

The Arrangement
S.S. Sahoo

Open Your Eyes

BRAD

Fire.

Wreckage.

Debris.

I couldn't keep my eyes off the screen. They had finally found the remains of the plane, but there was still no word as to the survivors.

I had no idea whether my son and my daughter-in-law were alive or ...

I couldn't allow myself to think *that word*. I refused to say –that word –aloud. The same word that people used when they spoke about my wife. My beloved Amelia.

To think that, on top of losing her, I might also lose the only family I had left was too much for an old man to bear.

The voices on the television refused to give me peace.

"This just in. We have now learned that there are a number of casualties from the plane crash over the Caribbean. No word yet as to the fate of billionaire Xavier Knight or his new wife, Angela Knight ..."

I grabbed the remote and muted the voices. Watching my life fall apart at the seams was one thing, but having to listen to it?

"This is all your fault," I whispered to myself through clenched teeth. "If you hadn't forced them to go on that honeymoon ..."

Tears stung my eyelids. I threw the remote against the wall, enjoying the sound as it cracked open, batteries flying out. It felt good to destroy something right now.

But deep down, I knew this enjoyment would be short-lived.

How was I supposed to go on from here? How was I ever going to forgive myself if my worst fears were realized?

Suddenly, my cell phone buzzed in my pocket, and I hurried to take it out, hands trembling. I knew, with one swipe, my life, my dynasty, my future as I'd always pictured it, might be erased.

But as I opened the text messages from my loyal assistant, Ron, my eyes widened in disbelief.

Ron

Boss!!!

Ron

I just spoke with the Haitian authorities

Ron

You won't believe it

Brad

What?

Brad

For Chrissake, Ron!

Brad

TELL ME.

Ron

They're alive!!!

Ron

Xavier and Angela

Ron

They're both alive

Ron

They're being transported to Miami right now

Brad

Are they okay?

Ron

Only minor injuries. Some blood loss, dehydration

Ron

But they're going to be okay

Brad

Are you SURE?

Brad

Are you absolutely certain?

Brad

I can't take another heartbreak, Ron.

Brad

I need proof.

Ron

I know, boss

Ron

I'm sure. I just received this photo

Ron

[attachment: Episode31_Content2_hands@2x.png]

Those hands. The wedding ring on the girl's finger. I would recognize that ring anywhere. After all, Angela's ring had once belonged to my Amelia.

It was true. Ron was right. They really were alive.

Ron

That's from inside the helicopter

Ron

They were told no photos of faces in case this leaks

Ron

But I'm sure you can tell if it's them ...

Brad

Get my plane ready, Ron.

Brad

I want to meet them in Miami.

Ron

On it, boss!

I quickly grabbed my things and hurried from my office, trying to keep the tears of relief at bay. Normally, I would never show emotion in front of my employees.

But today was no normal day.

I could feel them all watching me as I hurried to the elevator. I could feel their pity, their concern, their anguish, but they didn't know what I did—that Xavier and Angela were safe.

I wouldn't believe it until I saw them with my own eyes, but my heart told me that it was true.

Amelia, I thought. You'll have to wait a little bit longer, my love. Your son and daughter-in-law have so much more life to live.

XAVIER

My eyelids felt like they were made of cement. There was no goddamn way they were going to move anytime soon.

A part of me recognized that I would need to open my eyes eventually, but the darkness was so soothing right now. After all that harsh light, that unforgiving sun, that brief time she and I had shared on the island ...

Angela.

I remembered now. Angela. How she'd taken care of me, fed me, dressed my wounds. The girl I'd constantly insulted, the girl I'd called a gold-digging bitch, the girl I was married to.

My wife.

I blinked open one eye. Then the other. Everything around me was blurry, but I could vaguely make out the cold, sterile setting of a hospital room.

For a second, I wanted to shut my eyes and retreat back into darkness—I was so damn tired—but then I thought of Angela again.

