

The Arrangement | Dark Desperation by S.S. Sahoo

Dark Desperation

ANGELA

“We managed to resuscitate your father,” the doctor said, his voice grave. “Stroke victims are susceptible to heart attacks in the first twenty-four hours after the stroke. We’re keeping a close eye on him and will continue to run tests to see what we can do.” The way he said it made it sound like he wasn’t confident there’d be much.

“Thank you, doctor,” Lucas said.

The doctor nodded and left us alone.

“How long is dad going to have to be here?” I asked in a small voice. “It doesn’t look like he’s in any shape to go home.”

“We might not have a choice,” Danny said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

My brothers looked at each other. My heart pounded in my chest. I could sense the bad news coming. Finally, Lucas turned to me.

“We can’t afford him being here, Angie.”

I blinked. “What?”

Danny ran his hands through his hair, his face haggard. “We’re broke.”

“How? The restaurant...” The restaurant had been my dad’s life when we were growing up. Mom had worked there too, until she got sick. My brothers took over as soon as they finished college.

“It’s been struggling for a couple of years. The recession took its toll. Dad put a second mortgage on the house to try and see us through.” Lucas sighed. He looked defeated.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked. “I have my interview soon, so maybe...”

But Danny was shaking his head.

“The hospital bills are coming soon...”

I couldn't be there anymore—in the hallway, in the hospital. It was too claustrophobic. I pushed away from my brothers. My shaking legs carried me through halls and down stairs until I found myself standing outside, in front of the hospital.

The night sky loomed above me. I glared upwards, the light pollution was still too strong to see any stars. Not even a passing airplane so I could pretend. How naive I had been to wish upon a star. No, not even a star. A stupid airplane. I should have known better.

I needed ~to do well in my interview. If I got the job, maybe I could ask for an advance so I could keep Dad in the hospital.~

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I could do this. I had no other choice.

XAVIER

Weirdly enough, I liked cemeteries.

There was something about the quiet atmosphere, the carefully manicured lawns, the polished headstones that made me feel at peace. A quiet serenity that everyone, no matter who you were, respected. You could be rich, poor, famous or a nobody, but everyone had the same understanding.

We were all going to end up in the dirt anyway. That fact tended to make everyone quiet, solemn, and best of all, made them mind their own damn business.

I couldn't say the same for my dad.

He was already there, standing over Mom's headstone, a bouquet of lilies at his feet. I walked up beside him, but he didn't acknowledge me. We stayed like that for a while, each of us lost in our own thoughts.

“Do you know where I got those flowers from?” he finally asked, breaking the silence.

I looked down at the lilies. They were Mom's favorite flowers.

“Some flower shop?” I guessed. What did it matter?

“A kind young woman offered them to me after you left me in the park yesterday.” He turned to look at me, his eyes full of hope. “She noticed how pained I looked and she tried to comfort me. With your mother’s favorite flowers, on her favorite bench.”

“That’s nice,” I said absently. *So what?*

“Do you believe in fate, son?”

“Fate?” I scoffed. “No. You want me to believe that something purposefully planned for all the bullshit that happened to me? Fuck that.”

“I know things were hard after what happened with—”

“Don’t even mention her name,” I warned him, voice hard. “I don’t want to think about that bitch.”

Dad’s frown deepened, but he nodded, dropping it. We lapsed into silence again, and I felt my patience running thin.

“Listen, my plane is going to leave soon, so if there’s nothing else—”

“I was like you once, Xavier,” Dad said suddenly. “Angry at the world. Lashing out at anything and anyone. Pushing everything away, chasing one empty pleasure after another until I felt nothing left inside of me.”

I was stunned into silence. Dad never spoke about things like this with me. He was Brad Knight, genius CEO and billionaire, a near mythological figure. There were business courses in universities all across the world that studied his rise to power. He was always more of a figurehead to me than a father.

“Do you know what changed me? What saved me?” he asked softly.

I looked down at the headstone at our feet. I could guess.

He nodded. “I met your mother. Amelia saved me...and so did you, Son. The two of you were the light that pulled me out of the darkness.” Dad looked at me then, that infamous determination plain on his face. “I want the same for you.”

I was instantly on my guard. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You need someone to balance you out. To be what your mother was for me. You need to find your other half.”

My jaw practically hit the ground after I connected the dots. “You can’t be serious.”

