

Too Late

ANGELA

"Please," I begged, voice hoarse from screaming. "Please let me go."

Like every other time I'd asked, my kidnapper ignored me.

I hissed as I was jolted to the side and my head banged against the cold metal paneling behind me.

We were in a vehicle. That much I knew. I could hear the engine below me. Felt the braking and turns as we wound through traffic.

How long we had been driving, or to where, were other matters.

I forced myself to think back.

I remembered cool night air brushing against my too-hot cheeks and bare arms as I stepped into the hotel gardens.

I had taken a deep breath in, letting the stillness of the spring night soothe me.

The whole day had been perfect. Em was over the moon. Soon, Xavier and I could return to our apartment and cuddle in bed.

I could tell him those three little words I'd been dying to tell him.

I crossed the stone patio and sat on a bench in front of a little pond.

The thought of Xavier had made me wonder what could have pulled him away from the wedding.

An emergency, he'd said. What kind of emergencies happened at ten at night on a Saturday?

I'd shivered as another breeze rustled through the trees, making me cross my arms against my chest. Then, from the shadow beside the doors, a voice had spoken:

"Can I interest you in a drink, mademoiselle?"

My heart stopped. "What are you doing here?"

Jacques had smiled, stepping toward me. "I saw you leave, and you looked so ...so sad that I thought I'd come to make sure you are okay."

We were in the hotel garden. There were hundreds of people just on the other side of the doors. He wouldn't dare touch me there, would he?

"Xavier is here," I'd lied. "If I scream, he'll come running."

My heart was racing in my chest, my hands clammy on the cold stone bench. I knew what came next. Jacques's fingers digging into my thighs, his lips on my throat.

We'd danced this dance before.

Frantic, I turned my head, looking desperately for another exit.

I couldn't let him win.

Couldn't let him get that close again.

Jacques laughed and slowly began to step toward me. "I'm afraid, mademoiselle, that your husband is rather occupied at the moment."

"Please ...Please stop," I said, standing.

Jacques took another step closer. "Stop what?"

I opened my mouth to scream, but I wasn't fast enough.

Jacques jumped forward, knocking me backward.

A sharp pain blossomed in my temple.

My vision swam.

Then there was only ...black.

When I'd come to, I was lying on my back, blind in this vehicle. Jacques had put something dark over my head. I could feel the rough material of it move and dampen with every breath I took.

My hands had been laced behind my back, the ties so tight I was beginning to lose feeling in my fingertips.

This was it. The end. It had to be. No one knew I was missing, where I was going, who I was with.

"Please, let me go," I tried again. "You can have whatever you want. If it's money you're after—"

A dark laugh replied.

At least it was something.

"I'm not after money," Jacques told me.

"Then what?"

"Revenge."

Finally the truck slowed to a stop. I heard the front door open and close, the crunch of shoes in gravel as Jacques walked around to the back.

The panel doors slid open, and I let loose a blood-curdling scream as a hand wrapped around my ankle and pulled me from the truck.

I was hauled roughly to my feet, and Jacques hurried me across the gravel then jerked me to a stop. I heard a door open and he shoved me through it.

Suddenly, the fabric was ripped off my head.

I blinked as my eyes adjusted to bright, synthetic light.

Head pounding, I tried to stay standing.

Stay focused.

I was standing in the entranceway of some kind of warehouse. Crates were stacked in tall rows, stretching out in front and behind me.

I blinked again as a shadow came over me, blocking the light, and Jacques came into focus.

"Such a pretty thing," he purred, running a finger down my jaw. He laughed as I jerked back.

"Why are you doing this?"

Jacques's expression darkened. "You shouldn't have rejected me in Paris. If you'd let me have what I wanted then, we would have been even. Now he's taken everything from me. So I will take everything from him."

Pulling a knife from his belt, a smile spread across his face.

Something welled up inside of me. Was I going to let this man hurt me more than he already had? Was I going to let myself be a casualty in his anger at Xavier?

Jacques had made a mistake.

Though his plan had worked so far, he'd overlooked one small detail.

He'd underestimated me.

I was tired of being underestimated.

As though I were some swooning damsel in distress, Jacques had left me standing in the middle of the warehouse, believing me to be too feeble to ever think I might be able to escape.

My head might be ringing, and my arms might be bound, but I still had my legs, and he was a fool to think I wouldn't use them.

I may not have been the most outgoing or self-assured, but I valued my life.

I wanted to see my family again. Tell Xavier that I loved him. Be a good wife, daughter, friend. And I wasn't about to let Jacques take that away from me.

As soon as Jacques was close enough, I kicked, hitting him right between the legs with the heel of my black pump.

His knife clattering to the floor, Jacques dropped to his knees with an "oomph," and I sprinted for the door.

XAVIER

Penny
you need something?

Xavier
I need to speak to u

Xavier
Pick up ur phone

Penny
i'm in a lecture right now ...what's up?

Xavier
Where is Jacques?

Penny
UGH. don't even get me started

Penny
you were right. Never should've given that creep the time of day again

Xavier
Penny

Xavier
Angela is missing

Xavier
I think Jacques might be behind it

Penny
oh no

Xavier
When's the last time u saw him?

Penny
A few days ago ...

Xavier
Does he have a place in town? Somewhere he might take her?

Penny
Let me think ...

Xavier
hurry.

Xavier
please.

Xavier
Penny???

Penny
He owns a warehouse on the waterfront!

Penny
its usually empty. He likes to throw parties there sometimes.

Xavier
THANK U

"Get out," I snapped, ripping the driver's side door of my Lamborghini open.

We were out front of the hotel. A few pedestrians turned their heads at my raised voice.

"Out. Now." I snapped again when Marco didn't move. "Leave the keys."

My driver stepped out of the car, and I slid into the driver's seat. I didn't have time for traffic or red lights. I needed to get to Angela now.

Ron had found the address of Jacques's warehouse and I wasn't about to let anything else stop me from getting there as fast as possible.

"Son," Dad called, approaching the car window. "You should wait for the police."

"They can follow me," I shifted into gear. "I don't have any more time to waste."

If the painting was any indicator, Jacques had done all this to get back at me.

For fucking Penny.

For ruining his career.

For sending the police after him.

It was my fault he'd taken Angela.

If he touched her, hurt her, it was because of me.

I couldn't let that happen.

Tires squealing, I merged onto the busy street.

A symphony of lights and sirens fell into line before me, cutting a path through the city.

"I'm coming, Angela," I murmured to myself.

I only hoped that I would arrive before it was too late.

Heart hammering, I tore through the streets.

I soon left my escort behind blocks back. I could barely hear their sirens now.

My vehicle was much faster, far superior.

But still not fast enough.

Only this morning I had been asking Mr. Carson if I could marry Angela.

I was ready this time. I knew that Angela was everything that I could ever want and more.

We'd been together for months. I'd wasted so much valuable time hating her.

Now it was too late.

Now I might never have the chance to tell her the truth.

To tell her I was wrong.

To tell her I loved her.