The Arrangement

## Thunder and Lightning

## It had been years since we'd last been in a room together. Years since I'd seen his face, or felt his hands on my body, or

Claudia

heard the sweet nothings he whispered into my ear. My life with Xavier felt like centuries ago, and it may as well have been.

I was different then. Different now.

He looked the same, though. Just as dark and dangerous, like a young Zeus, crackling with energy and power.

I often found myself thinking of him, of us. It was all so long ago, the memories bright and blurry, like the world spinning by outside a carousel ride. The romance, the passion, the sex...had it all been real?

The memory of the way our hips had ground together, the way our lips and tongues fought for dominance, was too vivid for it not to be.

Xavier and I had been good together in the same way that thunder and lightning are. Our love was loud, and bright, and fast...and then over as quickly as it had started.

From what I'd read, our storm had left a lot of collateral damage. A lot of anger and hurt, and drinking. At least I wasn't the only one in pain.

But then *she* arrived, almost overnight, as though plucked from a doll store and brought to life.

A little Barbie.

A perfect, docile princess.

His angel. Suddenly he was smiling again. Happy again. Full.

Meanwhile, I was forgotten. Cast aside. Bled dry and left to rot.

I deserved more, better, and I wasn't going to let anyone stop me from getting it. Not him, not the man who'd fucked

Angela, his tiny little mouse, was nothing but a plaything. That much had been clear from the moment we'd met. I had

... These

It wasn't fair.

I could see the panic rising in him as he grabbed his bride and fled from the ballroom.

her jumping at my every request. A woman like that couldn't handle a Knight.

I found the door with my eyes and pushed through the crowd toward it.

I hadn't seen my ex-fiancée since the night I'd found her fucking my best friend.

My response that night had been much the same as it was now. *Get away. Run. Move.* 

We knew each other too well for him to have stayed. To have waited to see what would happen, what I'd do cat and mouse games were what we both played best.

No, Xavier needed a lioness, a strong woman, and let me tell you, I was on the prowl. The only question was, when would I pounce?

I searched the crowd at the auction, my eyes catching the young man with slouched shoulders who Brad had been speaking to earlier, and I smiled.

My vision was red.

There was no thought behind what came next, only pure animal instinct that made me grab Angela by the arm and

It didn't matter who was in my way, or who stopped to say hello. I knocked them aside, fixated on getting through the

Xavier

Move. Move. Move. Faster. Farther. More.

open doorway.

bed.

Perfect.

me over, and definitely not Angela.

The need to get away, to put as much distance between her and us, was all consuming.

way, taking the impact myself.

Everything after that was pain.

vibrated under my skin.

Faster.

Farther.

But what?

My body.

Since they betrayed me.

Since the night that I returned home from a business trip to find *her* riding Daniel, cowgirl style, in the center of my

coming straight at her. Some primal instinct, still aimed at protecting the person I'd loved, made me turn around and push Claudia out of the

I'd relived the moment that came next more times than I cared to remember. A taxi shooting around the corner,

I'd run right onto the street, but she followed me. Yelled at me. A thousand excuses falling from her lips.

My heart. My whole fucking life.

I wore the scar on my back as a constant reminder of it all. I could feel it burning now, as if being so close to Claudia

I ran out of the hotel and onto the street, only this time Marco was there waiting. Cars honked. Doors slammed.

I couldn't focus on the word though. Not when my heart was beating so fast it hurt. Not with the tingling feeling that

More. Thoughts and memories blurred together.

I'd lost everything that night. The woman I loved, my best friend, myself.

Someone was talking near me. Beside me. Saying my name.

head thrown back in ecstasy as she rode Daniel's cock.

I'd never seen Xavier this way before.

I chewed my lip, worry washing over me.

Finally, his eyes snapped to mine. "Angela."

after all these years had made it inflamed. As though it was happening all over again.

I thought I'd escaped all this. The pain and fear and hate. But I suddenly knew that I never would. If Claudia was back, that could mean only one thing. She wanted something.

Angela

Claudia wrapped in my arms. Claudia surprising me with a trip to St. Barts for my twenty-fifth birthday. Claudia's

I'd tried to talk to him, to calm him, in the hotel lobby and the car, with little success. I didn't know what to make of the situation myself. There was so much confusion, so many questions that kept popping up. With Xavier's current state, it didn't seem like I would be getting answers any time soon.

I didn't think the man knew what fear was, but the look in his eyes when he had seen Didi had been complete terror.

Even now, as he paced the hardwood floor in the living room at the penthouse, he still buzzed with nervous energy.

