

The Arrangement
S.S. Sahoo

Flash

Xavier
we need to talk

Claudia
who is this?

Xavier
take a guess Didi

Claudia
Xavier...it's been a long time

Xavier
meet me at the Dali exhibit tmrw at 2

Xavier

If there's one thing Claudia was good at, it was fucking up my life.

But I thought I'd gotten better at putting a shield up, at stopping her.

Until she somehow scooped up Angela on her crazy train, taking her for an all-consuming ride. The kind of ride that she couldn't get out of her head long enough to act intimately with me.

Messing with me was one thing; I was a big boy.

I could handle it, but putting Angela through mind games, manipulating her innocence—her purity—was a whole other ball game.

And I wouldn't stand for it.

Especially when the woman leading the crazy was the woman who'd broken my heart.

She'd really done a fucking number on me. We were real, at least, I'd thought we were.

When I proposed to her, I really did want to offer her everything. Give her the world. Give her my heart.

And then I caught her cheating.

With my best friend.

I thought we would be able to work through it and move past it but Claudia made it clear she was done.

If it weren't for my father forcing my hand into Angela's, I'd probably still be alone, sulking, cut off from the rest of the world, coming out only to have random flings to lick my wounds. Sure, they were models. Sure, they were the average guy's dream.

But it wasn't satisfying.

It wasn't really anything at all, to be honest.

Now, I had everything again. A woman I not only loved but trusted. A woman who I knew to be honest, to care for, and a woman who cared about me, who wanted the best for me.

And Claudia was jeopardizing that.

All I need is a reason to ruin her, I thought to myself as I strode toward her. I'd told her to meet me at the Museum of Modern Art, hoping the mandatory silence would stop me from yelling at her. Stop me from losing my shit.

Hopefully.

Claudia hadn't dressed for the museum. She looked like she was heading to a gala, her dress perfectly pressed and her hair smoothly ironed.

She always looked her best when she was at her fucking worst. She'd looked stunning when she cheated on me with my best friend, and even more gorgeous when she called off our engagement to run away with him.

"I was surprised you wanted to see me," Claudia admitted as she stared at Salvador Dali's oozing clocks. It was my favorite painting, but I couldn't even enjoy it next to the sight of her.

"I'm hoping this is the last time I'll ever see you, Claudia," I said evenly. "I'm married now."

"I know."

"So you're doing everything you can to destroy that?"

Claudia looked down. I couldn't tell if the guilt was weighing on her or if she was trying to avoid my gaze so I wouldn't be able to tell she was thinking.

I knew her lying face well, after all.

I'd seen it a thousand times before.

"Angela is a nice girl," she said, her tone sounding genuine.

And you're a bullshit-crazy bitch, I thought. Hearing Angela's name come out of her mouth instantly got my blood boiling.

"You think I don't know that? You think I don't know that she'll listen to your song and dance and believe you're the good person you claim to be? Your act is pretty damn easy to fall for," I said, seething. "But she has me to protect her from your games."

Claudia looked at me, and it was like her eyes were boring into my soul.

"I know you better than you think, Xavier," she said softly.

"You don't know anything about me."

"Why are we at the MoMa? You were afraid you couldn't keep your cool."

I felt sweat collect around my palms. Why was I surprised? There was nothing she wouldn't use against me, including my own rage.

"I'm not getting into this with you. Not now, not ever. You're not worth it. I just wanted to tell you, in person, to stay away. From me, from Angela. You're not a part of our lives," As the words washed over her, I saw her lips curl up in a sort of smirk.

Something was up.

"That's a nasty thing to say to the mother of your child," she responded.

I stopped.

Froze.

My blood heated up.

My mind started racing.

That couldn't ... there was no way ...

She was reaching ... No, she was flailing.

"I don't want to hear your bullshit, Claudia."

"No bullshit. You need to know this, Xavier. I need you to know this," she replied slowly, as if, with every syllable, the earth beneath us might crack. "I have a toddler. Her name is Sophie, and she's three years old. She's been wanting to meet her father. You."

Shit.

SHIT!

Goddamn fucking SHIT.

I wanted to scream that she was fucking lying. I wanted to scream so loud that the world around me erased itself, that she was erased from my memory.

But I couldn't.

An atomic bomb had detonated inside me, shedding radioactive questions into my bloodstream.

Where is Sophie?

Is she really my daughter?

How could Claudia have kept her from me? Why did she keep her from me?

Why would she bring this up now that Angela and I are happy?

Did she bring this up because Angela and I are happy?

I wanted to throw the paintings off the walls and smash them apart.

To lose every ounce of the person I was.

But I couldn't.

The anger stormed through me so quickly that I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. I was a statue cemented in liquid shock, more stone than man.

And then Claudia came for round two.

She pulled me against her, crashing her lips against mine in a cursed kiss.

Claudia

Flash.

As I held Xavier against me, I watched the photographer capture our lips locking.

Flash.

I ran my hands through his hair and over his ears so he couldn't hear the shutter clicks.

Flash.

For a slick second, it felt good, like how, when you cut yourself, the adrenaline pumps out with the gore, reminding you that you're still fragile. That you're still alive.

Flash.

Xavier shoved me off of him with violent force. I nearly hit the ground but stood there, defiant, legs quaking.

I'd nailed the landing.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" He seethed, his normally tanned skin looking ghostly.

"I...I thought we're a family. We need to make this work, for our daughters," I pleaded, trying my best to sound confused and heartbroken.

