, I'd been staring at my computer screen for the past hour, unable to shake the feeling of Jacques's eyes on me.

I couldn't tell Em that, though. I couldn't worry her.

"Just didn't sleep well," I offered her a small smile. "More coffee should do the job."

I pushed myself up and went to the kitchen to make a fresh pot.

I filled my mug and returned to sit beside Em at the table. "I'll find those pictures now. Did you find any bridesmaids dresses you like?"

"Yeah, a couple of options. There is a halter-neck one here I think looks nice." As she spun her laptop toward me, my phone buzzed on the table.

I picked it up, heart sinking as I read the incoming messages.

Dustin
I have some terrible news

Dustin
My studio was broken into last night

Angela
Oh no! Are you okay?

Dustin
I'm fine

Angela
And your paintings?

Dustin
Untouched, except for one

Dustin
The asshole stole your painting

Dustin
I'm so sorry

Angela
Don't be silly. I'm just glad you aren't hurt!

Dustin
I promise I'll make you a new one

Angela
Any idea who might be responsible?

Dustin
The fuzz are looking into it

Dustin
Hopefully they will find my masterpiece soon

"You sure you're okay?" Em asked, seeing my somber expression.

"Someone broke into Dustin's studio," I replied, putting down my phone.

"Is he okay?"

"Yes, they just stole the painting he made for me. The one of Xavier and me."

"No offense, but who else would want a painting of you two?"

There was only one name that came to mind: Jacques.

It was a ridiculous thought. Jacques didn't know Dustin. There was no way for him to know the painting existed.

If he had, he was more likely to set it on fire than hang it over his mantel. Still, I somehow knew that he was responsible.

I put my shaking hands in my lap, hiding them from Em.

"Angie, you really don't look so good." Em frowned, her gaze running over me. "You sure there isn't something you want to talk about?"

Tears began to pour down my cheeks, and I shook my head. "I'm sorry, Em. I can't."

Seeming to understand, Em pulled me into a hug.

I wouldn't let this be like last time. Wouldn't let anyone else get hurt for me. When the pictures of me had leaked on the news, it hadn't just affected me but also Brad, Xavier, and my family.

This time, Dustin had been attacked. It was only a matter of time before someone else would get hurt.

Jacques was coming for me.

The only question was, when?