“It’ll keep you responsible. And it’ll clean up your public image. I don’t want to kick you out of the company, Son. We need a way for the stakeholders to see that you’ve grown and matured enough to take over once I step down.”

“So you want me to date some random girl off the street because she gave you *flowers*?” I ask, incredulous.

“Not just date, Xavier.” He turned to me, and he was no longer my dad. Now he was Brad Knight, the unstoppable patriarch of Knight Enterprises. The man who always got his way. “I want you to marry her...and eventually, produce an heir.”

ANGELA

Emily frowned as she watched me dig into a tub of Ben and Jerry’s ice cream in my pajamas, my hair tied up in a messy bun.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Super,” I said through a mouthful of chocolate.

She sighed, grabbing her own tub of ice cream from the freezer. She sat next to me, stuffing a spoonful of vanilla into her mouth.

“Spill,” she demanded.

“I’m just really stressed out,” I admitted. “My dad’s in the hospital, and we’re going to have trouble paying the bills. I just had my interview with Curixon, and I’m afraid that I messed it up, and...” My voice faltered.

Too many things.

“You didn’t mess it up,” Em assured me. “You killed it, right? You told me yourself.”

“I *thought* I did,” I said. “Now I’m not so sure.”

It was true; I'd really hit it off with the interviewer. Curixon was a great company, and I was hoping I could finally put my engineering degree from Harvard to good use. I'd spent the last few months working part-time at Em's flower shop.

She even let me live with her in her apartment.

I'd be totally screwed if it wasn't for her.

"You're a lifesaver, Em," I began. "If it weren't for you letting me stay here—"

"Kill the dramatics," she said before I could thank her again. "You know you're allowed to stay as long as you want. I just don't want to see you waste your life sweeping the floor of my flower shop when you could be working somewhere like Curixon. You're too smart for that, Angie."

Oh, Em. Where would I be without her?

"Anyway, I'm off." Em got up, throwing her spoon into the sink and the empty tub of ice cream in the trash. "Don't mope around too much." She slipped on her shoes, and before I knew it, she was gone.

I was alone. I hopped up from the couch and busied myself with cleaning the apartment. I knew I'd only mope and worry myself to death if I sat still.

I was in the middle of scrubbing the sink when my phone rang. I practically jumped over the couch to reach my phone, scrambling to check the caller ID.

CURIXON LTD.

My heart kicked into overdrive.

Okay, okay, okay, okay.

I took a deep breath.

"Hello?" I said, willing my voice not to shake.

"Hi, is this Angela Carson?" a female voice said on the other end of the line.

"Speaking."

“Hi, Angela. I’m just calling to inform you that unfortunately we’ve decided to move on with other applicants for this job.”

“Oh.” My heart sank.

“We’ll be sure to keep your application on file should another position become available.”

“Uh, okay. Thanks.”

What else could I say?

After another few seconds of painful exchanges, I collapsed into my pillow, face first.

So much for killing the interview.

I felt tears of frustration spring to my eyes, and I let them soak into my pillow. There was so much more on the line than just paying the bills and having some spending cash.

My dad’s *life* was at stake.

But what could I do now?

Unsure of what to do, I grabbed my things and ran out the door, desperate to get to the hospital. I needed to see my dad. Maybe I could talk to the doctors if they could somehow extend his stay, if they had any other options...

I ran out onto the street and almost slammed into someone in my rush.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, walking by. I need to call Lucas and Danny. Maybe they’ll know what we could—

“Angela?” a kind voice called. “Angela Carson?”

I paused and looked back at the man I’d almost slammed into. It was the older gentleman I’d given flowers to at the park the other day.

“Oh, hello,” I said, distracted. “Sorry, I’m in a rush, but it was nice seeing you...”

“I can help your father,” the man said.

I froze in place.

“Excuse me?” I asked. Did I hear that right?

“Your father is in the hospital right now, right? And forgive me for saying, but you and your brothers can’t afford to keep him there.” He talked slowly, trying to calm me down.

“Uh, yes, but how did you know that?” Alarm bells were ringing in my head. Who was this man?

“I fear I’ve gotten ahead of myself.” He smiled reassuringly at me. “My name is Brad Knight.”

I gasped. Brad Knight? *The* Brad Knight? The billionaire behind Knight Enterprises?

“Um,” I stuttered.

“I must confess that after our fateful meeting at the park I looked into your situation. Please forgive my intrusion on your privacy, but I believe we can help each other, Angela.”

