

The Arrangement  
S.S. Sahoo

# Don't Trip

## BRAD

There was no celebration like a wedding. In my sixty years of life, that was perhaps the one thing I could say with certainty on any given day. The decor, the apparel, the spectacle itself—it was all in the name of love. And love—real, true love—was the one thing I had faith in.

And so what that this old man was the one who'd orchestrated it?

It was no matter that I had been the one to find the angel who could help save my son. What mattered was that he was open to her. Sure, it had taken some convincing. Children these days didn't accept instructions like we used to with our parents, but that was neither here nor there.

As soon as I had dangled the role—my role—at the company in front of Xavier's face, he was all in. For the marriage, the job, everything. His heart was open to her entering it, and that was all that mattered.

I looked around the ballroom today, filled with family and friends, associates and clients, and couldn't help but well with pride. The wedding planner had knocked this one out of the park.

The room was covered in flowers—white lilies, of course—and light ornaments hung from posts along the walls. There was a raised platform where the vows would be exchanged, and the priest stood behind Xavier as they awaited the bride's appearance.

The pews had been specially installed to match the oak flooring, and they came with ivory cushions. The florist had woven lilies across each pew, and there were tiny glowing lights in between them. The whole room was radiant, as it should be.

I was happy to see the pews filled to the absolute brim, even though we hadn't permitted press inside to watch the ceremony. I wanted as many eyes on my son and his new wife as possible, to bear witness to the day his life would turn around. I knew deep in my heart that this was the right step for him, and I was so proud to be there to see it. I only wished Amelia was here beside me.

As I scanned the room, nodding and waving at guests I made eye contact with, I couldn't help but think about my beloved—the reason we were all here today, the reason I was able to find guidance, and, in turn, guide my son. I missed her every day, but today I missed her something extra.

Then the doors opened, and the guests all got to their feet.

And when I turned and looked and saw my dear Angela, my dear daughter-in-law, walking down the aisle, I felt my beloved right there with me.

## ANGELA

Don't trip. Don't trip.

Lucas's words repeated themselves in my ears over and over, and I didn't know if the nerves or the shoes were the reason I thought I might. I hadn't had this many eyes on me since...scratch that. I had never had this many eyes on me.

It was emotional, walking down the aisle at my wedding, alone. I hadn't been one of those girls who had grown up dreaming about her wedding or anything, but I'd always thought dad would be beside me, walking me down the aisle. But he was miles away, in a hospital bed. In a coma.

Don't cry, Angela, I ordered myself. There are too many people watching.

Finally, I got to the raised platform. I took my position across from my fiancé, the man who hated me more than any person had ever hated me. The man who barely knew me but was also saving my dad's life—even if he didn't know it.

I gave him a nervous smile. He just stared back at me.

The priest smiled at me, then at Xavier, and then bellowed to the crowd, "Be seated. We're gathered here today to witness holy matrimony, to observe the commitment of love between Angela Carson and Xavier Knight..."

And after that, his voice trailed off and I spaced out. I looked at Xavier, saw his dark eyes and locked jaw. I saw the stubble that lined his chin, as though he were too cool to shave on his wedding day.

Then I trailed down to his tuxedo, the kind of tuxedo that would make the costume department of Gossip Girl jealous. It had probably been designed by someone fabulous like Armani, or Dolce & Gabbana, maybe even custom-made. It was jet black and sleek and everything a man could ever want.

And yet, I'd put money on the fact that Xavier couldn't care less about his tux. Or this wedding. Or anything else, really.

"Angela?"

The priest looked at me expectantly, and I felt every gaze in the room land on me. My cheeks burned. Where were we? What was I supposed to say?

"I do?" I mustered, and the priest smiled, nodding.

And then he turned to Xavier. "And Xavier Knight, do you take Angela Carson to be your lawful wedded wife, in poorness and in wealth, in sickness and in health, as long as you shall live?"

"I do," he said, like he had just been asked if he thought salt was a useful spice.

"Well, then, ladies and gentlemen, we have a marriage. Xavier, you may kiss your bride."

There were whoops and cheers from the spectators, and I waited nervously for whatever Xavier's move was going to be. I was expecting an air kiss or a handshake, or maybe even a slap in the face. But what he did next surprised me even more.

He leaned forward until his lips were almost touching mine, and he smiled when he said, "I'm a powerful man. I get what I want. And what I want is to ruin you."

And then he kissed me, on the lips, as my mind reeled and my eyes filled with tears.

When he finally pulled away, he turned and walked off the platform ahead of me, fielding congratulations from guests as he walked back up the aisle. I couldn't believe how seamlessly he was able to transition from breathing fire at me to laughing with everyone else, like nothing had happened.

The priest, seeing my tears, patted me on the back. "It's always an emotional day. I wish you the luck of the heavens," he said.

After a second, I thought, *that I could use*. And then I followed my husband out of our wedding ceremony.

Em  
Where r u

Angela  
Bathroom

Angela  
I want to leave

Em  
It's ur wedding...

Angela  
There's something I have to tell you

Angela  
About why I married him

Em  
??

Em  
Hello? Angie?

I was in the bathroom, sitting on the cold floor.

I slipped my phone back into my purse.

I was still wearing my gown, still locked into my heels, but I just couldn't be on the dance floor for one second longer.

I was tired of having to fake smile and air kiss at every person Brad introduced me to, and I was even more tired of having to accept the congratulations of people I didn't know.

I knew I had already told Em too much, but I didn't care.

