The Arrangement

**Morning Shift** 

**ANGELA** 

tired. My hand instinctively rested on my belly. *My twins.* 

The electric doors leading to the emergency wing slid open before me. After being awake most of the night, I was bone

At the penthouse, I'd napped for a few hours, taken a shower, and gathered some clothes for Xavier. My sleep was restless. I was worried for him.

For so long, all I wanted was for him to come home. But not like *this*. In the weeks we'd been apart, he hadn't once

Now that he was back, I oscillated between anxiety, anger, relief, love

My nerves were live wires.

Being in the hospital didn't help. Even though the sterile white surfaces were washed in the calm, blue light of early

morning, it did nothing to relax me.

returned my calls. I didn't know who he was anymore.

I introduced myself at reception, and the woman led me to my husband's room.

As we headed down the hallway, a man left one of the adjoining rooms and closed the door. My breath caught. I would recognize those broad shoulders, tousled blond hair, and athletic gait anywhere. It was Leo.

*OMGOMGOMG!* I thought to myself. My heart raced. Why was my doctor bringing up this kind of reaction in me?

The last time we saw each other, we were hurling snowballs. It had been light and fun, but it also felt like there was

Maybe it was the look in his eye

The same one I saw now, as Leo noticed me.

No. My emotions were frazzled and my hormones were raging. That must have been it.

something ...intense about our play.

He touched my shoulder with the hand that wasn't holding a manila folder. "You ran away from the park so quickly—I only knew that there had been an accident."

"Angela," he called, his voice soft with concern as he walked toward me. "Is your husband okay?"

The past day had been such a whirlwind that I could hardly hold a conversation. And for some reason, seeing Leo made me even more overwhelmed.

"Is he okay?" Leo pressed. "Yes. Thank God. Yes."

Relief hit me like a drug. Just saying those words released some tension in my shoulders.

The receptionist was waiting for me. And staring at Dr. Carmichael.

I realized that she was trying to cheer me up in any little way she could.

"Yes, there was an accident..." I began before I lost my train of thought.

He's okay. Xavier will be okay. "Good." Leo smiled down at me. "He'll be so happy to see you."

"Here you are," the receptionist said, delivering me before my husband's room. Just then, the door opened, and Penny

I broke away from Leo's searching eyes and continued down the hall.

I can see why you fell for her, Brad.

stepped into the hall.

Penny took my hand.

I stood at the door, hesitating.

It wasn't like he came home on purpose.

him, life was moving forward.

stupid and stubborn behavior.

Angela.

I missed all of this.

I felt myself spiral deeper.

Angela.

The pain of our separation struck me all over again. It still felt fresh.

across the world?

Something in his tone made me look away.

She smiled when she saw me, trying her best to look energetic even though I could tell she was anything but. The bags underneath her eyes didn't lie.

Though she was an unexpected friend, I had always felt a connection to her. "He's awake," she said softly. She gave me a small smile, and then she left.

Last time we were together, all either of us wanted was to be apart. Apparently, Xavier still wanted that.

I was about to see my husband awake for the first time in countless weeks. What had he been doing in Tokyo, so far

But I swallowed the lump in my throat. I needed to be strong. I had my babies to think about. With Xavier or without

**XAVIER** 

I pushed down the handle and stepped into the room.

It had to be Angela. Who else would bother coming to me? Who hadn't given up on my sorry ass?

In my heart, I knew I didn't deserve another visit from my wife. She had been here, and she left before I woke.

Maybe she wouldn't come back. And how could I blame her? What had I given her to hold onto?

For all she knew, I hadn't planned to come back at all. All I wanted was to hold her, to tell her I had been planning to come back to her. I regretted everything—the fight, my

I had disappeared in a stinking cloud of whiskey burps and exhaust fumes.

I was planning to come back. Before the crash. Before the mess got

In the early morning light, she was an angel. She was *my* angel.

But I didn't know if she would take me since I had fallen from grace.

She was as beautiful as ever, her blond hair loose around her shoulders.

I stared at the doorway in anticipation, waiting to see who Penny had been speaking to.

Finally, she came into the room.

...even messier.

I was gone for so long.

And her belly! She was showing, and her hand held it like an act of comfort or protection.