My head spun.

What does he want from me?

“I’ll pay for everything. I’ll make sure your father is taken care of. You just have to do one thing for me.” He sounded so genuine, but a hint of desperation crept into his voice. He gathered himself, staring right into my eyes.

“I need you to marry my son.”

“What?!” I scrambled away from Brad, putting some space between us. “Is this some sort of joke?” Should I scream for help? Run back inside? Was the famous businessman some kind of freak?

He watched me, shaking his head. “I assure you I’m completely serious. I’m aware of how strange my request is, and I know you’re uncomfortable right now. I’ll leave if you want me to, but please, hear me out. I promise I have nothing but noble intentions in mind.”

I hesitated, unsure of what to do. Normally if some stranger came up to me and asked me to marry his son I'd try to get as far away as I could as quickly as possible. But there was something about Brad that made me want to trust him...something in his eyes that was just so genuine and kind.

And if what he was saying was true...if he really could help Dad...

Well, I didn't really have any other options.

I nodded cautiously, gesturing for him to continue.

"Thank you." Brad took a breath, and he seemed genuinely relieved. "We can help each other," He smiled, his eyes disappearing in a crinkle of crow's feet. "If you marry my son, I swear to you that your father will have the best all around care money can buy. You've actually already met him."

My eyes went wide. "I have?"

"At the park." Brad said. "You bumped into him and he handed you the bouquet of lilies you'd dropped."

That was Xavier? ~My mind spun. I thought he'd looked familiar...someone I'd seen on the front page of magazines right in front of me. Wow, how oblivious could I get?~

Xavier Knight.

I knew of him, of course. How could I not? He was a celebrity. Filthy rich and drop dead gorgeous. I'd seen the headlines and articles about him, on and off for the past few months.

Sex.

Drugs.

Races.

He was wild.

Dangerous.

A shiver ran down my spine, but I couldn't tell if it was from fear or excitement.

“But why me?” I asked. “I’m sure you could find a million girls that are more beautiful and more successful than I am. A better fit for your son.” They’d all be tripping over themselves for the chance that Brad was offering me.

“You’re a pure soul, my dear. You may not know it, but you’re rare. I want the best for my son, as any father would. I think you can help him. I trust my instinct, and my instinct now says this will work.”

I blinked.

A pure soul? What does that even mean?

“But marriage isn’t just a piece of paper,” I argued. “You can’t just sign a contract and fall in love.”

“That may be true, but love is patient.”

“How do you know I won’t marry your son and then divorce him the next day?” I was playing devil’s advocate, but I needed answers to this confusing hypothetical.

Instead of getting his back up, he stepped closer to me and took my hand. His touch was warm and strangely comforting. “I don’t believe you’d do that, Angela. Like I said, your soul is pure. But if you need some sort of insurance plan, think about your father.”

Dad’s face came to my mind. Not as he usually was, so boisterous and full of life, but of the last time I saw him in the hospital bed. He looked so fragile, so broken...

“Medical bills are no joke. Treatments, rehab, around-the-clock care. It all costs money, darling. If you hold up your end of the deal, I promise you, on my life, that I’ll hold up my end, too.”

My mind was racing. There had to be a different way.

“Maybe I can get a second job. Work double shifts...”

“Angela,” he said, stopping me. “Do you know how much an overnight stay in the hospital costs? Seven-hundred dollars each night. A routine blood test is two-hundred-fifty dollars. If they, God forbid, have to use the defibrillator, that’s another fifteen-hundred dollars.”

I closed my eyes.

“Please. Please, stop. Just give me a minute to think.” I tried to organize my scrambled thoughts.

My dad.

The restaurant.

My brothers.

Years of debt.

How could I marry a man I didn’t love, much less even met?

“Why are you even helping me?” I asked.

“When you came to me this afternoon,” he began, “you answered a prayer I’d sent up to the sky. You gave me strength when I needed it. So, now I’m here to answer your prayers. I’m here to give you strength, and this is how I can do it.”

I thought about it, my breath coming in shallow gasps.

Was I seriously considering this?

“Angela?” Brad asked softly. “I truly believe that this will work, Angela. I truly, truly do.”

It’s not like I have much of a choice.

I took a deep breath. I felt like I would be crushed underneath the weight of the words forming in my mouth.

“Yes,” I said. “I’ll do it.”

I felt something inside of my heart curl up and die.

“I’ll marry your son.”

