big-enough-to-house-a-pissed-off-best-friend, I guess," he joked. I knew he was trying to lighten the mood, so I offered my best attempt at a smile.

It probably still looked like I was about to cry, though.

door and heard his footsteps retreating down the hall.

I knew the window of opportunity I had to sneak out was small, so I wiped the tears from my cheeks, sucked my breath in, and opened the door.

"Seriously, Angela, you don't deserve this kind of shitheadedness, okay? You're too good for him," Dustin went on, But as appreciative as I was that he was letting me stay with him, that he was giving me an open ear and all the hugs I needed, something about the way Dustin was criticizing Xavier left me ... uneasy.

putting a friendly hand on my shoulder.

"Can we talk about something else?" I asked, lowering myself onto the couch. I needed to stop talking about my

press a button and hindsight would fall out, like how I should have known Xavier would cheat on me.

"Girl, you need to vent. Seriously. If you keep it all bottled up, it'll eat away at your little body—"

"You don't know the full story," I got out before I could stop myself. "You don't know what Xavier and I

"Excuse me, biatch? You're trying to tell me I don't know about being treated like shit by shitty men?" Dustin replied.

"Um, of course," I answered, immediately confused. I hadn't been trying to tell Dustin that, *at all*, but him thinking that

"True. But, more importantly, false. They are gay icons. Who do you think sustained their entire discography of boys

He paused dramatically as if I knew what he was talking about. "Thousands of gay men. Because we know how it feels,

"I don't doubt that you know how I feel, Dustin," I said slowly, trying to calm his dramatic response down a little. "I'm

Dustin looked at me, and then after a few moments, he nodded. "Okay. Yeah. Your trauma is my trauma, Angela."

I gave him a quizzical look. He smiled and sat down next to me, grabbing my hands in his. "You want to watch clips of

A giggle slipped out of my throat before I could stop it. And then another. And then, just like that, I was lost in a fit of

I could hear Dustin's laughter in the background, could feel his hands still wrapped around mine, but I couldn't focus

And now ... it was like the carpet had been yanked out from under me, revealing that there'd never been a floor

When I left her at the MoMa, I'd truly believed I'd solved the problem. I'd squashed the issue before it tumbled out of

It was like Claudia had poured emotional acid all over my life, destroying the roots that connected me to anything

Angela had disappeared from the apartment. Dad was ignoring my calls. Even Lucille couldn't maintain eye contact.

As aggravating as that was, as I sat alone at the kitchen counter, drinking my morning coffee, it wasn't really

And it dawned on me—that she'd seen a picture of me and my ex-fiancée kissing. That the rest of New York, the rest of

If the situations were reversed, I'd be doing a whole lot worse than taking some space. So I stopped calling her every

As much as I'd repeated that logic to myself over the course of the past seven hours, I couldn't bring myself to really let

go. I couldn't just sit back and do nothing, waiting for her to come back home. Waiting for her to come back to me.

While I didn't want to have to rely on Dad to bring her back, I knew that she and my father had a special connection.

As soon as I got to my dad's Upper East Side building, the doorman opened the heavy oak door. "Good morning, Mr.

Then I was in Dad's private elevator, heading to the penthouse, a place too large for a family of five, let alone one guy.

It wasn't until I was in the elevator that it dawned on me. My own father might not believe me. He might think the

Don't be stupid. Of course he's seen it. Five of his fucking PR guys have probably already sent it to him.

otherwise, but actions spoke louder than words. That was what he always told me.

That I'd do anything to protect her, even if it meant staying out of my *maybe* daughter's life.

Dad was trying on retirement, and seeing his stomping ground, it seemed like a good fit.

The shuffle of fluffy slippers—a distinct sound I'd heard a few times myself.

He could think I'm up to my old shit, my bad-boy, party-boy, player behavior. And sure, I could try to convince him

But he was my father. He'd be able to look into my eyes and see the truth, wouldn't he? He'd know the real me, not the

The doors slid open, and I stepped into the foyer. Immediately I was struck by how different it looked. It felt like

The sheepskin blankets were thrown over the handmade leather couch, the two-thousand-dollar chiffon accent

pillows were littered all over the deep hazelnut wood floor, and hell, it even looked like he was reading some of his

I'd gone there to see my father, to ask him for advice—for help in saving my relationship—but I'd never expected to be

I brought my fingers to my hair, running them through my locks as if the mere motion would be enough to get me out

Because Penny was emerging from the door down the hall, her too-big button-down shirt exposing her bare shoulder,

In my lifetime, I'd seen pictures of my son doing any number of outrageous things in the press. But him kissing

I ached for him, for the confusion and anger he must be feeling with her return into his life. I prayed that Angela

Filled with the need to help, to do something, I decided to go straight to the source. There was no question in my mind

My driver dropped me off at a dive bar in the Bronx. The instant I saw the picture in the tabloids, I contacted her. The

