

The Arrangement
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The Silver Jubilee

ANGELA

Lights flashed. Crowds shouted. Smiles dazzled.

We were in the middle of a red carpet for the Silver Jubilee, and I could hardly see straight. There were so many members of the press here.

Everywhere I turned, someone was yelling at me.

“Mrs. Knight! Who designed that dress?!”

“Mrs. Knight! Can you pose with your husband?!”

“Mrs. Knight! What do you have to say to your fans?!”

Fans? Since when did I have fans? Xavier was smiling and waving, clearly used to this, dressed in a snazzy tux. I, meanwhile, wore a chiffon cocktail dress with a glamorous gold accent, which I knew would sparkle on the dance floor.

Even though Xavier insisted I looked like “a million bucks,” I felt out of place and extremely nervous. It wasn’t just because I was about to dance in front of a massive crowd of important people.

It was because of those weird texts I’d received. I hadn’t thought about who might be trying to mess with me in a while. The last time I’d received a text like that was when I was hanging out at Dustin’s café.

I thought it might have been like Dustin had been saying, *Just words*.

Now I wasn’t so sure. There seemed to be a hidden threat in the words, a promise that something terrible was about to happen. I couldn’t get the last line out of my head.

“No one says no to me ...”

He, whoever he was, had said that last time too. It was so creepy. The threats permeated my being, making me feel like my hands were made of ice and my legs of jelly.

How was I possibly supposed to be coordinated tonight after receiving texts like that?

“Hey,” I heard a gruff voice whisper beside me. “You okay?”

I turned to see Xavier, looking concerned. I guess I wasn’t hiding my nerves very well. I tried to fake a smile.

“Fine,” I said. “We should smile for a photo, right?”

“Angela, if you don’t want to, we don’t have to. There’s already enough on our plate tonight.”

He was being so *nice*, so ~supportive~. I could hardly believe this was the same Xavier who had once called me a gold-digging slut, among other things.

“You’re sure?” I asked. “It seems like it’s expected of us.”

“Come on.”

Xavier took my hand and led me inside the massive ballroom without another word. I was extremely grateful to be away from the cameras.

But now there were new obstacles to contend with. The wealthy guests of the Silver Jubilee, which included members of Knight Enterprises and other important business people.

Xavier tried to skip most of the pleasantries and get us as quickly to our seats as possible, but some small talk was necessary. By the time we reached our table, I was out of breath.

“Here, sit,” he said. “I’ll grab us some water.”

“When does the competition start?” I asked.

I just wanted to get it over with at this point. He put a hand to my bare shoulder. The feel of his rough skin on mine made me shiver with excitement.

“As soon as everyone’s inside, Angela. Don’t worry. We got this.”

We got this.

I wanted to burn those words into my brain. They were so casual and reassuring and exactly what I needed. With that, Xavier turned to go find us some water.

I smiled a bit, trying to put those creepy texts behind me. I had a new phrase to fill that space.

We got this, I thought.

That’s right.

We got this.

“Please welcome to the stage ...Mr. and Mrs. Knight!”

The crowd applauded wildly as Xavier and I stood up and approached the dance floor. I could feel myself sweating in anticipation. I was so scared and so excited at the same time.

Finally, when we reached the middle of the dance floor, the applause had died down, and all was quiet, Xavier pulled me close and whispered into my ear.

“It’s just you and me, Angela. There’s nobody else that matters. Not right now. Okay?”

Those dark eyes had never looked so full of light. I almost gasped. He was so beautiful. I know, strange to call a man beautiful, but that was how Xavier appeared in that moment.

Like some sort of Greek god, towering above me, offering me his perfectly sculpted hand. Me, a nothing, a nobody, a peasant.

He wanted to lift me up, to show the world I was his, that, in this moment, we were all that mattered. And I wanted to say yes to everything.

The bolero began, its soft Spanish guitar strumming, causing us to sway and slink around one another like an inverted mirror image ...

Vaguely, I could feel hundreds of eyes following us, but there were only two eyes that had me entranced. And those were Xavier’s.

The intensity in that gaze was unlike anything I’d ever seen. As he spun me, I could feel the force of his rippling muscles propelling me. As he pulled me close, I felt his hot breath against my pale cheek.

