

**The Arrangement**  
S.S. Sahoo

## Benchmark

### Xavier

"A brain aneurysm starts with a blood vessel," the doctor said.

The words echoed through me as I slid onto the hospital floor. I was limp, as if I had transcended through my own body, as if I had lost possession of my limbs.

The searing pain was so deep, so indescribable, that it had to take physical form. It had to burn me, melt my bones into mush.

I stared up at the fluorescent lights, my mind flashing back to my father's penthouse.

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I'd been rushing to him, to my father, so that I could apologize. So that I could say sorry for being such a dick. For being ungrateful, harsh, and unfair.

I soared up the elevator, rehearsing my apology to my father, thinking of the proper way to phrase my remorse.

*What you did, setting Angela and me up, wasn't a mistake*, I thought. ~It was a gift, even if it was fucked up.~

Maybe he'd made the match a little for him, but at the end of the day, I got to wake up next to her.

I got to hold her tiny, perfect waist. I got to know that I was loved by a woman so perfect for me, a woman only my father could have known was *made* to love me.

To blame him for our problems was selfish.

I was the one who got involved with Claudia, and if there was anyone who'd fucked up my life, it was her. It was always her.

As soon as the elevator doors opened, I darted into Dad's foyer.

Hopefully, he'd heard the press conference. Hopefully he'd heard my earnest answers, how I was no longer afraid of owning up to the truth.

Of admitting my love.

"Dad?" I called out, waiting for an answer. Waiting for the sound of his feet, in slippers, padding down the hall. But there was nothing.

The foyer was as silent as a goddamn center for the deaf.

I paced back and forth, sensing that something was up.

"Dad?" I called again, deciding to take off down the hall. He wasn't in the living room, the dining room, or the kitchen. He wasn't in the guest bathroom or in the library.

The door to his home office was closed.

I tried knocking.

*Knock knock.*

*Knock.*

*Knock.*

Nothing.

I tried the handle, and it shifted under my grasp, the door opening with a fluid motion. That was when I saw him. Slumped forward, folding into himself, on the armchair by the window.

"DAD!" I cried out, dashing toward him. "PLEASE! DAD!" I screamed as I felt for a pulse.

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"The blood vessel balloons in the brain to a dangerous size," the doctor said, bringing me back to reality.

The EMTs had wheeled Dad out on a stretcher.

His eyes didn't open.

His hands didn't shake.

His breath didn't even steam up in the brisk February air.

I took off my coat, covering his undressed body with it, trying to shield his unsaturated flesh from the raw cold.

"Dad, I'm here. I'm not going anywhere, I swear," I had whispered into his ear, unsure if he could hear me.

"It often looks like a berry hanging on a stem," the doctor said, continuing his explanation, continuing the force of the knife being shoved into my gut. "If the blood vessel ruptures, it causes bleeding into the brain."

As soon as we'd gotten to Bellevue Hospital, white coats fluttered over Dad like doves.

They'd dragged him inside, into the operating room, trying to cut and paste him back together.

Angela had sat with me, but I couldn't feel her hands around mine at all.

I couldn't feel anything.

Anything except the clanging, violent noise inside my head. My body was a building, and every fire alarm was screeching.

"He's going to make it," Angela said softly after hours of waiting, but I wasn't sure if it was for her sake or mine. "He has to make it. Please, he has to make it."

The second the doctor walked up to me, I knew my father was gone.

That I'd get some speech about how they'd done everything they could. They tried their best, but he didn't make it. He couldn't make it. He was too far-gone.

I could tell all this by the agonized look the doctor was giving me.

The surgery didn't work.

The leaking blood killed all the cells around it.

It also increased the pressure inside his skull, destroying the oxygen supply.

He was suffocating inside his own mind.

I could empathize.

I knew exactly what the fuck that felt like.

### Angela

I wanted to sob, but I couldn't.

At least not today.

The funeral had to be planned, the guests managed, the paparazzi exiled. Xavier was unresponsive, a shell with no sign of life.

How could he be anything else?

At least Em lent a helping hand. She'd come with masses and masses of flowers, littering the entire space with white lilies.

Brad's favorite flower.

The flower that had brought the Knights into my life.

On the most bitter day of our lives, she'd made sure the air was tinged with sweetness.

When the time came for people to give speeches, it was mainly business associates. People who had made development deals with Brad, who'd sat next to him in countless boardrooms.

Xavier was too traumatized to even speak. I could tell he hated it, every second of the men in suits attesting to Brad's personality, like they really knew him at all.

Even Penny, who was sitting in the pew to our left, stopped sobbing for long enough to give these men dumbfounded looks.

