A Secret Universe

Angela

The only thing I knew about Didi was that she was a liar.

She had lied about who she was, what she'd wanted, and why she'd wanted me.

Didi sipped her coffee. I sipped mine. We didn't speak.

We hadn't been speaking for the past twelve minutes.

I really didn't have much to say.

There was no reason for Xavier's ex-fiancée to be in my life, let alone in my favorite Chelsea cafe.

I didn't want to talk to her.

But she hadn't.

I would have never talked to her if I'd known who she was, even if she'd told the truth from the start.

me what I can do to make amends, and I'll do it." "I don't know how you can fix this, Didi

"I don't know what to say except that I'm so damn sorry. Really," Didi said, her eyes piercingly intense. "Please, just tell

"Actually, it's Claudia. I went by Didi so Xavier wouldn't know I was hiring you," she admitted. I couldn't believe the

lengths Didi, I mean Claudia, had gone to—and for what? "Why did you do it?" I asked.

"Well, you know Xavier and I were together for almost a decade and—"

this isn't the first mistake I've made

"No, why did you hire me?" I probed, unsure if I should even expect a truthful answer.

"I guess...it's because I need your help, Angela. I need it really badly," she said, nervously stirring her coffee. "You see

Whatever mistake Claudia was struggling to bring up was heavy. I could see that much on her face. But not knowing what it was somehow suffocated me, making me queasy, even though it was *her* problem.

I needed to know what it was.

"We all make mistakes, Claudia. What's wrong?" I pressed. She didn't answer, so I asked another question. "When did

"Three years ago...when Xavier got me pregnant."

Pregnant?

Does that mean ... It couldn't.

Xavier doesn't have a child.

it happen?"

"No matter what direction Xavier and I were going, it always felt like we were slamming into each other," Claudia said in a distant voice. "He was so angry at everyone and everything."

church. And Claudia was sitting there in confession. "I was his emotional punching bag, the one person he could say anything

I knew she was a liar, but her words rang true, so loud that the chord struck through me as if I were an abandoned

to and he thought would never swing back. I didn't even feel human anymore." "But you were engaged, right?"

"Yes. We were going to get married, basically hating each other. I couldn't have something so special feel like a punishment for him or me. So I called it off. I called our entire relationship off." Called it off?

"Xavier told it a little differently. He said," I cleared my throat, "he caught you with another man."

"What about the baby?" I asked, thinking of the red-headed little girl in the picture on Didi's desk.

Didi sighed, "Yes, that's true. Xavier wanted to try to work through things afterward. I turned him down."

I couldn't believe it.

Xavier...had a daughter.

"She's three years old now. Her name is Sophie," Claudia said. "She's not just my child. She's my universe. Before she

A daughter he didn't know.

A daughter with Claudia, someone who *I didn't know*.

I could feel my stomach sinking within me as if it were full of cement.

Her confession was too much for me to handle.

like a statue, frozen in pain, left at a museum to rot in observed solitude.

was born, I didn't have the courage to tell Xavier about her."

My bones were congealed inside me like fossils in tar.

The emotion trembled through my body, the cement feeling rising into my throat, where a lump was growing. I felt

My thoughts were sticky, dirty traps I couldn't escape, deep enough to drown me whole. Claudia's eyes were glossy with tearful shame.

"I was such an idiot. I know that. I wasn't thinking about Sophie, or that she'd need her father. I was thinking about me and how I needed to get away from him," Claudia elaborated, her breath unsteady.

Each of her words was a hook digging into my flesh. I didn't know which line pulled me further into despair.

Was it that Xavier's daughter was living out there without him, like a phantom limb?

Was it that our friendship had been just a ploy to get closer to Xavier? Or was it the fact that Xavier and my future family was broken before it even started?

Was it that Claudia was so desperate to reconnect that she'd been willing to manipulate me?

Claudia continued. "So you think he should miss more memories?" I pondered out loud.

Didn't she want him to be there for their child, not just a stranger with the same DNA?

had, but we always asked for more time, more effort, more *him*.

ourselves.

It was wrong for her to keep this secret—this person—from Xavier. He had a right to be involved in his daughter's life, didn't he?

"Now, it's too late to tell Xavier. If he found out he'd lost three years of his daughter's life, it would be unbearable,"

"Listen, Angela. You're just hearing the facts. I've agonized over them for years," Claudia asserted. "Being a single mom is like trying to build a mountain out of sand. It's waking up knowing that, even if you're doing your best, it will never be good enough."

I thought of my dad and how hard we'd been on him when he was raising us by himself. He gave us everything he

No wonder, by the time we were adults, his heart was breaking down. We had carved off so many of his ventricles for

and her daughter—and one I couldn't understand. Even if I tried. Because I was on the outside, looking in. She was right. It wasn't my place to judge her choices or her silence.

I still didn't understand why Claudia didn't want Xavier to know about the baby, but it was a huge sacrifice—for her

"I make okay money at Animas, but it's not enough to raise a child, especially without child support," Claudia noted. "Xavier would pay that. It's his responsibility," I said.

selfish, Angie," Claudia said, putting her hand over mine in sympathy. "I can't ask you for anything else, except for you to keep my secret." In that second, I realized that, by asking for nothing, Claudia was asking for everything.

"No. I can't ask for it. I can't make your lives any more complicated than I already have. I've already been so damn

Honestly, I wanted to rip the fucking clock off the wall, break time in half so she could come sooner. I no longer wanted to fuck anyone but my angel, but I wanted to take her all the time.

I'd had a lot of beautiful women in my bed, but Angela was the first person I had really connected to...the first I really

I had loved Claudia. Really. I'd loved her voice, her bold attitude, the way she didn't take any of my bullshit. But in

Xavier

When she'd left, that was enough to slice me in half. I felt like my best parts had disappeared.

reality, she'd thought all of me was bullshit.

I couldn't wait for Angela to come home.

trusted. Through and through.

women.

At first, it had hurt so much I couldn't breathe. Or speak. Or move. But then...it was like a shot of Novocaine to the heart. I was so numb...I wasn't me. I was a mannequin that could walk.

But when I found out she had cheated on me with my best friend, Daniel, I'd realized she was the worst part of me.

So that was what I did—I walked. All over the world. In and out of expensive resorts, expensive cars, and expensive

Until Angela. She gave me the power to feel again, and last night had felt so fucking good. Her soft skin on mine

Now I was dying for her to come home, to hold her against my chest and kiss the world away.

On the one hand, she made me want to do relationship stuff, like cuddle. On the other hand, I wanted to throw her on the kitchen table and fuck her till the mahogany snapped in half.

As soon as Angela walked through the door, I sprinted toward it, lifting her up, intertwining her legs around my hips. I threw her on the couch, leaving kisses on her head, chin, collarbone.

It was beating out of control. Angela

The silence I promised Claudia slid in between us, taking up too much space. He saw me, saw all of me, but couldn't truly connect to me. Because I was hiding something. My armor was up, even

though I was lying on top of him.

Xavier was inches from my face, but a galaxy away.

That was when I heard footsteps approaching.

I took her hand, laying a gentle kiss on it.

And then I placed my fingertips on her heart.

I was shielding him from the truth. "You are my entire world, Angela," Xavier professed, nibbling on the side of my ear. The pleasurable shockwaves

I realized that, yes, I was his world. But Sophie ... his daughter ... she could be his universe.

I closed my eyes, willing myself to, for once, actually keep the truth inside.

galloped through me, trying to distract me from the facts eating at my insides.