

## Ready or Not

### Angela

I had been waiting in Mount Sinai Hospital for two hours when Lucas and Em finally stumbled into the waiting room.

The second I saw them, I jumped out of my seat and threw my arms around my brother. “Oh my goodness, are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Angie,” Lucas said, squeezing me tight. “Just a few bumps and bruises. The doctors just wanted to be sure my head was okay.”

“What happened?” I asked, stepping back. There was a bandage across his temple and a few stitches on his forearm.

“Some idiot ran a stop sign,” Lucas said. “He was in worse shape than I was, the poor bugger.”

“Do you need to stay for more tests?” I worried.

“Nope, doc said I’m good to go,” Lucas assured, wincing as he put his arm over Em’s shoulders.

She curled into his side, looking about a hundred times calmer than when I’d picked her up and brought her to the hospital.

I knew all too well what it felt like to get an emergency call in the middle of the night.

It was easy to imagine that the worst had happened and that you’d never see your loved one again.

“Well, let’s get you two home,” I said, taking up the place on my brother’s free side and looping my arm around his waist. “Just give me two minutes to make a stop on the way.”

I led them toward the exit and, after a brief detour at the hospital cafeteria, out into the cool spring air.

Marco waited in the Audi, underneath the hospital’s porte-cochère.

Xavier had been determined to come with me to the hospital.

He’d only been convinced to stay and finish his work when I’d promised I’d let Marco take me.

It was past midnight now, and Marco had yet to get home for the day.

“Can you take us to Em’s place, please, Marco?” I asked the driver as we piled into the back seat. I reached forward and handed him the coffee I’d picked up on the way out. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure, Ms. Knight,” Marco replied, accepting the Styrofoam cup. He nodded his head in thanks and then took a big sip of the coffee and pulled out into the street.

“There is some bad news,” Lucas said. His eyes flicked to Em, who sat between us, for a moment before landing on me. “The truck I was driving was filled with your order, Angie.”

My chest tightened. “You mean the flowers for the auction tomorrow?”

Lucas nodded. “I was in the middle of transporting them from the nursery to our shop when the accident happened. You should have seen the street afterwards. The whole thing was covered in white flowers.”

“It’s okay,” I told him. “We can get more. There is still time in the morning.”

“There’s no way we can get three thousand more white orchids in less than twenty-four hours. Especially not with a totaled truck,” Em said, taking my hand in hers. “I’m sorry, Angie.”

My shoulders dropped. I’d placed the flower order for the entire event with Em. No flowers meant no centerpieces on the tables, no decorations for the auction pieces, no arrangements.

Without flowers, the hall would be naked.

I took a deep, steadying breath. There had to be another way. I just needed to think. To breathe.

“The important thing is that you aren’t hurt,” I said, half to make my friend and brother feel better and half to remind myself of the fact.

“I can put in a few calls to my connections,” Em offered. “They won’t come back until morning though.”

“It’s okay. I’ll figure something out. You and Lucas have had enough excitement for one evening,” I assured them.

“Please,” Em said. “It’s the least I can do. I’ll fix this, Angie.”

“Okay,” I agreed as we pulled up in front of their apartment building. “But in the morning please.”

“Thanks for coming to my rescue,” Lucas winked and helped Em from the backseat.

“Goodnight,” I waved.

As soon as the door slammed shut, I dropped my face into my hands.

The auction was less than twenty-four hours away, and all of my flowers were scattered somewhere on the dirty streets of New York.

*It’s okay. One of Em’s connections will have what I need.*

*There is still time.*

*There is still hope.*

After all, how hard could it be to find flowers?

\*\*\*

“What do you mean you can’t find the flowers?” I said into my phone the next morning.

I was standing in the middle of the banquet hall of the Tribeca Knight Hotel. Hotel employees were fluttering around me.

Tables were being assembled, chairs brought out, posters and lights hung, but there was not a single blossom in sight.

“You said one of your friends would have them,” I pressed.

On the other side of the line, Em sighed. “I said that they *might*. I’m really sorry, Angie. I don’t know what else I can do. I’ve called everyone I know. No one can get that many orchids on such short notice.”

“What about freesia, then?” I asked, hunting for a solution.

“They’re not in season,” Em told me. “Tulips and daffodils are the only thing you can find in that quantity this time of year. I’m really sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” I said, closing my eyes. The last thing I wanted was for my friend to feel guilty for something that was outside of her control. “I’ll see you later, okay?”

I hung up before Em had the chance to reply. I didn’t want her to hear any evidence of the tears that had brimmed in my eyes and made my throat hurt.

The auction started in less than twelve hours now, and I still had no flowers.

I’d failed.

Xavier had been right. I wasn’t cut out for this sort of thing. I should have taken the internship he’d found for me.

Now the event was ruined.

My phone vibrated in my hand, and I quickly unlocked my phone, hoping it would be Em with some good news.