Rude Awakening

BRAD

I couldn't believe she'd said yes. Even though I was a hyper-successful businessman, even though I was used to being treated like the self-made tycoon I was, I still found myself at a loss for words. There was something so impossibly innocent about her.

And yet, here she was, shaking hands on an arrangement that would force her life down a different path. I might be agreeing to pay her father's medical bills, but somehow, I still felt indebted to her.

A few days had passed since she'd agreed, and today was the day we were going to meet to discuss the finer details of the agreement.

I invited her for tea at the Plaza, and she readily accepted. And when she asked, "Which plaza?" I couldn't help but laugh; the girl was unequivocally endearing.

I had just sat down at my usual table, the one in the corner with plush armchairs on either side. It was true that many of my associates frequented tea in this dining room, but this table, hidden behind floral arrangements and centerpieces, made it easy to avoid them.

I was just checking my emails when I felt the whole mood of the room change, like a gust of wind had entered a sauna, leaving everyone inside refreshed.

I looked up, and there she was. She stepped nervously into the room, looking around like a lost child. I couldn't help but smile—and feel even more sure about my plan.

ANGELA

I woke up with a start this morning, surprised at how late I'd managed to sleep. I had tea with Brad Knight scheduled for the early afternoon. *Man*, I thought, ~that's a sentence I never thought I'd say~. What do people wear to afternoon tea?

A business suit?

A frilly dress?

I thought about asking Em for help, but then I'd have to explain who I was meeting, and why. And that felt like a whole other problem. So, instead, I

slipped into my normal jeans-and-blouse attire, stomped my favorite black boots on, and headed out the door.

After consulting with Google, I'd learned that the Plaza was not actually a plaza but the Plaza Hotel. Frequented by rich people, the Plaza had a mix of business and celebrity guests.

And afternoon tea wasn't just chamomile or orange pekoe. It was an event. I read all this on the train, looking down at the fading denim I had chosen to wear. I was out of my element, that much was clear. My nerves were multiplying by the second.

Would they even let me in?

As soon as I walked through the doors, the concierge ran out from behind his desk and put a hand up, stopping me.

"Madame?"

"Hi, yes," I stuttered. "I'm here for tea?"

He just raised an eyebrow.

"I'm meeting Mr. Knight," I said, not quite believing it either. But saying his name did the trick.

"Ah, perfect," he said, his French accent making him all the more intimidating. "Follow me."

As soon as he opened the dining room doors, I gasped. The decor was so meticulously arranged, so impossibly well coordinated, that I felt like just walking inside would ruin it.

I looked around, from table to table, feeling like an alien. And then I saw Brad in the back corner, standing up and giving me a wave. The concierge, still by my side, raised another eyebrow at me.

"Thanks for your help," I said softly, and weaved through the tables of people I'd seen in magazines. Holy cow.

"Take a seat," Brad said as soon as I was within earshot. He pointed to the plush chair across from him, and I felt like I had sunk into a cloud the moment I sat down. "Thanks for joining me."

“Thank you for inviting me,” I responded, filled with nerves. “This place is incredible.”

“This?” he said, looking around. “It’s nothing.” But he had a smile on his face, letting me in on the joke. “It’s something you’ll get used to.”

“I don’t think I could.”

“Believe me,” he said, “the glitz and the glimmer wear off. There are only so many bottles of champagne you can buy before you realize you have no one you like to share them with. But that’s why you’re here.”

“You drink champagne at tea?” I asked, confused. Just then, the waiter came over, wearing a bow tie. I thought he must be a model. He looked at Brad.

“Mr. Knight? The usual?”

Brad gave him a swift nod, and he disappeared without so much as a glance toward me. But then Brad leaned forward, and I could tell he was gearing up to start *The Conversation*.

“So, Angela. What you might not know about my son, Xavier, is that he’s been through a lot. Growing up with me as a father isn’t easy, contrary to what many might believe. There’s a lot of pressure. And pressure in small confinements...”

“It explodes,” I finished. And then I felt blood rush to my cheeks. Had I just interrupted Brad Knight?

But he just nodded at me.

“Exactly. Xavier’s been all over the place lately. And I think you...you have the ability to ground him. To remind him of what’s important. That’s what I’m proposing.”

“So, I get married to your son, and you make sure my dad’s health...his medical bills...”

“Everything will be covered,” he said, with a certainty that made me trust him.

