**Back to Normal** 

## After my memories returned to me, we'd quickly returned to New York.

We'd just left the airport, and Marco was driving us through the usual hustle and bustle of the city.

This was the Xavier I remembered—cold, callous, staring out his window the entire ride home. He hadn't said a word

But then, what was there to say?

How were we supposed to process everything we'd just been through? Would Xavier continue to hate me now that we

**ANGELA** 

were back?

He was who he was.

felt like home, not really.

to me.

I had to admit, whether he still hated me or not, the quiet was certainly preferable to him screaming at me all the time. "Marco," Xavier said, shaking me from my stupor. "Drop me off at work, will you? I have a lot to catch up on."

"Of course, sir," Marco said, always obedient.

I considered Xavier, surprised. Was he really capable of going back to work already? He'd just survived a plane crash!

But sure enough, five minutes later, Marco was pulling up to the Knight Enterprises building and opening the car door for Xavier.

"Um," he said, looking uncertain as to what to say. "Take it easy ...I guess?" Then he slammed the car door shut and headed inside his building. I stared in disbelief. *Take it easy?* That was all he

had to say? I found myself both confused and not surprised in the slightest. Who was I to make the great Xavier Knight change?

back where he belonged. Marco stepped back into the car. "All right, Ms. Knight. Back home?"

I thought about it. Home. Of course, Marco meant the penthouse apartment I shared with Xavier, but that had never

A plane crash, a near-death experience, strange bonding on a faraway island—none of it mattered now that he was

No. I knew where I wanted to go.

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The front door opened, and burly arms wrapped around me, lifting me into the air. Even as my leg bumped against his

"You have no idea how scared we all were, sis," Danny said, lowering me and waving me inside. "Lucas started

"Angie!!!"

and it throbbed with pain, I smiled. Because, at last, I was surrounded by the people I loved. Back home in Heller, where I was raised.

"Danny, you can put me down," I said, laughing slightly. "I'm fine."

Beside Lucas, I was surprised to see Em. For a second, I couldn't understand what she was doing here. She was one of my best friends, don't get me wrong, but she wasn't family.

How had I forgotten? "I'm ...I'm glad you're here," I managed.

"Thank God you're all right," she said, running forward and hugging me tight. There were tears in her eyes. And I

Finally, around the corner, came my dad. His cheeks looked rosy and healthy, and his smile was huge. "There she is," he said. "My sweet pea."

Suddenly, there were tears in my eyes. When I'd been stranded on the island, when all hope seemed lost, I'd thought of

"Dad, I'm ..." I said, but I couldn't continue. An involuntary sob left my throat, and I was running toward him, throwing

my arms around his neck. "It's okay," he said, holding me, gently patting my head. "It's okay, Angie. I'm all right. We're all here."

And not a fact I'd expected to be confronted with when returning home.

my father and whether I'd ever get to see him again.

And here I was. Here he was. Here we were together.

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"You did WHAT?!"

"I caught a fish! Is that so hard to believe?"

intended to avoid for as long as I could.

"So the treatment might actually be working?"

do a little jogging."

Instead, I looked at my dad. "So, how are you feeling?" I asked.

the temperature and air quality of my bedroom exactly right

every hour as if it might be my last, I couldn't help but feel

grit, all of these things were rightfully mine.

what cost?

What the hell is the matter with me?

Jesus.

meetings.

begin.

"Xavier?"

might as well."

otherwise put-together demeanor.

"What is it?" I asked, frowning.

"Those were her fault."

"And then the plane crash."

you're in control."

life.

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"Fine," I said. "Name it."

I scoffed. "Shouldn't that make us look

"Please," I said, tsk-ing. "You know I'm—"

"The rumors that you've been sleeping around."

"That's what everyone keeps telling me."

made my life a goddamn living hell?

what she was—a no-good money-grubbing whore.

didn't hear one word.

"Do you see this girl? Skin and bones!" he said to Lucas. "C'mon, we gotta get her fed, pronto!"

Danny was staring at me in disbelief. Everyone at the table was looking at me as if I were a completely different person.

"Guys, it's not that big of a deal," I said, blushing. "Dad used to take us all hunting. You don't think I picked up a few

tricks along the way?" "I didn't think you were capable of killing anything," Danny said. "I'll admit it. I'm scared of you now."

There were so many questions I wanted to ask, but they could wait. For now, I just wanted to eat a delicious homecooked meal, laugh at Danny's jokes, and be thankful that I was spending this moment at home. In my real home. Not with Xavier.

My dad shrugged, but when I looked at Danny, he was smiling, as if to say, *Yeah*, *Angie*. *It's really working*.

"Better, sweet pea," he said, taking a big bite of lasagna. "So much better. My appetite's back, and some days I can even

But when I opened my eyes, I saw the wood-paneled ceiling and realized I was back in my massive luxurious kingsized bed. Back in New York City where I belonged.

I sighed with relief. These microfiber sheets, this Zen Chi buckwheat hull pillow, the centrifugal humidifier that kept

These were the markings of a billionaire's home. The wealth I had accumulated, the riches I had earned through sheer

...changed.

"Oh, uh, sure," I said, eyes glazed over. "Wonderful," one of my top executives said. "We'll get the ball rolling and keep you updated!"