It was difficult to believe that, after all the years we'd treated her like family, and all the years Xavier lost to the pain of

"I don't have any more photos of Xavier. You're paying me to pay me," she said, her eyes still on the money. "I'm not

"I'm paying you to leave my family alone. I know you and Xavier have your history, Claudia. I always thought you

"But now you're not just hurting him. You're hurting Angela, and she's not like you. She acts out of purity, out of

As I got back into my Town Car, I tried to wipe the grime off my hands. But then I realized it wasn't the table's

"Where's my father?" I asked Penny, barely making eye contact. If it were up to me, I wouldn't be speaking to her at

"Only on paper." She smiled, and I instantly regretted lifting my eyes up to her face. The audacity of her to smile. To

"So, what are you doing here, Penny?" I said, taking a step closer, forcing her to look me in the eyes. Forcing her to see

I wanted my father to be happy, sure. But when his little bubble of euphoria burst, I also wanted to have a stack of

As I thought about ways to tell my dad to be careful—to watch his back from gold-digging sluts looking for a palatial

"You jumped from me to my dad," I interrupted. "Not to mention you used to date that psycho Jacques. Seriously,

"No, I don't like you," I interrupted before I could hear her sob story again. "But aside from my personal feelings,

Instead of running away at my harsh words, or dropping into a pit of tears, Penny just clasped her hands tightly in

But whenever I looked at her I could feel the heat crawling up the back of my neck. Something squirming under my

I bit my tongue, and she continued. "But I love him. Really and truly, I love your father, Xavier. And I will do

"Brad makes me wear those!" Penny said. She suddenly laughed, the sound taking me by surprise. "We actually had a

"Remember before? When you and I used to"—she paused—"see each other. When you were there for me after I

broke up with Jacques. You used to try to give me all of these gifts, and I never accepted any of them."

"I know you think that I'm a gold digger. That I just latch on to whatever man with money I see. But Brad

"He doesn't just want to hear me sing pretty. He wants to read all the books I recommend to him. He wants to play

"And it has nothing to do with the money?" I pressed. It might've been impolite—or downright rude—but I needed to

"I would love that man if he were dirt broke, cleaning up the stage after I performed my set," she said. "Just like how

"You don't know what you're talking about," I stated, not wanting to get into this, into my *private life*, at the current

"No, *you* don't know what I'm talking about. I've seen the picture, Xavier. And I know that whatever that was

I tried to back away, to stop the conversation from continuing, but Penny just stepped closer to me, and then she

"Angela will forgive you. If you earn her forgiveness. You need to fight for her, Xavier."

Until that moment, I had thought Penny's sweet girl act was all a front.

"He wants to hear me talk, and argue, and be angry, and be chaotic and

... Brad's the

... it

...and ...human. I can be my weird, goofy self

"You trusted me enough to go to that warehouse to save Angela," she shot back, some fire in her eyes.

"I know. I know how it looks, okay? I'm not dumb," she said, looking at the floor.

"Yeah, right. I can see all of your new jewelry and designer clothes and—"

... that was a dark time in my life. But I dumped him like you—"

Xavier

righteousness, and she does not deserve to be hurt. So take the money. And stay away from the Knights."

After a few moments, she gave a slight nod and straightened her shoulders, sliding off her seat.

She closed the briefcase and then, after tossing me one final glance, walked out of the bar.

I walked into the shabby bar, seeing her already at a table. I put the leather briefcase on its sticky surface.

"Whatever amount you're planning to blackmail my son for, this is more," I said, keeping my voice steady.

Claudia, his ex-fiancée, while he was married to the sweetest woman on earth? That was, by far, the worst.

would be able to see past this, to see the truth, so that they could move over this hurdle together.

Brad

So I finished my coffee and headed for the elevator, ready to embark on a morning trip uptown.

surprising. I'd been enraged when I got home, enraged that Angela wouldn't even let me try to explain.

Whatever act I had going, pretending that I knew what the hell to do about Claudia, was up.

It was officially out of control, and I had officially failed at squashing it.

When I asked her where the almond milk was, she pointed without looking at me.

five minutes. I stopped sending desperate texts, and I stopped trying her friends.

Xavier

who treat love like a sick game? Who refused to discard them as they raged past their Hollywood prime?"

... what we had

"But he SCREWED UP!" Dustin yelped. "And you need to know that you deserve better."

was what my vagueness implied was a hell of a lot better than him knowing the truth.

... with his ex.

"Singers?" I guessed, still having no idea what he was trying to prove.

Angie. The only people men fuck and fuck over more than women are other men!"

dogs reuniting with their soldier daddies who just got back from war?" he asked.

on him. I was too busy focusing on the absurdity of everything else.

just saying ... I'm not in the mood to dwell on it. Not right now. I'd rather distract myself."

It wasn't that I didn't have a thousand rants to squeal about him. My body felt like a vending machine for feelings. Just

drowning love life, about the man who'd betrayed me. Again.

