The Arrangement

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And all in my honor, no less.

Angela had truly outdone herself.

TWO MONTHS LATER

The Big Finish

yacht club. Don't mistake me.

playing my favorite tunes flat-out tickled me pink.

One single thought gripped my old heart.

My son, my pride and joy, Xavier.

That was why I was stepping down.

He would bring honor to the Knight name, to our legacy.

"The dancing will start soon," Angela chipped in.

What would it be like to be young again?

up every morning and storm Wall Street.

Is this all that's left?

What was left?

of my favorites."

Closer to the enchantress dominating the stage.

Closer to an uncharted future.

What can be left?

Is this all that's left?

yourself, my dear."

The party was to publicly celebrate my official retirement from Knight Enterprises. Forty years of toil and fighting to build the world's largest oil company, followed by the world's most sought-after luxury hotel brand. It all boiled down to this, to five hundred of my closest friends and colleagues in their Sunday best, chin-wagging at the

Brad the yacht club. Even the annual bash couldn't hold a flame to tonight's extravaganza. Despite the festivities around me, I couldn't help but feel a certain wistfulness.

I could feel only the utmost gratitude for my comrades and their desire to celebrate my accomplishments.

The signature mango-infused and strawberry-topped drink, named The Bradlini in my honor, and the live band

"What are you doing all the way back here, old man?" my son said suddenly, clapping me on the shoulder.

One single thought, though, left me sitting in my chair, chasing ice cubes around my glass with a little pink umbrella.

Once, I'd worried he might not have it in him to inherit my estate. Over the past year, he'd proved himself twice over.

Xavier didn't need my guidance anymore, not even part-time. He was a man in his prime, filled with the hunger

"Just taking a moment to soak it all in," I told him then turned to address his beautiful wife. "You've really outdone

"Why don't you join the party?" Xavier urged again. He grabbed a Bradlini from a passing waiter and held it out for

That was the trick of it all. I felt just the same as I had forty years ago. Just as vibrant. Just as hungry. Like I could wake

It wasn't until I looked in the mirror that I was reminded of the truth. Then, as I took in the wrinkles and balding head,

I'd lived a good life. I'd had love as great as the stuff in fairytales. I'd raised a son who was the apple of my eye. My

Suddenly, a high-pitched squeal screeched through the yacht club. I winced, ears ringing, and opened my eyes.

As though possessed, I found myself standing from my chair, my sixty-five-year-old bones carrying me closer.

I wasn't convinced but let him hold me anyway, leading me as we began to sway to the music of the band.

The dancing hadn't started yet, not really, but I wasn't about to point out to Xavier that we were the only couple on the

When he'd approached me to plan his retirement party, I had been excited about the opportunity to help out. Brad had

I felt him sigh. "Angela, please try to have some fun. You planned a wonderful party. If I know my father, the last thing

I tightened my grip around him and started paying attention to the steps he was leading me through. "Okay."

I had a surprise coming up soon, anyway. If that didn't get Brad up on his feet, I wasn't sure anything would.

As if on cue, a high-pitched noise pierced through the yacht club, making me falter. Xavier pulled me tighter to his

His relationship with Penny was a complicated one. Honestly, she was a wonderful person. Very kind and surprisingly

I guess it was kind of like looking back at awkward childhood photos. Cringing at how stupid and goofy you looked

I'd found her name by accident on a list of singers to hire for events. As soon as I'd seen it, I'd known I had to call her,

If it hadn't been for her, Xavier wouldn't have found the warehouse where Jacques had taken me. He wouldn't have

Jacques had died that day, and despite the terrible things that he'd done, I knew there were people out there who loved

It seemed like it had been a good choice too, because out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Brad had stood up and was

He was transfixed, his eyes glued to Penny as she belted out the final chords of "Dream a Little Dream of Me."

"I am," he replied. His husky voice had me turning back around to face him, and I realized he'd been looking at me.

It was difficult for me to initiate a simple kiss in the privacy of our own home, let alone touch him when we were in a

We'd grown closer in the past few months, and I felt more connected to him than ever before, but I wasn't sure why I

Xavier

... The smallest touches had

The music changed, a slow Spanish beat filling the air. Xavier pulled me up against his hard muscled body.

done so much for Xavier and me that it was an honor to be able to repay him, even just a little.