I nodded and then lazily turned aside in my chair as she left my office. I looked out the window at Manhattan. Sure, it

I know I should've said something to Angela in the hospital, in the plane, in the car, but I didn't know where the hell to

Oh, so now that you saved my life and all, you think we can move past the fact that you married me for my money and

I put my head in my hands. I wished that I could still hate her, that I could reconnect with my rage and call her exactly

was an island, but could it have been more different than the last one I was on?

her. My brain was chaos. It felt like I couldn't think straight if my life depended upon it. I wanted to blame the plane crash. A physical malady was easier to diagnose, but I knew better. This was about my feelings for Angela somehow.

I turned to see my father enter my office. He looked better, if still exhausted. The bags beneath his eyes betrayed his

He tapped on the table between us, sighing. "It's too early to bring up, but if you're insisting on working, I guess I

I just couldn't make heads or tails of what the hell my goddamn feelings were telling me.

"You really should be at home," he said, taking a seat across from me.

What the hell was happening to me? One second, I wanted to spit in the girl's face, and the next, I wanted to cuddle

I was struck silent at that. My father was giving me one of those glares that meant, *I'm not going to even ask if that's* true because I don't want to know.

...I don't know, like victims?"

"No, Xavier. Right now, I don't know anything. And neither does the board. You need to do something to show them

"The Silver Jubilee is two months away. As you know, part of the evening includes an annual dance competition."

"Yes. Pathetic. Powerless. Incapable of running a business because you've been so traumatized."

"Xavier," my father said sternly. "I don't ask you for much, but this I am asking for. I nearly lost you and Angela both and ... Please. If not for the company, do this for me." I sighed and looked away, knowing that convincing Angela to dance with me, especially when she had a leg injury, was going to be next to impossible.

The idea that I had to ask Angela for a favor was eating me up inside.

came first. To think my entire future depended on some stupid fucking dance!

with Angela, I'd never thought I would have to try.

oh-so-sweet gold-digging wife.

had to admit that I had no idea how to answer it. How the hell was I going to convince my own wife to dance with me?

"...you know that's not true!"

"You know what, Marco," I said. "I'd like to stop somewhere first."

He was about to step out when he stopped and looked at me.

"He did?" Behind him stood Lucas, shaking his head but beaming. *Of course not*. Even at the scariest moments, Danny was always joking around. Making all of us feel better.

knitting just to calm his nerves."

suddenly remembered.

Em and Lucas were a thing. A couple. In truth, the idea of my best friend dating my brother still made me feel a little queasy. I was happy for them, obviously, but it was just hard to wrap my head around it.

We all stayed there for the longest time, frozen, trying to hold on to this moment, this gratitude that we had been reunited, despite everything. Finally, I pulled away from my dad and wiped my tears away.

I laughed, feeling a warmth inside that no Caribbean sunlight could ever come close to competing with.

We all laughed. I noticed Lucas and Em holding hands under the table and looked away. That was one subject I

**XAVIER** Our first morning back, I woke up, and for a second, I could've sworn I was still on the beach. I could *feel* the grains of sand scratching against my back, ~hear~ the sounds of waves lapping on the shore, ~smell~ the fresh ocean breeze.

Mine. Xavier Knight's. But ...

Having been stripped of all these items on that island, reduced to nothing more than a man trying to survive, living

The material possessions that had once brought me such pleasure felt silly and empty now. I was comfortable, but at

All I could think about was Angela. "Mr. Knight? Do we have your approval?"

I forced the thoughts out of my head and hurried to dress and get to the office, where I sleepwalked through several

Someone was speaking to me about flowcharts, about a new Knight hotel, about an upcoming presentation, but I

But just thinking that, never mind saying it out loud, made me feel sick. Is this what they call guilt?

My dad had that look, the look that said he was about to spring something on me. Something I wouldn't like. At all. "Right now, your PR image is ...how do I say this?" My dad paused. "It's bad, Xavier. The photos of Angela—"

"You can't be serious." "You and Angela are to take part. You need to dance in front of everyone. Show how confident you are. How in love you are. Understand?"

"This is ridiculous. I thought it would be something business-related. Not some goddamn—"

To presume she would do more for me now was insanity. If I were her, I would hate my fucking guts. I would never want to see me again, let alone be my dance partner at the Silver Jubilee.

I never thought in a million years that this would be my problem. *Be nice*, I thought. ~Be charming~. But with this girl,

I knew, if I failed to convince her, my father might very well replace me as CEO of Knight Enterprises. Business always

It made me want to tear my hair out. Nothing made sense right now. Not work. Not play. Not the relationship with my

The question played out again and again, over and over, in my own head, sounding more ridiculous every time. But I

After all the horrible things I'd said to her, after the filthy ways I'd treated her, how had she repaid me? By saving my

I thought of Angela and remembered that I was going to have to speak with her about this Silver Jubilee dance competition. Ugh.

The idea alone made me shiver with disgust. The last thing in the world I wanted was to ask a woman for a favor, but

Louis XIII Cognac, one of the world's finest. Yet another reminder of my ridiculous wealth. I took a step into the hallway, and I heard two distant voices. Laughter.

I hoped she wasn't back yet from her father's place in Heller. I needed a drink first.

Maybe doing this will help clear up how you feel about her! My brain was trying to come up with justifications now. Great.

after talking to my father, I knew I had no choice.

"Angela, stop acting so humble for once in your life."

A man was speaking to my wife, making her giggle and squeal.

Who the fuck is that?