"What's happening?" I asked carefully. "You're scaring me. Tell me what's going on. How can I help you?"

"I can't figure out what she wants," he said. "Why she's done this. There must be a plan. God, it's hot in here."

Gently, I reached up, brushed his hands away, and pulled the bowtie from around his neck, undoing a few buttons of

He followed me down the hall and up the stairs that led to the roof. We had a garden there, complete with a terrace

and a pool. It was rarely used though, except for the few times in the summer months I could come out to read on one

He pulled at his tie, trying to make room at his throat, but his hands were shaking too much to succeed.

Xavier turned at the front of the room, and I stepped into his path, throwing my hands up to press gently against his chest. "Xavier."

of the lounge chairs.

sense to me.

you lies."

"Xavier—"

I love you.

"You have me."

Xavier shivered.

closer.

And then we were moving.

Dancing.

screaming his name.

"Marry me."

My dress came next. Up and over my head.

"Do you still love her?"

reason for the scars on his back, and on his heart.

"What would she possibly be planning?"

Xavier inhaled audibly, his dark eyes flashing to mine. "No."

can't let her hurt me like that again. I can't lose more people I love."

I placed my hand on his pale cheek. "You're not going to lose anyone."

It was the first time he'd said it to me without seeing my naked body.

Slowly, I leaned forward and placed a kiss on his cheek. "I love you too."

I knew then what this was all about. How I could fix it.

Xavier stilled, so I placed another kiss on his lips.

The tension fell out of him as I kissed him again.

He replied eagerly, hungrily. "Tell me you're mine."

"And I'm not going anywhere," I promised. "I'm right here."

Still nothing.

his shirt at the same time. "How about we get you some air?" I suggested.

I took Xavier by the hand and led him to one of those loungers now. Made him sit beside me.

"Xavier," I tried again. I was standing a few feet away from him, beside the sofa.

I needed a new technique if I wanted any chance at getting through to him.

"What did she do to you?" I wondered softly, searching his eyes. Xavier frowned, his hands balling into fists in his lap. "I told you what she did."

He had. I knew the truth. Knew that he'd caught her cheating on him with his best friend. Knew that she was the

Still, his reaction was so strong. I found another question bubbling up to the surface, the only explanation that made

I flicker of relief filled me. "Then why are you acting this way?" "She's planning something," he said. "I just don't know what."

Xavier shook his head. "I don't know, but it's what she does. Claudia takes whatever she wants, no matter the cost. I

"You don't know that. You don't know her like I do. You've been working with her for weeks, and all she's done is feed

"No, Angela. I don't want you to see her again. Please. I love you too much. I–I can't—" His words cut off, a muscle jumping in his jaw as he wrestled with whatever darkness had gripped him. I froze for a moment as his words hit me.

"I'm yours," I vowed, meaning it. His hand came up and knotted in my hair, his forehead resting against mine. "I need you right now."

Reaching up, I began to make my way down the buttons of his shirt.

Xavier shrugged off his suit jacket and then let me slide his shirt off his broad shoulders.

Goosebumps raised in a trail across his skin as I ran my fingertips along his bare chest.

Then Xavier was pushing me back against the lounge chair, his body hovering over me. Chest to chest, hips grinding into hips.

Xavier's hand moved down, closer to my core, and he let out a groan. "Fuck, you're wet." "I want you," I breathed, head spinning.

I gasped, a wave of pleasure rolling over me, as his finger circled.

Colliding. And I wasn't scared.

When the time came, Xavier worked with me through the pain, turned it into a peak so bright and blinding I was

After, when I lay wrapped in Xavier and felt more full and complete than the star-flecked sky above us, he said,

Xavier nipped at my ear, my neck, my shoulder, his hand running down my ribs to trace along the top of my panties.

For the first time, no fear jumped up and had me pushing him back. Instead, I dug my nails into his back, needing him

Encouraged, his hand dipped under the hem of my panties, his fingers expertly finding my little bundle of nerves.

Xavier grunted then slid my underwear down my legs. He fumbled with his belt and kicked off his shoes and pants.

I laughed, blushing. "I'm serious," Xavier said, pushing himself up a little.

"Angela, will you allow me the honor of doing this right? Doing it the way I should have the first time? I love you. More

than I ever believed possible. Will you marry me?" Tears filled my eyes, and I held out my shaking hand. "Yes."

He took my left hand and slid my engagement ring off my finger. My eyes grew wide as he dropped to his knee before the lounger, still completely nude.