Public Knowledge

Xavier

I couldn't believe my eyes.

I literally couldn't believe them.

At first, I thought it was a dream. A nightmare.

Maybe I'd eaten a brownie that had some weed mixed in without knowing it, and this was the high.

Maybe, just maybe, this was a figment of my imagination.

But then I blinked, and the news alerts were still there on my phone. And then more of them popped up. And then even more.

XAVIER KNIGHT BOUGHT HIS NEW BRIDE

HIGH-PROFILE KNIGHT MARRIAGE DONE FOR CASH

ANGELA & XAVIER KNIGHT ARE A PAID ARRANGEMENT

I wanted to scream. I wanted to pound a wall with my fist, to inflict pain on something that wasn't me. To focus on hurting someone, rather than focus on my own hurting.

I sprinted all the way to my dad's building, not giving a shit that the brisk wind felt like a slap in the face with every step I took. By the time his private elevator was opening up into his foyer, I was already screaming.

"DAD!" I howled.

He wobbled in, looking half asleep. "Shhh, Penny and I had a late night, Xavier," he said, rubbing his scalp.

"I take it you haven't seen the news?" I asked.

"I just got out of bed. What's going on?" Dad pressed.

"Someone leaked the agreement. You know, the arrangement you forced me and Angela into."

"That's not possible," Dad said, his voice strong and level. He was fully awake now.

"Every page, every condition, every detail you demanded of Angela. They've published for the world to see."

I walked closer to him. "The entire world thinks I had to pay to get a girl. They think I'm some limp-dicked asshole who needs his daddy to get him laid."

"Don't talk to me that way, Xavier," Dad commanded. I ignored him.

"And worse, they think Angela is some gold-digging bride-for-hire! Do you know what you've just done to her life? To my life?" I raged.

I was done playing nice. It didn't matter what I said. There was nothing else I could lose. He couldn't stomp me to do the right thing by dangling the company in my face, by dangling a role or, I don't know, the memory of my mother.

All that fell out of the window when he started screwing my ex-fuck buddy.

My father's power was gone. There was nothing more he could take away from me.

Not even Angela. She was so ashamed to even be around me, breathing the same oxygen. And now she'd been branded as a woman for hire, as if she were my whore instead of the blood in my veins, keeping every muscle alive.

There was no way she'd come back to me after this.

And I couldn't blame her.

I wouldn't come back, either.

The worst part was that it wasn't even the truth. The newspapers didn't care that Angela had been trying to keep her father alive. They didn't care that she made my heart soar out of my chest, going off like a seizing alarm clock.

"Who do you think did this?" Dad asked carefully. Like he knew I had a bomb strapped to my chest and wasn't sure when I'd press the button.

"My dear ex-girlfriend," I spat.

"Claudia?"

"Of fucking course Claudia, Dad. Who else?" I sneered.

I watched as my dad took a deep breath. Then his eyes slowly rose until they met mine. "Son, that's not possible. I made sure of it. I made sure that she'd leave you alone."

I froze. *"What the fuck did you do?"* I growled.

"What anyone in my position would. I paid her to stop harming my family," Dad revealed.

I was so enraged that I was seeing stars.

"That doesn't work with people like her!" I screamed. "You just gave her more resources to attack us! She won't stop until my life is as pathetic as hers. Don't you get that?"

Maybe my father was too goodhearted a man to see it, but I wasn't. Everything with Claudia ... it was never about money. It was always about torture.

And my dad had played right into her hand.

My eyes dashed to him, and for the first time in my life, I saw the man for who he was. His kindness was just a disguise, hiding the truth at his core—his obsession with control.

He would give, and give, and give, only so he'd be known as the person who gave.

Only so he could control the outcome, without any chance of failure or dissent.

The rage spilled out of me. I couldn't hold it back any longer.

"I can't believe one person could pull so much shit. Coercing me and Angela into a fucked-up marriage? Lying to each of us about what we were doing? Funding the woman who broke my heart—"

"Everything I did, I did for you!" Dad replied, agony all over his features.

Dad started to hyperventilate, bending over the couch in pain. He was stammering through painful breaths, as if I had punched him in his gut.

I didn't care.

"No, you did it all for you," I insisted. "I can't believe we're even related. I can't believe I came from you."

I meant it.

Dad wanted me to live the life he couldn't. Mom was dead, and instead of recovering from his own trauma, he wanted me to do it for him. He wanted me to have the marriage he'd lost, instead of allowing me to carve my own path through the forest.