“So long as you assure me our deal, our arrangement, will never be told to anybody else. Nobody can know why you’re doing what you’re doing. Not your family, not your friends. And not Xavier. Not my son.”

He handed me a multi-paged document. I saw it was a contract, with at least thirty clauses. And then my dad's face flashed through my mind—the face I'd seen in the hospital bed, all pale and weak.

My mind was telling me to stop, to think it over, but it was like my hand was working on its own. I took the fancy pen out of Brad Knight's hand and I signed the contract.

Then, hand still shaking, I took a sip of the steaming tea the model-server put before me.

Liar Liar

ANGELA

The scalding hot water cascaded over my skin, but no matter how hard I scrubbed, I still felt dirty.

Disgusting.

I couldn't believe how Xavier had spoken to me. I couldn't believe what he thought of me—that I was after his money and his family's name.

The idea of using someone like that was enough to make me sick, and yet that was exactly the type of person he so wholly believed I was.

That was when the irony hit me.

I was after his money.

If it wasn't for the Knight fortune, I never would have agreed to marry Xavier Knight.

But I wasn't a selfish gold digger.

I was doing it to save my dad's life.

But does that make things any better?

After turning off the shower, I wrapped a towel tightly around my body. Anything to help hold me together.

I dried off and slipped into my pajamas robotically, my mind far away.

As I collapsed into bed, my eyes fell on a framed picture across my room. It was a photo of me, Danny, Lucas, and my dad.

We all looked so happy.

Dad looked so healthy.

The photo was taken just last Thanksgiving. Danny had burned the turkey and Lucas had made way too much stuffing, but it was perfect.

We'd all squished into the old, worn-out couch in the living room and watched football with no worries about the future.

I put my head in my hands.

How has so much changed in just a year?

Dad had always been such a pillar of strength. After mom passed away, he'd taken on the role of both parents. He was the one constant, a steady rock in the storm of life.

And now he was in the hospital, and I wasn't sure if he was going to—

Em

hey girl

Em

u up for some 🍣🍣🍣 tn?

I stared at the little sushi emojis, the tiny unassuming picture saving me from my thoughts.

The last thing I wanted to do was go out in public. My blankets whispered seductively to me, tempting me with the promise of darkness and silence.

But maybe going out was exactly what I needed. Even if it was to escape my thoughts for an evening.

To get away from the memory of Xavier staring daggers into me with his ice-blue eyes...

Angela

K, meet you at the usual in 40

Em

yaaaasssss 🐟

“You’re too good for Curixon anyway,” Em said, popping another piece of salmon sashimi into her mouth.

I dipped my own tuna nigiri in soy sauce, humming noncommittally. “I still don’t get it,” I muttered. “I had such a good feeling after my interviews.”

“Well, it’s their loss.” Em snatched up a plate of salmon sushi from the conveyor belt in front of us. She was quickly amassing a little tower of empty plates beside her.

I chewed on my food, not tasting it at all.

If only Curixon had panned out. Maybe I wouldn’t have ended up getting engaged to a hateful billionaire...

My eyes roamed lazily over the slow-moving conveyor belt in front of me. I had so many choices, but none of them were even slightly appealing.

Em placed a salmon roll on my empty plate. “Anyway, we didn’t come here to mope.” She smiled at me, and I couldn’t help but feel my spirits rise a little. “Happy Pre-Giving.”

“Happy Pre-Giving,” I replied, and we tapped our sushi pieces together before eating them.

Every year Em and I had our own pre-Thanksgiving meal before we went back to spend it with our families.

“Anyway,” Em said around a mouthful of food, “did you hear about the commotion in Central Park earlier today?”

“Hmm?”

“Apparently some mega-rich couple held a fancy prewedding photo shoot. They even blocked off an entire section so no one could get close.”

I choked, trying my best to not send sushi bits flying over the conveyor belt.

Em slid me a glass of water. “I know, right? How crazy is that?” She sighed, wistful. “Imagine being so damn rich and in love that you could reserve *Central Park*.”

I chugged down some water, then cleared my throat. “Yeah, i-imagine that...”

I couldn’t exactly tell her that that was *my* prewedding photo shoot.

Nor could I correct her.

Sure, Xavier was mega rich.

But we were definitely *not* in love.

The look of hate and disgust in Xavier’s eyes flashed into my mind again.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

“Angela? Are you okay?”

I blinked, snapping out of my thoughts. “Of course,” I lied.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost...”

