

The Arrangement
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We'll Always Have Paris

ANGELA

My back was to the counter, but panic had me pinned in place, unable to turn to confirm if my suspicions were correct.

"A grande, low-fat, half- whip, mocha frappuccino with extra sprinkles?" I hardly heard the woman's reply through the pounding of my heart, but a pang of familiarity echoed at the sound of her voice as well.

"And a chocolate croissant?" the man asked in his crisp French accent.

"No, Jacques, that's really not necessary."

My stomach turned.

I was right.

It was Jacques, the man from Paris.

My breathing hitched, and I slammed my eyes shut.

I could feel the ghost of his hands on my thighs, his lips on my neck.

I needed to get out of here.

"Let me spoil you, *mon coeur*. No one says no to me."

It was as though a bucket of cold water had been thrown over my head. Before I could stop myself, my head whipped around to face the couple.

Jacques's eyes were boring into me, a slick grin spreading across his lips.

The woman on his arm was *Penny*. Penny, who had been standing in my living room not long ago. Penny, who Xavier had—

I was going to be sick.

Following Jacques's gaze, Penny's eyes landed on me. "Oh my God, Angela!"

"Angie?" I faintly heard Em whisper.

She probably wondered who these people were, why my skin had gone white as a sheet.

Penny pulled me into a brief hug. "Jacques, this is Angela, a ...friend. Angela, this is my friend, Jacques. He's from France."

"We're just *friends* now, ~mon cheri~?" He kissed Penny's hand, and she blushed and looked away.

"Y-yes," she stammered, sounding entirely unconvincing. "Friends." She looked between me and Jacques. "Do you two know each other?"

Jacques smiled at me like a wolf would at a sheep. "We met briefly. At the gala in Paris, I believe?" He took Penny's hand. "How did you two meet?"

He was expecting an answer, but I couldn't speak, couldn't move.

Did Penny know what he did? What he was like? Did she have bruises like I had after the last time I encountered her boyfriend? Was *this* who she had been crying over the last time I saw her?

"Ah..." Penny fumbled, realizing her mistake. "I think it was at the yacht club's seasonal bash?"

I had no idea about any sort of yacht club but I found myself nodding, covering for her.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" I finally managed to rasp out.

"Just visiting. Both for business and pleasure." Jacques winked.

"One grande, low-fat, half- whip, mocha frappuccino with extra sprinkles and a chocolate croissant for ...Jock?" Dustin called.

"Sorry, we're in a bit of a hurry. Nice to see you, Angela!" Penny pulled Jacques toward the counter, where their order was waiting.

There was another gust of cold wind, and then they were gone.

I dropped my head into my hands and tried to calm my frantic breathing.

In ...one, two, three. Out ...one, two, three.

"Angie? Angela? What's wrong?" Em put her cool hand on the back of my neck.

"That man ..." I shook my head. *Those words* ...

They were the same as in the messages that had been sent to me.

I'd been wrong.

The messages hadn't been from Lemor, who was locked up in prison.

They were from Jacques.

Jacques, who was now in New York City ...

When I got home, I managed to crawl from the bathroom and up into my bed. Lying in a ball at its center, under the huge, puffy duvet, I felt like I'd been swallowed whole.

I couldn't breathe, couldn't move. I felt raw, like I'd been filleted open and left for the birds to rip me apart. How could this be happening again?

Maybe I would need to move home for good this time. Take a job at the mechanic shop in town. Help take care of Dad. Stay out of sight.

Would it be worth giving up my dreams for some peace and quiet?

It's hardly as though I was living them out now.

"Angela?" Xavier called, crashing through my bedroom door.

I winced, pulling tighter into my ball, awaiting his verbal assault.

The duvet was thrown back. Xavier towered over me, chest heaving.

A fresh wave of panic built within me as his dark gaze ran over my body, taking in the fetal position I lay in and my tear-stained cheeks.

Something shifted.

Xavier's brow furrowed, and his breathing slowed.

He crawled into the bed beside me, pulling me against his chest, and tugged the covers back over us.

I froze as he settled in behind me, squeezed me closer, and placed the lightest of kisses on my jaw.

"What's hurting you, my angel?" I could feel his words reverberate in his chest against my back.

I shook my head, and my voice, when I spoke, sounded raw. "I don't think I can tell you."

I'm scared to tell you.

Xavier hummed. His fingers began tracing small circles on my hip. There was nothing demanding in the touch, nothing sexual.

