

The Arrangement
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Begin Again

ANGELA

“What do you want, Angela?”

What do I want?

Em had asked me the same question. My lips parted in reply, but I found, again, that I couldn’t form the words.

The answer wasn’t so simple.

It wasn’t a red-dress-or-blue-dress kind of question. Not sushi or pasta. This was happiness and love. Hurt and death.

It was my life. The future of my family.

As my mind began to swirl with thoughts and memories, I closed my eyes, unable to concentrate with the weight of Xavier’s searching gaze on me.

Memories washed over me.

It wasn’t enough that Xavier was sleeping with another woman on the day he married me. No, he had to pick up a woman I knew, a woman I’d spent time with that day. A woman who knew what my pores looked like up close. It was like he was purposely trying to hurt me, to punish me for marrying him.

“Clean it,” he said.

What?

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. You want to cause problems in my life, inviting my own father over without giving me some advanced warning, then I’ll throw it right back to you. This is a mess I made. You clean it.”

“Hey,” he said, softer, like he was trying to flirt. Like I was another girl. “You are my wife, you know that?”

“I know, Xavier.”

“So don’t walk away from me.” He was so close to me I could count his eyelashes.

“Okay,” I said. I tried to wiggle from his grasp, but he held strong.

“You know, wives are supposed to do things for their husbands. To perform,” he said, and the stench of alcohol flowed off him.

“...love is patient ...”

“...gold-digging slut ...”

“...love is kind ...”

“...I fucking hate you ...”

“...love never fails ...”

“...what I want is to ruin you ...”

“No,” I finally said, surprising myself.

Eyes fluttering open, I forced myself not to falter as I watched Xavier’s expression drop. “I-I’m not ready to stay, to continue being married to you.”

Xavier swallowed, “I understand. I—”

“But”—I held up my finger—“I would like to start over. If that’s okay?”

I heard the air *whoosh* out of Xavier’s lungs as though he’d been punched in the stomach. A radiant smile spread across his lips. “I would like nothing more.”

He wrapped me in his arms, suddenly embracing me.

“In that case”—his sweet breath fanned across my cheeks—“I’d like to ask you out. Next Friday maybe? I know this cute little pizza place ...”

Unable to help myself, I laughed. “That sounds wonderful.”

“Angela, I ...” Xavier stopped, licked his lips, and squeezed me closer before stepping back. “Let’s get inside. It’s freezing. And they are about to announce the winners.”

With his arms wrapped around my shoulders, I let Xavier lead me back across the street and into the banquet hall.

Despite the snow falling in the streets, I felt warm. Bright. Like I was walking on a cloud.

If there was one thing I knew, it was that you always needed to weigh the good against the bad. Since I’d met Xavier, my life had had its ups and downs, but there was no doubt in my mind that the good far outweighed the bad.

Especially since we’d returned from the island.

It was as though my husband had become a new person. It wouldn’t be fair to use everything he said in the past against him.

“The moment we have all been waiting for has arrived,” the announcer sang as Xavier and I made our way to the center of the dance floor and took our place among the other participants. “It’s time to announce the winners. First, in third place ...”

Polite applause punctured the air.

“In second place ...”

I couldn’t focus on the words the announcer was saying. It didn’t matter if we won or not anyway. I’d already won a prize better than I could have ever hoped for tonight. It would be greedy to hope for anything more.

Instead, I let my joy radiate through me, felt my skin tingle when my hand touched Xavier’s, my cheeks burn from smiling so much.

There was a bang and the pop and fizz of champagne as the second- and first-place winners were announced. Glitter and confetti surrounded us. Balloons bounced.

Xavier swore beside me, and then I was lifted up, spinning through the air.

I heard his breathless words as his lips brushed against my ear, “I can’t believe it.”

Then, I was on a podium, and a huge bundle of flowers was pressed into my arms as the crowd cheered.

“Congratulation, my children,” Brad said, appearing below us. He helped me down from the step and crushed the bouquet of white roses between us as he hugged me.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Knight! I can’t believe we came in first.” Tears of joy brimmed in my eyes.

Brad beamed.

“You danced beautifully! I’m proud of you.” His eyes flashed up to meet his son’s. “Of both of you. Now, let’s get you some drinks. The night is still young yet!”

Xavier pulled me through the crowd toward the bar. The popping lights of the cameras and smiles of the guests didn’t seem so malevolent now.

No, now I was invincible.

XAVIER

She said yes.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been this happy, the last time I’d smiled this much.

Angela had agreed to date me, to give me a chance. There was no way I deserved such a perfect angel to take mercy on me after the rage that had sent me fucking through New York for the last year.

Sure, it wasn’t perfect, but it was a hell of a lot more than I deserved. She was still mine, and I’d make damn sure I wouldn’t let her down again.

Standing on the podium with Angela, accepting our gold trophy, I may as well have been standing on top of the world.

Nothing felt that good—Climbing Everest, becoming CEO, finishing a marathon. Not even the fucking glitter that flecked my silk suit could piss me off.

Later, as we drove through the night, the city lights making a kaleidoscope of color in the back seat, I let my eyes roam over the sleeping angel beside me. She’d passed out the second the engine had hummed to life.

Yes, she’d said.

Too much excitement, I supposed.

“Shall I help Ms. Knight to her room, sir?” Marco asked softly when we pulled up in front of our apartment building. He unbuckled his seatbelt.

“No, I’ll do it. You can head home for the night.”

Carefully, I stood from the car and lifted Angela into my arms. With her head pressed against my lapel, I thanked the doorman as he helped us through the lobby and into the elevator. Higher and higher we climbed to the penthouse.

To *our* house—~

God, she had me melting like a love-sick fool. Even worse, I was happy about it. Dad was right: Angela had me wrapped around her little finger.

The elevator doors pinged open, and dimmed hall lights flickered on as I stepped over the threshold, my bride in my arms. Far below, the noise and life of the city buzzed, too far away to disturb us.

I carried Angela into her room, though I’d had half a thought to take her to mine. She wasn’t ready for that yet, though. My sheets weren’t clean enough either.

Instead, I lay her carefully on her bed, still in her dress, slipped the Jimmy Choos off her feet, and covered her with a quilt draped over the back of a nearby armchair.

As the moonlight lit her skin with an iridescent glow, I suddenly felt like I needed to run, or to yell, or to *move*.

This wasn’t the usual rage that coursed through my veins, though. It was something I hadn’t felt in a long time. Something better than anger—hope.

I thought it wasn’t possible. After all the hurt and betrayal I’d experienced in the last year, I’d been sure that I wasn’t meant for love. I’d been sure that fate had forged a different purpose for me, one of conquer, righteousness, and might.

No one ever became successful through love, I had told myself. It slowed you down. Held you back. It was *useless*.

Elon Musk and Oprah didn’t need love to take over the world, and neither did I.

In the last few weeks, all that had changed.

Nothing felt more important than this. Than *her*.

Sitting on the edge of the mattress, I swept loose golden hair from her forehead. “What kind of spell have you put me under?”

I leaned down and pressed the lightest of kisses to her brow.

“Goodnight, my angel.”