I took a peek over Xavier's shoulder. Brad was still in his chair, eyes now closed.

"I don't think he's going to come dance with us," I whispered to Xavier.

Angela

"Sorry about that," she said, fumbling with the microphone. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to start you off with one

required to be a great businessman, with the drive to make something great of himself.

Angela blushed, as always, a vision of altruism and grace. "It was my pleasure."

I accepted the glass of frothy, sunset-colored booze. "You two go. I'll catch up."

I knew it wasn't possible, that the time had come to pass the torch.

career had been more successful than most could ever hope to achieve.

As I let the chatter and din of the retirement party wash over me, my eyes fluttered shut.

*Amelia*, I thought. ~My beloved. What comes next? What do you do after you've done it all?~

A woman stood at the center of the stage, a young sultry thing, with wide hips and mocha skin.

She counted the band in, and then the sweetest notes I'd ever heard filled the air.

"See, I told you. Everything is fine," Xavier said, pulling me into his arms.

Instead, I let his strong arms act as a comfort as I worried over his father.

Now, I couldn't help but think that I had done something wrong.

chest, stopping me from tripping and making a fool of myself.

"What's she doing here?" he asked, eyes fixed to the stage.

Xavier's lips pressed into a thin line as Penny began to sing.

But I think she reminded Xavier of a time in his life that he didn't like.

Penny was a singer, though, and a good one at that. She knew all of Brad's favorites.

The least I could do was give her a job she was more than capable of doing.

Xavier had told me that it had been Penny who had given him the final clue all those months ago.

shy for someone who took to the stage so convincingly.

A time when he was a meaner, angrier person.

I turned, too, and smiled as Penny took the microphone.

"It was the least I could do," I said to Xavier.

"For what?"

"Her helping to rescue me."

only a hundred times worse.

Plus, I hadn't meant to hire her.

to thank her.

made it to me in time.

him, who relied on him.

slowly making his way to the dance floor.

"Look," I whispered to Xavier, pointing at Brad.

I gasped as his hand ran down my back to my butt. "Xavier!"

I felt my cheeks warm. "I'm not sure if this is the right time."

This had to be a record. If not a world record, then a personal best.

The need to touch Angela, to feel her body rub against mine, was constant.

think about was taking her right there, in the middle of the dance floor.

"Good night, Marco," said Angela as I helped her from the back seat.

She looked up at me as we crossed the lobby. "Is everything okay?"

"Did you have enough to eat? I could whip up a little something. I—"

The elevator doors pinged open, and I rushed forward into the penthouse.

I stopped in my tracks beside the kitchen and turned on my heel. "I'm not hungry."

Angela slowly sauntered toward me, her brows knit together with worry. "That's not what I said."

I licked my lips, trying to ignore the increasing ache in my crotch. "What do you need, Angela?"

In less than a second, I lifted Angela in one arm and used the other to clear the kitchen island.

I pulled the zipper of her dress down and let my hands run over the now bare skin of her back.

Candlesticks and salt and pepper shakers clattered to the hardwood floor as I placed her on the counter.

Her fingers wound through my hair as I pulled off my suit jacket and began working down the buttons of my dress

Then, I felt a familiar pressure against my chest and her little hands pushed me back, off of her. "Xavier, stop."

We'd been dating for over two months now, had been husband and wife for almost a year, but our marriage had yet to

Xavier had been patient with me. Never pressing. Never forcing. I appreciated his efforts more than he might know.

Angela

A small smile crept over her lips. "To thank you. I had a great time with you tonight."

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to mine in the most delicate of kisses.

It was like a spark from a flint. Suddenly, my whole body was ablaze.

Angela wrapped her legs around me, pulling me closer.

I reached behind her again, fingers finding the clasp of her bra.

For a second, I thought she was going to let me do it.

Let me take her like I wanted to.

She was finally going to give me access to her full breasts.

"Where are you going?" her small voice called after me.

I could still feel Xavier's hands on me. Asking. Begging.

I could see that it was getting to him though, that he needed a release.