I held her hand, but I could hardly look her in the eye. I never deserved to be her husband. Even before I let everything get out of control. Now, I didn't deserve even her pity.

"I'm surprised you're here," I whispered, my voice pathetic and small, "after everything I've done."

"Of course I'm here," she replied. Her fingers brushed my cheek, and I finally met her eyes.

I saw some emotion flickering in her gaze. But was it love?

The rejection I felt that night returned to me fresh, as if it had never left.

"I thought you wanted to see me hurt when you left Tokyo."

She was right, but that didn't stop me from digging myself deeper.

been calling you. You think I want to be pregnant alone?"

"I'm your wife," she murmured.

The words fell between us like a wall.

"That's not fair," she whispered.

me, and finally you realized it, too."

Angela's hands were balled up in fists.

the ...the twins."

*I had missed so much.* 

My hand trembled.

How could I possibly come back?

What was I doing? There was no turning back now.

"Xavier," she cried. Tears shone in her eyes as she came to my side, touching the wrist that wasn't hooked up to the IV.

I felt the pain within me twist into an easier feeling, a familiar one: anger. That was why she was here. Obligation. She had left *me*. She told me not to come back.

"You didn't want me around. And you got what you wanted." She pulled her hand from mine.

"What the fuck, Xavier?" My wife asked. She was angry now, which was better than when she was sad. "You know I've

"I think you don't want me dragging you down. I just embarrass you. I always thought you would be better off without

"Xavier, I had to leave. I'm not only thinking about myself anymore. And not only you, either. I have to think about

What? Angela's eyes were wild, almost feral, as I searched them.

Maybe I could sink all the way into the gurney until my whole body disappeared.

"I don't have anything left to offer you," I whispered. "I have no job, no family

"Well, my dad isn't here anymore, either. Now there's nothing holding you back."

The confidence in her voice was a balm to my open wounds, but it wasn't enough to heal them.

I met her eyes, and she looked at me like she was looking into my soul.

"I was never with you for any of those reasons."

touched my cheek and found it wet with tears. "I'm so sorry," I managed. My voice rose up to Angela, up to the clouds where she was.

There was no outrunning my pain and guilt anymore. It came in waves that knocked me over and left me breathless. I

What was I doing?

That one little word broke me. My floundering rage only drove home Angela's point:

This wasn't the first time I'd needed to prove myself to my wife.

My voice was strong. Even the fog in my head began to clear.

I'd done this before.

"I swear to you, I'll try to get better if you'll still take me back." Angela's jaw was set. I didn't know what she would do.

This wasn't the first time I'd hurt her. When we were first married, I was awful. I was a cheater. I let my anger loose on Angela any chance I got. I thought those days were far behind us, but it was obvious that Angela never forgot.

"I fucked up," I admitted. "I'm still fucked up, and it's not going away overnight." Angela's brow furrowed. She wasn't sure about this. I continued.

"I'm so sorry for letting you down. I want to get better. I want to be better for you and for our family."

"Can you still trust me after everything I've done?" I whispered. I waited for her response like a castaway, treading water in the ocean. Would she give me the life raft I needed?

I was lashing out, and I didn't know how to stop. "How dare you?" she asked, her expression steely. It chilled me to the bone. "Nothing holding me back? I'm pregnant with your fucking children, Xavier." The curse rang in the air. This was a new side of Angela; one I'd never seen before. She was acting hard and cold. Then I understood. This side of Angela was new. She had built it because of me. To protect herself from me. At that moment, I knew I was running out of chances. If I didn't pull it together, Angela really would leave me. "Sorry," I managed. "You think one 'sorry' is going to fix everything?" she asked. "Because it won't. If you want to be here for our children, you need to *prove* that you deserve it." She narrowed her eyes at me, but her voice came out small. "Again."

"What do you mean, twins?!" "Why do you think I've been calling you?" she shouted. She looked down at her bump and held it, avoiding my eyes. When she spoke again, her voice was softer. "Or *I'm* having twins. I don't know if you want to be there." Her voice cracked. I felt like I was falling again, into the pillows behind my head. Falling from grace once more.

There was her touch again, on my arm. "Shhhh." Her voice was more than I deserved.

... I've wasted so much of our money."

As soon as the ugly words were out, I screwed my lips shut. Angela recoiled. She looked at me like I was someone she didn't know.