Like they had the audacity to mark the end of a man's life with a story of his business acumen.

Like the sum of his accomplishments was his company, not his family.

Not the people he'd loved.

This was not the way for Brad to leave this world—remembered by the people who didn't know him, who respected him for earning millions, not for how he so generously gave them away.

I didn't want to speak.

There were too many people.

I hated public speaking.

The public still thought I was a gold-digging liar.

But still, when the last suit-clad millionaire stepped down from the podium, I found myself gravitating toward it. Like I was floating, not walking, to the microphone.

"The day I first met Brad Knight was the worst day of my life," I said slowly, my voice trembling. "Until today."

Xavier looked up at me, surprised.

But then he nodded, and his eyes begged me to go on.

"Brad believed in people the way some of us believe in God. If he trusted you, he trusted you with every cell in his body. His faith in others was his religion," I surmised.

"If we measure influence by dollars, there are lots of powerful people here today. But Brad would have had the same amount of influence if you emptied his bank account. He had the gift of seeing potential and would give anything he had to let it grow."

I took a breath.

"Brad walked up to me on that awful day, more than a year ago now. He asked me to be part of his family and asked if he could help me save mine. He saved my father. He saved me," I admitted, and my eyes flitted over to Xavier's.

"And he saved my husband."

Xavier had tears streaming down his face.

I'd never seen him cry before, and it made me want to wrap my arms around him, to protect him from the grief.

"Brad gave us everything. He gave us each other, and with that, he gave us the ability to survive without him."

### Xavier

It was too cold and rainy a day to go to Central Park, but Angela insisted.

I was so numb she could've dragged me anywhere.

My body just felt like bloody meat. There was nothing left of me—no mental capacity, no emotional capacity, no spiritual capacity. I was nothing more than a dead creature, waiting to be skinned.

Because if my body could give something to someone, it'd be doing more than it was currently doing for me.

We sat on a bench in the park, with Angela trying to resuscitate me.

"This was their special place," Angela stated, motioning to the bench. She was trying to remind me of how my parents had always gone here.

But it just reminded me that, now, they were both gone.

I had sent my father off without a goodbye, and worse, the last time we'd spoken had been the worst fight we'd ever gotten into. He'd died thinking I hated him, thinking that I was ungrateful for everything he had fought so hard to give me.

He died after I had beaten our relationship to a bloody goddamn pulp.

I sighed, wanting to be alone.

I didn't want anyone—especially Angela—near me.

I didn't deserve her love.

I didn't deserve love at all.

I was an animal. No, a beast.

A creature so cruel it had no place in the fucking animal kingdom.

A monster.

"Xavier, I need you to talk to me," Angela pressed.

"What do you want me to say?" I snapped.

"Something, please."

"The last words I said to my father were that I couldn't believe we were related," I admitted.

Angela stared at her feet.

"I know," she murmured.

*What? How?*

"Your dad called me to check in on you before the press conference," Angela explained, slowly meeting my eyes. "He was worried about you. He knew you were going to apologize, Xavier. He had already forgiven you."

Bullshit.

She was just lying to make me feel better.

"But I didn't apologize. And now I'm ... I'm never going to get to. Those were the last words I said to him," I choked out, trying to push my tears back into my eyeballs.

Angela shook her head.

"No, Xavier. Just because he's passed on doesn't mean he's no longer with us. You know that. Brad's watching over us, just like he always did. I can feel it," she said. "Those weren't your last words to him. He's still listening. You want to say something to him? Just do it now, here."

I looked at her, and it dawned on me then, as goosebumps covered every inch of my skin, how fucking lucky I was.

I closed my eyes, willing myself to see my father.

Willing myself to imagine his face, his caring eyes, and his goofy smile.

*I'm sorry, Dad.*

*I'm so fucking sorry.*

*You were the perfect father—in every way.*

*You showed me what it means to be a man.*

*And you forgave me for screwing up.*

*Every time, you forgave me.*

*Every time, you welcomed me back, with open arms.*

*And you gave me her.*

*You found her for me.*

*You found love for me.*

*I love you.*

*I'll miss you every day.*

*I am so proud—so goddamn proud—to be your son.*

When I opened my eyes again, Angela was beaming at me. She grabbed my hand and gave it a squeeze, and then she stood up, pulling me up with her.

"Goodbye, Brad," she said softly, looking right at the plaque on the bench. The one we'd had amended so that it read *Rest in Peace, Amelia & Brad Knight*. Now Dad was back with Mom.

"Goodbye," I whispered to the plaque. "I love you both."