He wanted me to move on *for* him.

I felt sick.

"You can't leave," Dad said, cradling himself on the couch. But I was already at the door, already dead-set on leaving this mess behind me.

"Watch me," I declared, even though I'd heard the urgency saturating his tone.

"No. There's one more thing you need to know."

Angela

Love shouldn't be torture.

I knew that.

I did, really.

But even though I knew that, I couldn't walk away. Not from the love I had with Xavier. Even if our love was torture, even if, every day, I was floored at the new ways it was able to bring me pain, I couldn't turn my back on it.

Can I?

Our entire relationship had been a cycle of skyscraper-high dominos falling onto us. I could barely move I was so crushed under their weight. And the entire world had been invited to look on, to see the damage.

At this point, I wasn't sure if there were enough happy moments between Xavier and me to bandage the gaping, agonizing wounds.

Especially this one.

To the world, I was no longer Angela. No, now I was the worst kind of specimen. The kind that married for money. The kind that pretended love, in exchange for financial stability.

Ever since I'd married Xavier, society knew me as his wife. Getting used to that title was hard. It had taken time, and it had taken practice. There was a time when all I wanted was to go back to the Angela I was before him.

But now, all I wanted was to go back to being Angela Knight.

To the woman Xavier married, just because.

But I couldn't. Not now, not ever.

Because the arrangement was out there, public, for the world to see.

And I was nothing but *that girl*.

That girl who married a stranger for some cash.

That girl who lied to the world, feigning love because of greed.

That girl whose pretty face was just a mask for the depths of repulsive hideousness underneath.

The humiliation was... unbearable.

It seared my skin, chilled my bones, and wrapped my heart in barbed wire.

Everywhere I went, my name was synonymous with gold digger.

User.

Greedy bitch.

To everyone, Angela Knight was the woman who'd sold her soul for a diamond ring.

I stared down at my wedding band. I felt mocked by its sparkle, its elaborate, grandiose design.

They were right.

I was faking it.

This ring, this room, this luxury, it wasn't me. I was never going to put a napkin on my pizza before eating it. I was never going to make sure my bra matched my panties or that my hair was safely fastened in an elaborate up-do.

I had been an invader in this gala that Xavier called home.

And I always would be.

I ripped the diamond ring off my finger and slammed it down on my nightstand.

If we renewed our wedding vows now, it would be a joke. We were already laughingstocks.

We needed to cancel it.

Maybe we needed to cancel everything.

This romance was a cursed beast, always rearing a new violent, ugly head.

Maybe the only way to end the pain was to get divorced and leave each other behind.

But could I even do that?

Could I forget the man I'd loved so intensely, so wholly and genuinely?

I couldn't stop thinking about Xavier, couldn't stop worrying for him. Even when I was mad at him. Even when he was in the wrong.

I guess that was love—torture when it's around our fingertips, torture when it falls through them.

My hands were empty now, my fingers barren.

Creak. Creak.

Someone was walking down the hardwood.

Which meant ... Xavier was back.

I held up the ring, looking at its glamorous details. It certainly wasn't me. But damn, it was him—over the top, yet delicate.

I slid the wedding band back onto my finger, just as Xavier entered the bedroom.

"Are you all right?" he asked, pressing my head against his chest. I hadn't thought that being so close to him would make me feel better—that anything could make me feel better—but here I was. Feeling better.

"I don't know, Xavier. I don't know," I murmured, and then the sobs came.

He sighed. "I'm sorry to tell you this, but I have more news ..."

I looked at him, trying to see him through the tears.

"Sophie isn't mine," Xavier disclosed. I looked at him, stunned.

"What do you mean?" I stiffled.

"My dad did some digging...Sophie is Daniel's daughter. DNA proves it. His name is even on her birth certificate," Xavier explained. "She made it all up to get to me...to you and me."

"That's not ... I mean ... it's impossible. She loves Sophie," I stammered. How could Claudia play chess with her daughter's life like that?

"Maybe, Angel, but that doesn't mean she didn't fucking use the kid to hurt and steal from us," Xavier responded, running his hands through my hair.

That was why she didn't want child support from Xavier. Sophie wasn't his child, and that meant I wasn't her stepmother.

Xavier's eyes were bloodshot. I've never seen him so devastated, so enraged. He didn't look like himself. He looked dangerous, like an abused beast released from his cage. Ready for revenge.

"I'm going to end them," he declared.

"Xavier—" I said, trying to calm him down.

"No." He cut me off, kissing me on the lips. "I'm going to end them all."