My feet hurt, my lips were chapped, and my heart felt drained. I was just...tired.

There was a knock on the stall, and then I heard Em call out to me. "Angie?"

Without standing up, I reached to slide the lock open and let her in. She saw me on the floor, cheeks wet, mascara probably down my face.

"Angie, what on earth? What do you have to tell me?"

"It's just...too much," I said.

"What was that text? Why did you marry him?"

This was my moment. My moment to admit the truth, to ask Em for help. Our eyes were locked, and I wanted so badly to let it out. But my mouth was frozen. I couldn't say anything. She looked down, like she was hurt by my silence.

"Do you want me to get Xavier?"

"No!" I all but shouted at her. The moment had passed. "No, he wouldn't understand. I just...it's all so foreign to me."

She sat down across from me, barely able to squeeze her legs beside mine. The act alone made me smile.

"I get it. I get you. Yeah, this stuff is crazy. It's overwhelming, and weird, and terrifying. But the important thing isn't the caviar bar or the Christina Labootin shoes—"

"Christian Louboutin. I think."

"Whatever. You know what I mean. The important thing is that you love Xavier, and he loves you. And there's a lot of love here tonight, celebrating you guys." She leaned in closer to me and grabbed my hand. "I know your dad would've loved to be here, Angie. He would've lost it, seeing you all done up in that dress."

"He probably would've been doing a keg stand by now."

"Angela, I don't think anyone here knows what a keg is." She had a point. But then I saw her hesitate. "You do love him, right?"

"Who, Xavier?"

"Yes," she said, her impatience now clear. "Xavier. The man you just married."

"Yes," I said softly, eyes on the ground. "I do."

"Then let's get back out there." Her voice was light and breezy as she helped me up. I couldn't help but wonder if she believed for the first time since I'd started up the aisle. I closed the door behind me and turned on the light, kicking my shoes off and hearing my feet shout, "THANK YOU!"

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"One more," Xavier said from behind me as I was fetching myself a glass of water from the bar.

"What?"

"One more dance we gotta do," he said again, and this time I could smell the alcohol on his breath. He looked over at a middle-aged couple dressed to the nines. "They wanted to see us dance."

"They want to watch us dance?"

"I don't ask questions. They're clients, they want us to dance, we're gonna dance."

"Okay," I said as he grabbed my hand and half pulled, half guided me over to the couple.

"Angela, dear, you look just scrumptious," the heavily Botoxed woman said.

"Thanks," I got out before she continued.

"We just can't wait to see you and Xavier do a little ballroom—you know what they say. You can see the love in the dance," she said, and I inwardly sighed.

If they wanted to see love, they should look somewhere else. But instead of complaining, I followed Xavier to the dance floor and let him spin me around the room, praising myself for switching from champagne to water when I had. Otherwise, I wasn't so certain the grilled salmon would still be inside me.

When we finished, I waited for Xavier to say "thanks," or "good work," or anything remotely nice. After all, I had just done him a favor. But instead he tossed a thumbs-up over to the clients, shot me a blank stare, and then took off in the other direction.

"There you are, Angela," I heard from behind me, and turned to find Brad. He looked happy as can be, and I was glad that he was enjoying himself. Really, I was.

"I'm here," I said, smiling at him. "You did a wonderful job with everything. Really, it's all incredible."

"I'm glad you think so." And then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a hotel room key. "This is to the honeymoon suite, my dear. I already gave Xavier his. Go, enjoy yourselves. Young love, there's nothing better," he said, and it felt like that last part was more for himself than for me. He turned on his heel and, clapping his hands together, walked away from me before I could thank him.

Wanting nothing more to do with the party and not knowing where Xavier had gone, I headed for the elevators and, once inside, hit the top floor. All these fancy suites, the gourmet food, and the top-shelf liquor—none of it was making me any more comfortable with my choice.

Think of Dad, I reminded myself. He needs you.

When I got to the top floor, I had to walk for what felt like a mile before I reached the door to the suite.

I slid the room key into the slit and watched the light turn green. Then, I pushed the door open and stepped inside, exhaling for the first time since I'd started up the aisle. I closed the door behind me and turned on the light, kicking my shoes off and hearing my feet shout, "THANK YOU!"

I was starting to remember that I'd need someone to let me out of this corset when I heard a male voice coming from one of the rooms. Probably Xavier, I decided. So I took off toward the room, hoping that, if I asked nicely, he'd help me. Not in a sexual way—absolutely not.

I felt uncomfortable just thinking about that. But I wanted to sleep in something other than a tightly laced-up corset and didn't think the stylist with the tightly coiled bun would appreciate me climbing into bed in Mr. Wang's masterpiece. So, once I got to the room, I opened the door without thinking, and—

I gasped. There, before me, a few feet away, on top of the cushiony king-size bed with the all-white, 1000 thread count sheets, was my husband.

And kneeled over, with her face in the sheets and her butt in the air, moaning as the movements came faster and faster, was a tanned, dark-haired woman.

But not just any tanned, dark-haired woman.

It was Sky. The makeup artist.

Xavier turned to see who had opened the door. He didn't stop moving, or even slow down. He just smiled. And she kept moaning.

"Hey, Angela, do you mind shutting the door on your way out?"

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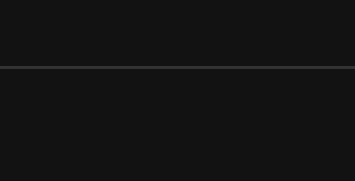
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