“J-just a little tired, I guess.”

Em stared at me, her eyes searching mine. I’d never been a good liar. And Em knew me better than anyone.

But I couldn’t have told her the truth if I wanted to. I couldn’t tell anyone. Not even my family. They’d probably find out eventually. It was impossible to hide such a high-profile marriage forever.

But they could never know the truth about my deal with Brad Knight.

I was *literally* contracted to lie.

And so I did.

“Anyway, I’ve got to make some last-minute preparations for Thanksgiving tomorrow,” I lied again. “I’m gonna head back.”

“Okay,” Em said, her tone neutral. I couldn’t tell if she believed me or not, but she let it drop.

We got up, and after paying we headed out into the cool evening air. My heart felt heavy with guilt. I’d had to lie to my best friend.

And that was just the beginning...

Sighing in frustration, I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes.

I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten the pecan pie. It was pretty much a staple at Thanksgiving.

But, to be fair, I had a lot on my mind.

The train went over a bump, and I shifted in my seat, leaning my head against the window and gazing at the scenery that blurred past.

I’d be at Heller in an hour; I wished I was already there.

Dad had assured us he was well enough to have Thanksgiving at home.

My brothers kept telling me how much better he looked, and I couldn’t wait to see him myself. I couldn’t wait to see all of them.

I felt my heart relax. It dawned on me how relieved I was to be getting away from New York. Even if it was just for a couple of days, some time away from the drama of the arrangement would be good for me.

It would give me space to breathe and come up with a plan.

After what felt like an age, I was finally walking up the front steps to my childhood home.

I knocked on the door and Lucas answered, wrapping me up in a big bear hug.

“You smell like train,” he said, pulling me into the house.

“Nice to see you too,” I said, sticking my tongue out.

I walked inside and a wave of nostalgia hit me. This was where I had grown up. The house that had seen me celebrate and mourn in equal measures.

This was where Em and I used to sneak R-rated movies into the DVD player, where Lucas and I used to build pillow forts and eat Nutella from the jar.

But being back now, with everything that had happened, it felt different.

Like somehow, this house couldn't protect me from the world outside anymore.

“Is that her? Angie?” And then there he was, rolling into the hallway in a wheelchair. He looked more like Dad than the man in the hospital bed had.

“DAD!” I leaped toward him, hugging him hard. He really did look healthier. Seeing him out of the hospital hardened my resolve.

If putting up with an angry billionaire meant that Dad would be okay...then so be it.

“Jesus, Angie, I'm here,” he said, laughing. “I'm not going anywhere, little pea. Unless you roll me there.”

“I know.” I tried to sneakily wipe away a tear before it spilled out of my eye. “I'm just happy to see you. You look great.”

“Ready to see the turkey?”

“You mean Danny?” I joked.

“I HEARD THAT!” Danny shouted from the living room. I knew he was already sitting on the couch watching football, his eyes glued to the TV.

I couldn't stop the goofy grin from spreading across my face.

This was exactly what I needed.

Our doorbell rang, and we all looked toward the door in confusion.

“Are we expecting anyone?” I asked Lucas.

“Nope.” His eyes lit up for a second. “Did you invite Em?”

“No, she should be with her mom.” I walked toward the door and opened it...

And just like that, my little Thanksgiving sanctuary was torn to pieces.

Because standing there, looking handsome and perfect and completely out of place with a box of pecan pie in his arms, was Xavier Knight.

He flashed me a brilliant smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. They looked cold. Calculating. Like a wolf playing with its food before it lunged in for the kill.

“Hey babe,” he mocked.

My heart kicked into overdrive. I was about to have a full-blown panic attack. My family didn't even know I was dating anyone, much less getting married to the richest bachelor in New York City.

“What are you doing here—”

“Angela?” Dad called from behind me. “Who's that?”

A pit of dread opened up in my stomach as I heard my family approach behind me.

“U-um, this is—”

Xavier stepped up beside me, his cruel, mocking demeanor gone in a flash.

He wrapped one arm around my waist and smiled down at me, his expression exuding love and affection. He looked like the definition of the perfect partner.

But I knew better.

He hated my guts. His touch felt more like a shackle than an embrace. I felt my dad's and my brother's gazes zero in on the gesture, and my face burned from embarrassment and shame.

“I'm Xavier,” my tormentor said, his voice buttery smooth. “I'm your daughter's fiancé.”