I needed to see her. I needed to be sure she was okay too. I thought she must be beside me, but when I turned my head, the hospital bed next to mine was empty.

Where was she?!

"Nurse ..." I croaked. "NURSE!!!"

My throat felt so parched, like someone had poured sand down my throat, but none of that mattered right now. I needed to find her.

A heavy-set, frowning nurse stepped inside with a tablet and began to check my vitals. She didn't even look me in the eye.

"Where is she?" I asked.

But the nurse either didn't hear me or didn't care. I noticed she had one earbud in, the other dangling around her chest, playing REM. Who still listened to REM?

"I asked you a question," I said, growing annoyed. "Where the hell is she?!"

The nurse finally made eye contact with me and shrugged. I couldn't believe the bitch's audacity. I felt anger rising within my chest, blooming up my neck, reddening my cheeks.

Does this fat slob have any idea who she's treating? I'm Xavier goddamn Knight. I should have ten nurses all dotting on me at once!

Clearly, no one had communicated how important I was to the nurse because she began to walk toward the door.

"HEY!" I shouted, and she finally turned. "My wife. Angela Knight."

"What about her?" she asked coolly.

"Is she ..." I began and stopped.

I found it suddenly difficult to form sentences. Emotion, caring, these foreign feelings had me in a chokehold. I still didn't know if she'd made it.

"Please," I said, though I was unaccustomed to using that word. "Just tell me. Is she okay?"

Something in the nurse's eyes shifted. A hint of compassion, maybe. Then she nodded. "She's right down the hall. Don't worry."

Then she stepped out, leaving me alone. I breathed a sigh of relief, grateful.

I didn't know at what point Angela had become someone I stopped hating, but everything felt different now.

The way she had looked at me with those bright blue eyes. That blonde tumbling hair. That perfect body descending into the water ...

What the hell?

Was I fantasizing about Angela now?

Maybe I'd simply been concussed and had to shake it off. We were back in the real world, and that meant we'd have to continue our routines, and I would have to learn how to hate her all over again.

Right?

Somehow, now, I wasn't so sure.

I approached her hospital room slowly.

The wounds on my arms still ached, and I had to be careful not to overexert my body.

I slowly pushed open the door and there she was. Quiet and still as Sleeping Beauty herself.

My wife.

Angela Knight.

The strange girl I had always thought to be a devil, but who was, in fact, an angel in disguise. Watching her lie there, her chest rising and falling, her eyes closed ...I felt a strange sensation wash over me.

At first, I'd thought that once we returned to the real world, everything would return to normal. But as I looked at her, I realized that was impossible.

What we had shared on the island was so primal, so raw, so real, and there was no going back now.

I slowly approached her bed and sat beside her, grabbing her cold hand.

When would she wake up? And what would she think when she looked at me now?

Would Angela see me as a monster for all the horrible ways I'd treated her? Or would she see me as someone different?

As the man, I really was underneath this hardened skin.

"Wake up, Angela," I begged her. "Open your eyes."

But her eyes remained shut. For a second, the stupidest thought in the world crossed my mind. That I might have to kiss her to bring her back to life. Like that stupid fucking fairy tale.

Yup. Definitely concussed.

I reached down and gently squeezed her hand. She looked so delicate, vulnerable.

She began to stir at my touch, and my heart leapt in my chest.

She opened her eyes, those bright-blue orbs staring right into mine.

"You're awake," I said, my voice gentle.

Angela looked around, and I could see the confusion setting in.

"You're safe now," I assured her.

"Where am I?" she asked, her voice trembling.

Something in her voice made me worry. She sounded terrified.

"Angela, we're in a hospital. It's okay."

She looked down and saw that her hand was in mine. She pulled her hand out of my grasp and cradled it to her chest, trying to lean away from me in her bed.

"Angela ...?" I could tell something bad was happening.

But what she said next, I could never have been prepared for.

"Who ..." She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. "Who are you?"