That was my new mantra. *There is nothing to be afraid of.* 

We'd gotten close a couple of times, but each time I'd stopped him from going further.

No matter how often I said it, though, we didn't seem to be any closer to making love.

*You're being silly*, I told myself and hopped off the counter. ~There is nothing to be afraid of.~

Every time Xavier and I were close, a wave of panic would wash over me and I would push him away.

As I reached down to pick up the now chipped salt shaker, I heard the shower turn on down the hall, and a steely

I loved Xavier. It was time I showed him just how much. Tonight was the night. There's nothing to be afraid of.

I pushed my dress off my shoulders, letting it fall to the living room floor, and took a step toward Xavier's bedroom.

He'd left the bathroom door open, like always. An invitation, he called it. Steam billowed out into the bedroom, almost

I unclipped my bra, shimmied out of my panties, and stepped through the open bathroom door.

hand braced against the tiled wall, the other wrapped around his—

I couldn't let my fear hold me back any more. I wouldn't push him away any longer. In private or public.

Xavier stood in the shower, his eyes closed, and his head thrown back. Steam rolled off of his shoulders. He had one

I couldn't stop the gasp that escaped my lips. My hand flew up to cover my mouth, but it was too late. He'd heard.

Xavier's head whipped around, his eyes growing wide they landed on me, his hand ceasing its up-and-down

"Fuck," he muttered, and the realization of what I'd just seen hit me like a brutal gust of wind.

I knew that I would have to give in soon.

be consummated.

*Just like now.* 

Then another.

beseechingly.

There's nothing to be afraid of.

*There's nothing to be afraid of.* 

movement. He rushed to cover himself.

determination hit me.

I growled, pushing away from the counter, away from her and down the hall.

I couldn't help the edge of anger in my voice as I growled my reply. "To the fucking shower."

I sat on the counter, half dressed, heart racing in my chest, trying to catch my breath.

She was inches from me now, so close our chests touched. She brought one of her hands up and wrapped it around the

I needed to fuck something, or punch something, whatever opportunity presented itself first.

"Fine," I bit back, closing my free hand into a fist.

I couldn't remember ever going more than two days without sex, let alone two months.

Her hand on my shoulder, the brush of her leg against mine, our fingers laced together

All I wanted was to get her home, to slip her out of her tight white dress, and ravage her.

I understood that, logically. Emotionally, I was ready to hit her over the head and drag her into a cave to have my way

Even tonight, in a room full of older people, at my dad's retirement party, as my ex-fuck buddy looked on, all I could

As we pulled up in front of our building at the end of the night, I found myself fluctuating back and forth between the

I put my hand on the small of her back, pushing her toward the door, before Marco could even reply. "Let's get inside."

She continued to rattle on nervously as we stepped into the elevator, the flush rising in her cheeks as she took in my

We'd played this game countless times in the last few weeks. She knew exactly what was wrong. What I wanted. What

The lust frequently left me with a sort of whiplash. One second I was sweet and hot, the next, cold and surly.

My husband was far too comfortable with intimate displays in public.

"Yes?" His leg slid between mine as he began to lead me in the familiar steps of the bolero.

needed to prove it by letting him grope me every time we stepped out of the house.

The kind of affection he seemed to crave was so foreign to me it was overwhelming.

Xavier kissed my bare shoulder then my neck. "Am I not allowed to enjoy dancing with my wife?"

My words trailed off, half because I lost the courage to say them, half because Xavier kissed me.

People like Penny.

room full of people.

"O-Of course, it's just ..."

Two months.

with her.

two.

tense shoulders.

I couldn't have.

"Xavier?"

back of my neck.

I almost groaned at the contact.

"Xavier," she breathed.

shirt.

Right, Angela had asked me something.

Two goddamned months.

Angela was nervous. She wanted to wait.

turned into the most erotic dance.

Maybe inviting her had been a mistake.

dance floor. Not with how he was looking at me now.

Brad hadn't seemed like himself the whole night.

he wants is everyone fussing over him."

They shared a quick look, and then Xavier took his wife's hand and led her toward the dance floor.

Nothing said goodbye like a party, and I had to admit it had been a long time since I'd seen a party so spectacular at