**Xavier**  
how’s setup going?

My fingers hovered over the keyboard for a moment as I considered lying. The last thing I needed right now was Xavier bragging about how he’d been right.

I shook my head. Lying wouldn’t solve anything.

**Xavier**  
why?

**Xavier**  
it looks great in here!

*In here?*

*Oh no...*

With a quick inhale, I quickly turned around, searching the hall for the familiar outline of Xavier’s broad shoulders.

Suddenly, I felt someone come up behind me, and a pair of rough hands wrapped around my stomach.

“Surprise,” Xavier breathed next to my ear.

“What are you doing here?” I said too quickly. I wiped at my cheeks, hoping he hadn’t seen the tears.

“I was in the area for a meeting and thought I would pop in to check on things.” I felt him shrug. “Besides, you do know I own the place, right?”

Xavier spun me around, and the smile on his face instantly fell as he took in my puffy red eyes. “What’s wrong?”

Fresh tears filled my eyes as defeat settled over me. “I don’t have any flowers.”

“I thought Em was doing the arrangements,” Xavier wiped tears from my cheeks with his thumbs.

“She was, but they were all ruined in the crash Lucas was in last night,” I admitted, finally giving in and pressing myself to him, letting him wrap his arms around me.

“Why didn’t you say something?” Xavier said.

“I thought I could handle it, but we’ve called every flower place in New York, and the notice is too short to get what I need. I don’t know what to do.”

Xavier chuckled. “Angela, sweetie. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“How can you say that? Without flowers, the whole event is ruined. You were right; this was all a mistake. I’m no event planner.”

Xavier hooked his finger under my jaw, forcing me to look up at him. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation.

“Then don’t worry about the flowers. I’ll take care of it.”

How could Xavier possibly make this any better?

Was he going to yell at the flowers to grow faster?

“But—”

Xavier raised an eyebrow, stopping my words.

“Trust me,” he said, placing a kiss on my head. “By the time you’re dressed for the night, you will have flowers.”

“Okay,” I hiccupped.

“Okay,” Xavier said. “Now, do you want a ride back home?”

I nodded and let Xavier take my hand and lead me out of the banquet hall.

There was nothing else I could do.

All that was left was to wait.

\*\*\*

A hot, relaxing bath was waiting for me when we returned to the penthouse.

Reminding myself to thank Lucille for being so thoughtful, I submerged myself in the soapy water, letting it soothe the stress that I’d been carrying around since last night.

I let my eyes close, taking a few deep breaths to steady my nerves.

The hall was ready, the pieces that were being auctioned had arrived, and the caterers were already prepping in the hotel kitchens.

Everything was ready...except the flowers.

Even if the whole night was a flop, I was proud of what I had accomplished.

I had never done anything like this before in my life. At least, nothing on this scale. The art show and retirement party were nothing compared to the auction.

With or without flowers, I’d done the best I could, and that had to count for something.

When I was toweled dry, Lucille came to join me, and I took my seat at the vanity. Together we worked to braid and twist my long hair into a luxurious-looking pile on top of my head.

I applied minimal makeup—some color in my cheeks, a swipe of mascara, some shimmer around my eyes.

Finally, I shimmied into my backless blood-red gown.

It was more revealing than I was used to, but the cut and color made me feel powerful and brave. I figured the more of that I could get right now, the better.

A black envelope clutch and a pair of light gold, strappy stilettos finished off the look.

“Ready or not,” I whispered to myself as I examined my reflection in the mirror.

\*\*\*

“Oh my God,” I breathed as I stepped into the banquet hall thirty minutes later.

The floor was covered in bundles of white orchids, the whole room filled with their scent.

At the center of it all stood Xavier, his hands on his hips.

“How did you do this?” I said, heels clacking on the floor as I crossed the room to him.

“You look stunning,” he said, ignoring my question.

“Where did all these come from?”

Xavier smiled. “Angela, you are a Knight now. As much as I know you hate namedrop, the name carries power. It took me no more than half an hour to find you every goddamned white orchid blossom in the city and get them to this hotel.”

“Thank you,” I breathed, throwing my arms around his neck. “Thank you so much.”

“Next time,” Xavier said, pulling back and looking me in the eyes, “ask for help sooner. You’re not alone in this, Angela. I want to help you accomplish your dreams, no matter what they are.”

“What if I decide to be a plumber next?” I asked, smiling.

“Even then. Now, there are some people here who are waiting to find out what to do with all these flowers, and you have”—he looked at his watch—“two hours until guests arrive.”

“Thank you,” I said again, kissing his cheek, and then hurried off toward the bouquets.

Xavier had saved me this time, but there was a long night still ahead.

And maybe it was the nerves, or the imposter syndrome, but I had this aching feeling that another disaster awaited me. Yet, as I looked from the flowers to Xavier and back, I welled with a sort of hope.

Hope that we were a team and we could face anything.

Head-on.

Together.

Angela  
not great