But Xavier's eyes flashed with anger. I could tell he wasn't buying it.

"If you'd wanted that, you wouldn't have let three years pass by, Claudia. You say you know me? Well, I know you. You're not here for your kid. You're here for you," he spat at me.

"Our kid," I hissed, watching the words cut through him like arrowheads.

"Prove it," he threw back in true Xavier style. "I stopped believing you a long time ago, and I'm not about to start again now. Prove the child is mine, and we can talk again."

I knew that he was a difficult man. You didn't win a spot among the world's best and brightest by picking the easy way out of arguments.

What I hadn't added into my calculations was that his hatred for me ran deep enough to remain resolute, even with a child in the mix.

For some reason, I felt a spark of the passion that used to run between us flare.

Had I ever loved him? I honestly didn't know.

I thought I'd loved the idea of him, how he was the man who had it all, the hero of the story. Hell, even his name was brave and noble—Knight.

But when our engagement fell apart, he became more *Night* than *-Knight*. ~a dark spell cast over me, which made even a crowded room feel empty. It was like I couldn't get away from his shadow.

When I was with him, he cast a shade over all the opulence surrounding us.

When I was without him, all that opulence was hidden away from me. Out of my reach.

"I'm a powerful man, Claudia."

"I know," I replied, laughing on the inside.

He was a large puppet who couldn't spot his lace strings.

"But I'm an even worse enemy," he declared, his eyes red and glossy. "Choose your next move wisely."

The last time I'd seen him this unstable was the last time I'd seen him all those years ago. When I ruined his life the first time. He'd found out something that night that had torn his heart into two.

And now, four years later, I was doing it again.

Giving him a piece of news that he couldn't recover from. Letting him in on a secret that wouldn't just destroy the life he knew but alter the course of his future.

It almost surprised me that I didn't feel the smallest semblance of guilt. Looking at him, seeing the money practically dripping off every inch of his skin, from his cashmere sweater to his Italian leather shoes, he was a mark.

And I was playing him.

As soon as I sold the photo of the billionaire playboy cheating on his perfect, heavenly wife, I'd have my taste of riches. The taste I deserved, for putting all that time in. It took more than blind luck to make someone believe they were in a perfect relationship.

And I was about to be rewarded for my talents.

Xavier

A father. *I might be a goddamned father.*

I felt like I was going to be sick.

I had no idea what to do with a kid, and having one with Claudia would open all kinds of doors I'd locked up tight a long time ago. Ones I had no intention of opening ever again.

I shook my head.

It's not true.

It can't be true.

She's lying.

Because that was what Claudia did. She lied and cheated and manipulated everyone into getting her way.

It was one of the things I had found so attractive about her, her competitive assertiveness. Now it had come back to bite me in the ass.

She and I had always used protection. I'd been gone two weeks on a business trip before I came home to find her with Daniel. The kid could be his just as easily as mine. Or anyone else she'd been cheating on me with.

My hands balled into fists at my sides, and I closed my eyes, taking a long breath in.

I needed to calm down and think this through rationally. Claudia wanted me upset, unstable. That was how she dug her claws in.

I couldn't believe that Claudia thought she could get back at me by throwing a child in my face. What was she hoping for? A big happy family reunion?

I wouldn't spend another night under that bitch's sheets for all the money in the world, let alone play house with her.

While a part of me wished I could meet the kid, to see her for myself, a larger part of me refused to negotiate with a terrorist.

The child wasn't just a child. She was the weapon Claudia would rely on to slice my life apart, to demolish every good thing I had. I couldn't let her do that.

Even if it meant not knowing my own child, I'd protect everything Angela and I had created for ourselves—at any cost. I'd already made that decision, and I'd stand by it.

So, as soon as Claudia fucking kissed me, I got the hell out of there. I stapled the knowledge that I had a daughter shut like a wound too big for stitches.

I wasn't going to bleed for that manipulating bitch, not anymore. I had already wasted too much pain on her.

Now, things were different. Now I had a woman who I would give my life for.

She was the reason I woke up every day not just content, but happy.

When the elevator doors to our apartment opened, I walked through them, ready to press my chest against hers.

I needed to feel the warmth of her skin, of her being, against me. I needed her to comfort me, to tell me that nothing outside of us mattered.

Not right now, at least.

"Hey, Angela, I handled it," I called out, walking through the hall and making my way to the kitchen. That was when I found Angela leaning over the countertop, shaking with sobs.

"What happened? What's wrong?" I asked, racing over to her.

She tried to form words, but they were conquered by cries of anguish.

I tried to cradle her, to comfort her, but she just shoved me off.

It hurt. Not physically, but emotionally, like she was treating me as a stranger invading her space. Not as her husband, and not as the love of her life.

"What's going on, Ange?" I pleaded.

Then she looked at me, and my heart stopped. Her eyes were coated in tears, and her lips were trembling. It killed me to see her in so much pain.

Angela pulled out her phone, and everything I'd been feeling became ten times worse.

Because there was a photo on the screen, of Claudia kissing me. It was on the front page of a tabloid site, but soon, it'd be national news.

In the picture, Claudia's arms were wrapped around me tight. Our eyes were closed, our bodies tight together. I looked like a willing participant, not a victim.

"It's not what it looks like, Angela. Really, I can—"

"You said you didn't love her!" Angela cried. And then she dropped her phone onto the counter, like it was too painful to hold.

And she ran—right to the bedroom, locking the door behind her.

Fuck.