

The Arrangement
S.S. Sakoo

Love-Me-Nots

ANGELA

Em
OMG!OMG!OMG!

Em
ANGIE!

Em
Lucas PROPOSED

Angela
YAY! Congrats 🥰🎉👍

Em
Did you know?

Em
How could you just let me complain last week?!

Angela
I knew it would all end well. I am so happy for both of you!

Em
Will you be my maid of honor?

Angela
Of course! You know I am always there for you.

We made plans to have a family dinner that night and then said our goodbyes.

It was funny how life had a way of turning things around.

Only a few weeks ago I couldn't see a single silver lining. Now it was as though everywhere I turned the world was gilded in the brightest and purest of golds.

"What's cooking, sweet pea? Smells great!" Dad poked his head into the kitchen.

"Lasagna." I smiled, buttering a slice of baguette.

"Well, remind me to thank your husband for working this weekend. Don't tell Danny, but I haven't seen foot this good in weeks!"

Dad reached for a slice of the garlic bread I was in the middle of making. I swatted at his hand.

"No butter! Doctor's orders, remember?"

"Our little secret?" Dad winked and then changed the subject: "How is that husband of yours?"

"Oh, Xavier is fine."

"Just fine? No daughter of mine would have settled for just fine!" Dad teased, going for another piece of bread.

I slid the bowl of salad toward him.

A cheer erupted from the TV in the other room.

"Whoop!" Dad popped the bread into his mouth, darting toward the sound.

I laughed, listening to his victory chant. The Giants must have scored.

Smiling, I slid the garlic bread into the oven to toast.

It felt good to be back in the small house I grew up in. I was glad that I had taken Em up on the offer to visit my hometown under the guise of checking out some wedding venues. It got me out of the city and gave me some time to regroup and figure out what to do about Xavier.

I'd messaged Xavier earlier, letting him know I'd be away. I knew he would be working all weekend, and I didn't want to be alone in the apartment.

Another cheer from the TV.

"Fiddlesticks! It was the 49ers," Dad reported as he reappeared in the kitchen doorway. "Storry, pea, you were saying?"

"Nothing, Xavier and I are doing great."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it, honey, but I'd like to hear a little more than 'great.' You'll be married for a year soon, and I've barely met the guy. You hardly ever speak about him."

The only downside to having Dad back on his A game was that he was back on his A game. He didn't miss anything, just like when we were kids.

"Really, Dad—"

"Look, pea, you've been quiet since you got here. Is there something wrong? Is everything all right between the two of you?"

I didn't know what made me say it. Maybe I was worried I'd tell him about Jacques if pressed anymore, or maybe so many months of keeping secrets from my father had worn down my resolve, but I found myself saying, "I told Xavier I don't want to be married to him."

My dad's eyes grew wide. "What did he do to you?"

"Nothing," I said, quickly backpedaling.

"Now, that's not true," Dad said, rubbing my back. "No one wants to end a marriage over nothing."

"It's not that simple."

Dad leaned back against the counter. "You're talking gibberish. What's up, pea?"

Suddenly, I knew it was time. I needed to tell my dad the truth. I valued his advice over all else. He'd been there for me my whole life. If anyone could help me sort out the complicated things I'd been feeling for Xavier, it would be him.

"Look, Dad, I need to tell you something, but I think you should sit down."

"You're making me nervous here, Angie." He laughed uncomfortably as I led him to the couch.

"Please, let me say everything before you speak, and try to keep an open mind, okay?"

He nodded.

"I didn't meet Xavier in a dumpling shop. We weren't head over heels in love with each other. The Knights agreed to pay your hospital bills if Xavier and I got married."

There, I'd said it. The truth was out.

Feeling like I was five years old again and had smuck a cookie before dinner, I bit my cheek and waited for my dad's verdict.

"I know."

I blinked. "What?"

"I know, sweet pea."

"How?"

"Em told me," Dad admitted.

My mouth fell open. "Em did what?"

"Now don't go getting mad at your best friend," Dad held up his hand. "She was just trying to protect you. Came to me a few months back. Thought I might be able to talk some sense into you."

I shook my head. "You knew this whole time, and you didn't say anything? I thought you'd be furious with me."

"Oh, I blew a gasket when I first heard of it. After I had time to digest things, though, I remembered how smart I raised you. How you did the right thing when that boss of yours mistreated you.

"And I knew that I shouldn't go pushing my nose in places I wasn't welcome. I had to trust that you'd sort things out on your own. That you'd do the right thing. Was I wrong?"

Tears brimming in my eyes, I shook my head. "We're dating, Dad."