"I don't want to vent, Dustin. I don't want to talk at all."

"Cher? Dolly Parton? Barbra Streisand? Ever heard of them?"

He always cheated on me.

He'd probably never stopped.

unspoken between us ..."

That I knew something Xavier didn't.

That I knew he had a daughter

Whom he clearly still loved.

"Cher. Dolly. Barbra."

"What?"

"What are they?" Dustin probed.

giggles, my eyes squeezed shut.

I'd felt so sturdy.

underneath it at all.

control

sturdy.

But now, that was clearly wrong.

All. Fucking. Wrong.

I tried texting Angela.

I even tried calling Em.

But then I stopped.

She knew where I was.

She'd come home.

Knight." He nodded at me.

But I wasn't really one to talk.

But I shook it off.

And he'd seen my past actions.

He'd seen the way I treated women before Angela.

Once a womanizer, always a womanizer.

fucked-up version they'd created for tabloids.

He'd know I was madly in love with Angela.

"Hey, Dad?" I called out. No one answered.

That was when I heard footsteps.

This was an outcome I hadn't thought of.

confronted with Penny.

coming straight for me.

who was behind all this pain.

Take advantage of us like *this*.

blackmailing anyone."

I saw her wince.

their breakup, she would come back and do this.

were a sweet girl, under all that manipulation," I told her.

Well, I thought, as I took a deep breath, ~that's taken care of~.

stickiness that was stuck on my skin. It was the filth of the whole situation.

all, but I needed answers. So withholding eye contact was the best I could do.

just *be* in my father's apartment. Like she lived there. Like she owned the place.

Penny clearly just leapt from one wealthy man to the next like a frog on a lily pad.

"This is my apartment, Xavier," Penny replied, wide eyes looking earnest.

penthouse to call home—I could see that Penny was sizing me up.

"Since when?" I asked, dumbfounded my father would let her move in so fast.

that, while my dad might be blind in love, I certainly wasn't.

evidence against the woman who'd popped it.

"I know you don't like me, Xavier, but—"

Penny, what the fuck is wrong with you?"

you've given no reason for me to trust you. Objectively."

I swallowed the bitter reply forming in my throat.

Penny recoiled in pain. "Jacques

front of her.

She was right.

Logically, anyway.

skin that made me furious.

The fuck is wrong with me?

everything I can for this to work."

"I don't believe you."

I stayed silent.

I couldn't deny it.

She looks like she's in love.

with him. So, yes, I love him."

know. I needed to hear her say it.

moment. But Penny wasn't dropping it.

wasn't you. Not the you who you are now, at least."

Angela loves you, Xavier."

grabbed my hand.

I was speechless.

Lucas

Lucas

Em is in the hospital

They can't find the baby's heartbeat

A trap to lure in her next mark.

board games with me.

"It's never been about the money, Xavier."

little fight about that ... He likes spoiling me."

Penny sighed, looking me straight in the eye.

first man I've been with who wants me to be a person."

Penny smiled. She looked wistful and happy, and

"Do you love him, Penny? Or do you love his money?"

"A couple of weeks."

Fuck.

I watched as Claudia swallowed the words.

"Doing business," Penny replied.

"He's retired."

of this situation.

But it wasn't.

A possibility that hadn't even crossed my mind.

It had been a long time since my heart had hurt this badly.

That was the most important thing—that they remained together.

woman was bad news, *terrible* news, and it was time to treat her as such.

She opened the briefcase up to find five hundred thousand dollars in cash.

I waited a few more seconds. "Dad?" I tried again.

someone was actually living in it.

rare antique books.

Shit.

I was no stranger to luxurious dwellings.

picture, and the implications of it, were real.

I tried calling, leaving voicemails, everything.

But all I got was a whole lot of fucking nothing.

the world, would be able to see the picture, too.

When Angela was ready to talk to me, she'd come back.

She'd trusted him long before she ever trusted me.

I nodded back, barreling right through the doors and into the lobby.

A hopeful thought popped into my mind. *Maybe he hasn't seen it.*

A week ago, I'd been so happy in my life.

Dustin's mouth fell open.

And then I ran as fast as I could on tiptoes, all the way into the elevator. When the elevator doors closed together, I finally released the air I'd been holding in. Then I jogged straight to Dustin's.

Angela

The Arrangement S.S. Sahoo

Forget, Don't Forgive

"He's a fucking scumbag, Angie!" Dustin raged as he made up the sofa in his living room for me. "I'm sorry I don't have an actual room for you. Moving from a shitty studio to a one-bedroom was big for me, but not As soon as Xavier had stopped pounding on the door to our bedroom, begging me to let him in, I pressed my ear to the

But maybe—just maybe—I was wrong. Lucas Where are u Angela At Dustin's cafe Lucas I've been trying to call u Angela Sorry, the signal isn't very good in here

Angela

Is everything okay?

Angela

Oh my goodness

Angela

I'm omw