

The Arrangement
S.S. Sahoo

Hollywood Knight

ANGELA

Only when we were in the car sent by Hollywood Knight did I turn on my phone again. It lit back to life as I rolled down the backseat window, letting in the warm evening air.

California. Even this state, so far from New Jersey, felt familiar to me after traveling across the world.

The black Escalade had ice-cold water bottles in the cupholders. Xavier passed one to me.

I kissed his cheek.

Then the messages started coming in.

DAD

Sweetheart, game's on and nachos are done! Only thing missing is you. XOXO

DAD

GIANTS WIN!!!!

DUSTIN

Should I spend \$500 on a pair of Gucci loafers?

DUSTIN

They're vintage and they're adorable

DUSTIN

Yes or yes?

DUSTIN

??

DUSTIN

??

DUSTIN

Oh, right. No phone.

DUSTIN

How cute.

DUSTIN

Love you bitch. Text me when ur back.

EM

I know you don't have your phone, but I miss you!! hope Bali is amazing.

EM

being a mother is insane.

EM

can't wait for some girl time with you.

I smiled as words and images from the last few weeks poured in like they were traveling through a time machine.

Xavier was looking at his phone, too.

Back to the real world, I thought to myself. I leaned over to kiss my husband again. With him, even the real world wasn't so bad.

XAVIER

The newest Knight property was supposed to be the most glamorous yet, and after a few days' stay, Angela and I both agreed.

We were staying at the hotel during the exclusive pre-opening, in which fewer than half of the rooms were available. Leading up to the party, our most loyal clients would experience unprecedented luxury and service.

The buzz in the air confirmed what I already knew: we had outdone ourselves with Hollywood Knight.

Leaving Bali felt like leaving paradise, even though we were more or less having another vacation.

The Hollywood Knight car took us on a scenic route through Los Angeles, passing the iconic Hollywood sign as we drove down bustling Hollywood Boulevard. Out the window, I saw my favorite entertainers' stars glittering on the sidewalks. And was that my man Leo DiCaprio we spied slipping out of a Coffee Bean?

Well, this isn't so bad.

And then, after what felt like a lifetime of travel, we were there.

The Hollywood Knight. Right above the bustling Sunset Strip.

As soon as we got out of the car, we felt the place's easy glamour.

There was a grand piano in the lobby, placed close to the resto-bar, where a jazz pianist would play every night for our guests.

The place was designed to immerse our guests in the glitz and charm of old Hollywood while maintaining the sleek simplicity of the twenty-first century. The interior of the hotel was light wood and white marble, and it felt like there was no hard corner in the whole place. It was all slick, smooth lines.

We spent the next few days taking care of the final details for the opening party and taking in the sun by the infinity pool.

I slept late in the honeymoon suite, letting the vacation stretch on while Angela ran off to meetings with the caterer.

And then, before we knew it, it was the night of the party. I watched Angela get ready in front of the full-length mirror, and I zipped up the back of her white silk dress.

I put on a blue linen suit, and together we descended the grand staircase into LA's hottest weekend event.

The lobby twinkled with the light from 100 candles and the buzz of partygoers. Champagne flowed and a quartet filled the room with smooth jazz.

I had to admit, this was our most impressive property yet. It was perfectly simple.

I looked at my beautiful wife, whose blonde hair was pulled back in a messy chignon, taking in the scene with wide eyes.

Watching her made my heart warm.

Dad would be so proud of her.

She met my eye and bit her lip as she smiled.

And he would be proud of me, for how good I was to her.

And that was all that mattered.

ANGELA

The night of the event, the lobby was buzzing with conversation and gracious laughter. I stood by the quartet playing by the grand piano and admired my work.

The party was just what I hoped it would be—effortlessly glamorous. A-list guests strutted their stuff on the red carpet while waiters circulated edible art from a hot celebrity chef.

Xavier appeared beside me with two flutes of champagne. He clinked his to mine.

"Cheers, darling," he said, his eyes twinkling, "to you! For planning the most successful opening party a Knight hotel has ever seen."

I closed my eyes as he leaned down to kiss me.

"Three people have already asked to purchase suites," he said with a wink.

A couple sauntering past suddenly changed direction, and the towering woman led her man towards us.

Oh, God.

I couldn't help the sudden shot of anxiety I felt. This young woman was clearly a model, her smile a thinly veiled sneer.

Was she one of Xavier's ex-lovers?

"*Bonsoir, mon cheri,*" she greeted, leaning into Xavier for the two-kiss.

Right. An old classmate from France.

The woman didn't bother to introduce herself to me. Instead, she brushed a brown curl from her forehead with her clawlike nail and stood there looking me up and down.

I felt my face heat up. How often had I shrunk before the critical gaze of a beautiful woman?

Her lips pursed in distaste. While this would usually make me want to melt into the floor, disappearing from sight, tonight felt *different*.

This was my party, and I was standing beside my husband. What right did this woman have to boost her own ego by flattening mine?