A sort of calm began to wash over me, originating from that spot and spreading outward.

He sighed. "If you won't talk with me, will you go with me somewhere?"

I thought for a moment, waiting for the terror to spring forward and grab me again, but it didn't come.

I nodded my head once.

"Can you walk?"

I nodded again, though I wasn't sure it was true, whether my legs would be strong enough to hold me.

"I'll get our coats," he said. "Wait here."

Xavier took me to Central Park. We walked through the curving paths, up and around Belvedere Castle, past the lake. The walkways and fields, which swarmed with people in the summer, were empty now.

I pulled my scarf up over my cold nose and took a deep breath of cold air in. It felt a little easier to breathe out here as we walked.

Xavier's pace began to slow. I looked around, trying to orient myself, and realized we were on the path I used to take when walking home from Em's shop.

There was something else that seemed special about the place. I couldn't quite catch the wisp of memory, though.

He pulled me over to a bench that faced a pond with an ancient weeping willow on its bank. We sat, looking out at the frozen water, at the sunset painting its icy surface a wash of purples and golds.

"I come here to think," Xavier began. "To clear my head."

He let out a sigh, making vapor billow from his mouth like a dragon's. "Dad told me this is where he first met you."

That's why this place seems so familiar.

"I was handing out lilies."

Xavier turned to look at me. "He said that's how he knew you were the one. They were her favorite."

"Whose favorite?" I whispered.

Xavier nodded to the back of the bench and the plaque there. "My mother."

My lips fell into a little "o." The grass, and pond, and willow seemed sacred suddenly.

Xavier had never spoken to me about his mother before, had never even mentioned her. I was scared to speak, to ruin this frozen moment.

I felt a little of the ache in my chest lift. This was the Xavier that I had seen in brief flashes over the last few months.

The real Xavier. I was sure of it.

"I came here a lot after the accident. After ..." He stopped and licked his lips.

I waited, letting him take his time to gather the words. I could see how hard it was to be speaking about this. Maybe he never had before.

When he started again, his voice was stronger. "You've seen the scar on my back."

It wasn't a question. We both know I'd seen a lot more than that before.

"It was raining the night I got it," Xavier began. "I was returning home from a business trip."

He stopped, as though it hurt to remember, like he didn't want to remember.

"When I walked in and found *them* together, I lost it. Ran out of the apartment, out onto the street. Claudia, my ex, followed me and stepped off the curb just as a cab shot around the corner. I pushed her back, but I wasn't fast enough to jump out of the way too."

Xavier took a shaky breath. "It hurt. It *still* ~hurts~, Angela. Every day. And whenever I see it, I think of her, and I hurt in a whole new way."

Fresh tears trimmed in my eyes, and I reached out and took his gloved hand in mine. "I'm sorry you hurt."

Xavier gave a dark chuckle. "You have nothing to be sorry for. You of all people, I'm trying to tell you something here. That the hurt I've been carrying around hasn't been so bad recently. Sometimes, I even forget it's there. That's because of you. Because you hand out lilies to strangers. Because I know for a *fact* that you'd be the one to jump in front of a car for me."

"Xavier, I—" I began but stopped when a lump formed in my throat. I threw my arms around him instead.

"You saved me, Angela," Xavier said, lips next to my ear. "And not just on that goddamned island."

I sobbed, squeezing Xavier closer. The emptiness in me was nearly gone now, like his words had healed me.

I had never believed, never hoped, that Xavier would ever be so honest with me. I didn't think that his overbearing, alpha-male personality allowed for such intimate gestures. I'd never been so happy to be wrong.

"I can see you are hurting, Angela." Xavier continued, pulling back. He held my cheeks in his large, rough hands. "I want you to know that I will be there for you too. That I am here. I can be that person again. The kind of man who jumps in front of a car. For you, I'd be willing to do anything, even if it meant going back to that fucking island. I just hope that you will let me prove it to you."

There was more to his words than it seemed. I could see that now.

His opening up was for me. An olive branch. A stepping stone in the right direction for us as a couple. Sure, the last few days since I'd agreed to start dating Xavier had been tumultuous. I had agreed to try, though.

I knew what I had to do. It was time to come clean about what Jacques had done. I could only pray that this would bring us closer and not be the final straw that ruined our marriage.

I took a deep breath. "Xavier, there's something I need to tell you ..."