"Dating? You just told me you want a divorce!"

"No, no ..." I sniffled. "Dad, I think I—"

The front door blew open, and Em, Lucas, and Danny shuffled in.

I quickly wiped the tears from my eyes. Our conversation was over for now.

"How are we doing?" Danny asked.

"What? Oh, last time I checked we were up by four," Dad reported.

My brothers shuffled past the kitchen and into the living room where I heard them boogie at the TV.

"What did you think of the hall?" I called to Em.

"Meh," she replied, voice muffled as she tugged off her scarf. "Too much wood paneling."

"Well, take a seat," I told her, popping my head into the hallway. "Dinner is almost ready."

Dad turned the TV off. "I don't see why you can't get married at the restaurant."

Em bit her lip, pretending to be occupied with settling into her seat.

"It's perfectly reasonable not to want our wedding guests eating with Johnny Cash posters watching them," Lucas replied, not for the first time today.

"Who doesn't love Johnny?"

Before anyone could reply, the doorbell rang.

"Who could that be?" Dad wondered as Danny shouted, "GOT IT!"

My timer buzzed, and I stepped back into the kitchen to pull the lasagna and garlic bread from the oven.

"Sweet pea," Dad called. "It's for you."

"Me?" Lasagna in hands, I kicked the oven door shut and returned to the living room. "Who is looking for—"

Standing before the front door beside Danny, looking as startled as I must have looked, was Xavier.

"Angel!" Xavier looked relieved. In less than five steps, he crossed the room to stand before me. There was an awkward moment as Xavier tried to greet me, the streaming dish of lasagna between us.

"What are you doing here?" I asked as he finally settled for kissing my cheek.

"Do you really think I'd leave you alone all weekend?" he replied, flashing one of his 100-watt smiles for show.

"Angie?" Dad asked, probably wondering if he needed to go get his baseball bat.

I stepped around Xavier and placed the lasagna down. "It's fine, Dad."

He threw his hands up. "All right. In that case, can I take your coat, Ace?"

"That's you," I murmured as I passed Xavier on the way back to the kitchen.

"Oh, yes, thank you ..." There was a hesitant pause as Xavier likely was trying to remember my father's name.

"Kenneth," he finally declared, sounding a little surprised.

There was the shuffle and slide of a coat being removed, and then Dad said, "Most people call me Ken."

Xavier chuckled. "Ken it is. It's nice to see you again after all this time, Ken."

Dad cleared his throat. "Mr. Carson will be fine."

I snagged the garlic bread from the oven and another pair of mismatched utensils from the drawer, then headed for the living space to save the two of them. "Dad, will you start serving? Here, Xavier, you can sit beside me."

"Will do, pea." Dad grabbed the spatula I'd left in front of his place at the table. "How do you want it, Ace?"

"Excuse me?" Xavier coughed.

Across from me, Danny snickered. I kicked his shin under the table.

"The noodles," Dad said.

Xavier laid the paper napkin I handed him across his lap. "I normally have them al dente."

"I'm afraid you can't have *all* of it, Ace," replied Dad, making me wince.

"There is extra cheese on half," I explained.

Xavier's eyes grew wide. "Ah. Then a normal amount of cheese will be fine, Mr. Carson."

Dad cut out a square of lasagna and plopped it onto Xavier's plate.

"You on a diet?" Danny asked, earning another kick.

Xavier picked up his fork. "No, just prefer to taste my meal rather than smother it in dairy products."

Dad shrugged. "More for me."

An awkward silence filled the air as Dad served up the rest of us. Xavier had been there less than five minutes and looked about as comfortable as Martha Stewart in prison.

After the conversation Dad and I had had before Xavier's surprise arrival, I was pretty sure prison was exactly where he hoped my husband would end up.

Lucas cleared his throat. "It's a surprise to see you, Xavier. Angie said you were working this weekend."

I gave him a thankful smile and accepted the bowl of salad from Em.

"I decided to shift my schedule. I know I've been here once before, but that was almost a year ago. I didn't want to miss an opportunity to get a better look at where Angela grew up."

Xavier reached out and squeezed my forearm. I wasn't sure if it was supposed to be an affectionate gesture or a cry for help.

"Shift your schedule?" Danny said around a mouthful of garlic bread. "I read in the paper one of your hotels is getting ripped down this weekend. That doesn't sound like something you'd wanna miss."

"Well—" Xavier began.

Dad cut him off. "Ripping down a hotel? Is business going okay, Ace?"

Xavier put his fork down, the line of his shoulder going rigid. "I'm not sure now is really the appropriate time to—"

Dad clapped him on the back. "Oh come on, we're all family here, right?"