"I'm Angela," I said, bursting the bubble of silence as I extended my hand to her. She reached out gingerly and held it between her sharp, manicured nails. I didn't break eye contact the whole time. The model's brow furrowed.

Was I intimidating ~her?~

The snooty couple drifted away from us, the woman flipping her hair.

"And she's Celine," Xavier said, turning to me. "I've never seen her at a loss for words."

Just then, a glamorous old woman with a head of white nineteen-twenties curls folded her hand into the crook of Xavier's elbow.

"Miss Marlboro," he said to her, "if I didn't know better, I would think you were following me."

The woman giggled at Xavier's joke, but she smiled at me from under red-framed cat-eye glasses with faux shyness.

"No, Xavier," she purred. "I thought it was about time that I meet this divine creature I've heard so much about."

I smiled back at her, taking in her two-piece suit made of leopard-printed satin. Her eccentric glamour told me she was a force to be reckoned with.

"Marlena Marlboro," she said, unfolding herself from my husband and covering both of her hands with my own.

"Angela," I said, letting our handshake linger.

I couldn't help but feel a magnetism towards the old woman.

"Marlena was a dear friend of my father's," Xavier explained.

"And I am so sorry to have missed his service. I was tied up in Venice for the Biennale. It felt wrong, but I know he would have wanted me to pursue my art."

Marlena paused, and tears shone in her eyes even as she smiled. "Brad knew me back when I was an aspiring little thing. Later in life, when we both had lost our great loves, Brad and I had a long and meaningful correspondence."

Xavier frowned. "My father wrote letters?"

"Oh, yes! He was quite the writer, in fact."

As she waved a dapper man into our circle, Xavier took the opportunity to close the distance between us. He subtly ran his finger over the exposed skin of my lower back, sending tingles up my spine.

"Rupert!" Marlena giggled, embracing the gentleman. "Please meet Mr. and Mrs. Knight."

"It's a pleasure." Rupert nodded graciously. "What a stunning property. And isn't this a fabulous party?"

"Indeed!" Marlena cooed.

"I have my wife to thank for that." Xavier smiled down at me, and I felt my cheeks flush. I thought I was keeping my cool, but my blush reflex gave me away every time ...

"You're an event planner?" Rupert asked, and when I nodded, he sighed with relief.

"You are *just* the woman I've been looking for. My newest art space opens in New York in a few weeks, and I need some help preparing ..."

"Oh, really?" I asked, my mind already spinning with ideas.

"Oh, yes! The opening show is a retrospective of Marlena's paintings," Rupert went on.

"Angela has experience with gallery events," Xavier chimed in. "She planned an opening that launched a young painter's career!"

I blushed at all the attention, but I was happy for my husband's assistance.

Marlena and Rupert shared a mischievous glance.

"How wonderful it would be to work together!" Rupert proposed.

"Wow!" I gushed. This event couldn't have sounded more fabulous.

"I'll give you my card. Why don't you call me after the weekend?"

I grasped the fine piece of cardstock between my fingers, hardly believing I had gotten so lucky.

"Perfect," I said, smiling.

XAVIER

I was as proud as the father of a Super Bowl-winning quarterback as I watched Angela networking.

Not only was she the event planner, but she was also the *host*. Or the cohost, with me.

She was embracing her social standing, and it made me want to dip her to the floor and give her a big kiss right here in the middle of the party.

If only Dad could see us now.

As I pulled Angela to the corner of the ballroom, she giggled, squeezing my hand.

"I'm having fun," she whispered.

"Don't sound so surprised!"

I kissed her temple.

Just then, my phone started ringing. When I pulled it from the pocket of my slacks, my lawyer's name appeared.

This was not a call I could ignore.

"Harry," I said as a greeting.

"Xavier. Glad I caught you."

"Yeah, I'm kind of in the middle of something."

"I'll be brief. Your father's will is ready to be read."

I gulped.

It had already been six months since Dad passed away. I didn't realize I was dreading the reading of his will. It made everything more ... real.

"Oh, okay. When and where?"

"Tomorrow at noon in my office."

"Thanks, Harry. Angela and I will be on the first flight from LA. I'll see you—"

"Xavier, one more thing. I just want to warn you that there are a few ... surprises in the will."

"Uhhh," I stammered, wondering what the fuck that could mean.

What, did the old man leave everything to charity?

I thought of the arrangement he made with Angela a few years ago. The trick he pulled so I could meet the woman of my dreams. My old man was certainly creative with the way he threw around his money.

But this was the Knight fortune we were talking about. He wouldn't have done anything too whimsical... would he?

"See you tomorrow, Xavier. Thanks."

I opened my mouth, but the dial tone was already playing.

I sighed, putting my phone back in my pocket.

Angela eyed me curiously.

"We have to be in New York tomorrow," I told her, my shoulders drooping under the weight of it all. "Vacation's over, baby."