His every move was dominant and powerful. And, still, we circled in perfect sync, our dance more than a dance.

It was a conversation we had been having since the first moment we met, the moment he cursed me. It was, at once, frightening and safe. Angry and calm. Sexy and sweet.

It was all the opposites in the world rolled up into one.

As he lifted me mid-air, his hands around my waist, I realized that so much of this dance felt just like the dream I’d had of Xavier.

The spotlight.

The feeling that we were totally alone.

The sensual music.

All that was missing was the bed of throw pillows, and as for what followed, I couldn’t believe I was going there in the middle of this dance. Thinking about that. That sex dream.

But I could see it in Xavier’s ravenous eyes. He was feeling the same. The sexual tension, the need for release.

But I couldn’t give it to him, could I? To Xavier Knight? After all he’d done to me?

Could I really just pretend that everything was fine, that our marriage was a normal marriage, and that we were now expected to have sex? When the dance finished, who would Xavier and I be?

The final step, the final pose. Then the room was on its feet, showering us in applause. I looked at Xavier, grinning, his eyes shining, and I knew I couldn’t take it.

As soon as we walked off the dance floor, I didn’t stop at the table. I went straight for the doors and ran from the ballroom into the night as fast as my feet could take me.

It was snowing—the first snow of the year—and I had no jacket, but I didn’t care.

I needed to get away.

From him.

From me.

From everything.

XAVIER

“Angela! ANGELA! WAIT!”

I was running after her as fast as I could. It was cold out, and she had nothing but a cocktail dress on for Christ’s sake! Where was she going?!

“Angela, please!”

I finally managed to catch up with her in the middle of a crosswalk. I grabbed her arm before she could make it to the other side of the street. On either side of us, cars whooshed by, heightening the intensity of the moment.

“What’s going on?” I asked her. “Angela, look at me!”

I tried to put my coat on her, but she resisted, pushing me away. For a second, I thought she was about to run into oncoming traffic, and I had to grab her shoulders hard.

“Angela, STOP!”

She finally stopped and looked up at me, and I realized there were tears in those big, beautiful eyes.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Everything, Xavier!” she exclaimed. “It’s everything. Everything we are. Everything we’re *not*. I can’t keep it straight anymore. I feel like I’m losing my mind.”

“I know it’s been a confusing few months but—”

“Confusing? I can’t even recognize myself in the mirror anymore, Xavier!”

I had never heard her raise her voice like this. Her cheeks were flushed, her mascara running. The bitter cold was making her shake.

“Let’s go inside,” I said, seeing the little man on the crosswalk flash white. “We can talk about everything.”

“No,” she said, resisting. “I don’t want to talk anymore. I want to *know*. What are we? What is any of this to you, Xavier? Really?”

I took a deep breath. For a while, I’d known I needed to come clean with Angela, but I had been too afraid to instigate it. Now, in the middle of New York City, as snow began to fall, I knew my hand had been forced.

It was time.

“Angela, I know why you married me,” I began. “My father told me everything. About your dad’s medical bills. About the arrangement. I ...”

And finally, I said the word I’d never said before, the only word that was right for this moment.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Angela. For everything. For the things I called you. For the way I treated you. If I had known all along that it wasn’t about the money, that it was a selfless act ...”

My eyes were stinging. I could feel the tears that wanted to flow. But—no, goddamnit—I wouldn’t let them. I still had too much to say. Angela watched me, eyes wide.

“I can’t forgive myself for how horrible I was to you, Angela. After all you’ve done for me. After you *saved my life*. I understand if you want to end the marriage.”

“Xavier, I can’t ...” She tried to speak. “Brad and I had an agreement.”

“Screw the agreement. If you want to be free, you should be, Angela. You deserve that. I will rip it up myself! But ...”

And now I looked down. If I kept looking into those pure, perfect eyes, I knew I’d crack. I’d break. I’d lose my shit.

“I’ll let you go if I have to, Angela, but you should know that’s the last thing I want. I ...I want you to stay, Angela. *Stay*.”

I didn’t know what Angela was about to say, but I knew that whatever the next words out of her mouth might be, they would change everything ...

“What do you want, Angela?” I asked. “Will you stay?”