"The hotel is getting ripped down because we purchased the entire block around it. A new, state-of-the-art resort will be going up along the waterfront."

Dad whistled.

Xavier continued. "How is your business going?"

I bit my lip. Yes, my family was being a little unfair. I was surprised how well Xavier was taking it, actually. Asking about my father's nearly bankrupt restaurant was a bit of a low blow, though.

I wasn't sure if I should intervene or if the comment was deserved. Did Xavier know that the monthly allowance he gave me contributed to pulling my family business out from the gutter?

"Great!" Danny replied a little too quickly.

Dad nodded. "Em and Lu are going to have their wedding there."

"It's one of our options, Dad," Lucas amended.

Thankful for the change of topic, I was quick to jump on board.

"Em would prefer to get married in the city," I told Xavier.

"A pipe dream, it seems." Em sighed. "You know *how* it is in New York. Everything costs an arm and a leg."

"Why don't you get married in one of the Knight hotels?" Xavier asked.

I choked on the sip of water I'd just taken. "Xavier, um ... dear, I think it's a little out of their price range."

"It would be on me ...us. Angela and I. Think of it as a wedding gift."

A grateful warmth spread through me.

Since when did Xavier do nice things?

A sudden desire to touch him, to thank him, like I'd seen couples do dozens of times before, bubbled up. Xavier and I didn't normally touch outside of dancing though.

Was I allowed to touch him?

Hesitantly, I reached out and laid two fingers on Xavier's knee.

Xavier's back straightened at the touch, and his hand found mine, lacing our fingers together. The intimate gesture made me blush.

"What do you think, Lucas?" Em asked. I could see her excitement as she held her breath, waiting for my brother's response.

After a quick glance at Dad, Lucas consented, saying, "Whatever makes you happy."

Em squealed. "Thank you! Thank you."

Taking a swig of his beer, Dad *lmphe*d. "That's very kind of ya, Ace."

Xavier smiled. "It's the least I can do."

"Why don't you help me clean up, Ace?" Dad stood from the table. "I wanna talk to you for a minute."

A sinking feeling began to grow in my chest, and I jumped to my feet. "I'll help you, Dad."

"Leave it to us boys, sweet pea. You did all the cooking."

Slowly, I slid back into my chair.

"It's okay. I'm happy to help," Xavier said, taking my plate.

I wasn't convinced this was a good idea. I was afraid that if I left the two of them alone, one of them would end up dead.

Unable to stop them, I watched Xavier and Dad disappear into the kitchen.

"We still going to Marv's tonight?" Em asked, pulling her leg up onto her chair. We'd been planning on going for drinks at the only Club in town tonight to celebrate the engagement, just us girls.

I wrinkled my nose as fuzzy memories of Xavier dragging me out of a club began to surface. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea. I don't think it's really Xavier's scene."

"Isn't your man famous for partying?" Danny called over his shoulder, and then he fist-pumped when the Giants scored. Danny and Lucas had turned the TV back on behind us and were yelling at the players.

"He can stay here and watch football with the boys," Em offered.

I watched her draw a little heart in some salt that had spilled on the table. "I don't know."

Our lumpy plaid living room couch seemed like something that would spark Xavier's temper.

I wouldn't know what to do if things really heated up between Xavier and my family. Who would I choose?

In the past, I would have said my family in a heartbeat. Things with Xavier had been so good lately, though, that it would be a shame to have to really end things over a silly argument.

Em huffed. "Well, why don't we just ask him, *hmm*? Xavier?!"

A few minutes later, Xavier came out of the kitchen, his expression somewhere between "I have heartburn" and "Someone scratched my Ferrari." He was quickly followed by a smug-looking Dad, who had a new beer in hand.

Uh-oh.

I knew I shouldn't have let Dad speak with him alone. What if Dad told Xavier he knew about the arrangement? Or that I had told him that I wanted a divorce? Or asked Xavier what he'd done to hurt me?

"What's wrong?" Xavier asked me, rather than Em.

Em didn't seem to notice. "Angie and I are going out for some fun tonight. Do you want to tag along, or stay here and watch the game with the boys?"

Xavier's expression darkened for a flash before his politician smile lit up his face. "Going out sounds like a great idea. In fact, why don't we all go?"

Danny raised his hand. "I'd rather stay here with Pa."

"A double date then?" Xavier suggested, looking between me, Lucas, and Em.

"Really?" I blurted out while Em clapped her hands and said, "Great!"

Xavier fished his car keys from his pocket. "You girls go get ready, and I'll grab my things from the car."