

The Arrangement
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Okay

BRAD

"Amelia," I whispered, eyes closed. "Our son needs you right now."

I was not a man who relied on churches for miracles—not when my Amelia died, not after the plane crash—but I figured now would be the time to start. On my knees, in the hotel chapel, I could feel a power move through me, a warmth settling in my chest.

"Our Angela has been taken from us. Xavier needs you, my love. He's not strong enough to lose her, too. Give them—give us all—the strength we need to get through these dark hours. Guide us to the right path. Keep her safe. Please, keep Angela safe. There's—there's nothing more I can do."

It wasn't just my son I prayed for but for Angela's friends and family. For myself.

Angela was one of the purest and brightest souls I had ever had the chance to encounter, and I knew the world would be a much darker place with her gone.

"Please," I whispered, clasping my hands before me. "Please bring them back safe."

ANGELA

"Xavier!" I screamed as Jacques swung the crowbar toward Xavier's head.

Then a loud bang rang through the warehouse with finality.

Jacques froze, his eyes rolling back in his head, and he crumpled to the floor.

"It's okay," Xavier breathed above me like a prayer. "You're safe. You're safe. I've got you."

He came.

Xavier came.

I'm safe.

Then we were surrounded. Dogs barked. People yelled. Sirens blared.

My eyes grew heavy again. Sounds and images became fragmented and blurred together.

"Are you hurt, Mr. Knight?"

"We need to get you to the hospital."

"You need to let her go now, Mr. Knight."

Strong hands tightened around me. Lifted me.

A bright light filled my vision, and a warmth began to fill me.

"You're safe now, my angel."

"I'm here. I'm here."

I'm here.

XAVIER

As Jacques dropped to the floor behind us, police swarmed into the warehouse, guns raised.

They spread out, scattering among the crates.

I stayed on the floor, clutching my angel in my arms.

"Don't leave me," she whispered, eyelids drooping shut again.

"Stay with me, Angela," I begged.

"Don't leave me," she said again.

"I'm here," I promised. "I'm here."

"Mr. Knight," someone said.

I blinked and looked to the side.

There was a police officer kneeling beside me. "Are you hurt, Mr. Knight?"

I shook my head, confused by his question.

What the hell did I matter? Couldn't he see how hurt Angela was?

He reached out and pressed two fingers against Angela's throat. "We need to let the paramedics look at your wife."

"Yes," I agreed. "Please."

"You have to let her go now, Mr. Knight."

"No, I need to stay with her. I promised I would stay with her."

"Mr. Knight, I'm afraid that isn't possible. You—"

I stopped listening. The idiot didn't understand.

Gathering Angela in my arms, I pushed myself onto my knees, my feet.

I could see the ambulance waiting just outside the warehouse.

"You're going to be okay," I whispered to Angela, taking one step toward the ambulance, then another. "We're almost there."

Paramedics jumped out of the back of the ambulance, running toward me with a stretcher between them.

"We'll take care of it from here, Mr. Knight," one of them said, stepping before me.

"You need to let go of her now, Mr. Knight," said the other.

"I won't. I need to stay with her."

Why doesn't anyone understand how important this is?

The second paramedic—a woman I realized—spoke again. "You can stay with her, Mr. Knight, but you need to put her on the stretcher now. If you want us to help her, you need to let go."

I relented, laying Angela onto the stretcher. In a second, she was whisked away by the first paramedic and loaded into the back of the ambulance.

"Come on, Mr. Knight. You too," the second said.

I followed after them. Climbed into the back of the ambulance. Sat on the bench. The back doors of the ambulance shut, and sirens started to blare louder than ever.

One of Angela's hands, the one closest to me, hung off the stretcher. I reached out and grabbed it, winding her cold fingers through mine.

"She's going to be okay, Mr. Knight," the woman told me, squeezing my shoulder.

"You don't know that," I snapped, gripping tighter to Angela's hand.

"I know," she said, "that we will do everything we can for her. I know that Mrs. Knight will be very upset if you don't let us take care of you, too."

I shut up and let the paramedic look at my arm, my hands, my head.

"Is there someone you should call?" the paramedic asked.

Fuck.

Dad. Em. Mr. Carson.

"Yes," I said and fished my phone from my pocket.

With shaking fingers, I found Dad's number and pressed call.

He picked up on the first ring. "Dad?"

"Xavier," my father said, voice filled with a certain kind of reverence.

"I'm here, Dad," I told him. "I'm okay."

There was a beat of silence as he gathered the courage to ask the question.

The only question that mattered.

"Angela?"

Fresh tears brimmed in my eyes. "I don't know."

"It's okay, son. Everything will be okay."

"We're on the way to the hospital," I told him.

"Okay. We're coming. We'll meet you there."

The line went dead.

The sirens continued to wail.

The paramedic took the phone from my hands.

I lay back on the stretcher and let my eyes close.

Please, I prayed. Please. Just let her be okay.

Let Angela be okay.

ANGELA

I woke to a beeping noise. It pinged in an even beat, in time with my throbbing head, in time with my heartbeat.

With a groan, I opened my eyes, wincing as bright, sterile light filled my vision.

I was in a hospital room. That much was clear, but how had I gotten here?

Then it all came rushing back.

Jacques.

The warehouse.

The knife.

Xavier. *Where is Xavier?*

The beeping sped up as I moved to throw back the hospital blankets, only to find I couldn't. Something was gripping my hand.

I looked down. Xavier sat at my bedside, asleep with one arm cradling his head. His other hand held mine.

I smiled. Xavier was here. He'd stayed.

I reached out my other hand and gently ran it through his hair.

Xavier jolted upright, his eyes frantically searching the room until they landed on me. "You're awake."

"I'm awake," I repeated with a smile.

Xavier jumped up, throwing his arms around me, making me wince as pain ran down my back. "It's so good to hear your voice."

It's so good to hear your voice. "Since when do you say things like that?"

"I thought I'd fucking lost you, Angela," Xavier cried, pulling back.

"That's more like it."

"How do you feel? Do you need the nurse? I should get the nurse." Xavier stood, reaching for the emergency call button on the wall.

"I'm okay," I told him. "Calm down."

He wavered for a moment and then seemed to decide to believe me and slowly sank back into his chair.

"Xavier," I said, looking down into my lap. "What happened?"

I wasn't sure if I was ready to know the answer. If I was honest with myself, I was scared to know the truth.

I knew I had to ask though. I had to know what had happened. If I didn't, I would be wondering the rest of my life. I would imagine the worst.

Xavier cleared his throat, having the decency to look uncomfortable.

This wasn't the sort of stuff we normally talked about. Hard things. Important things.

He began to recite a list of medical words like concussion, lacerations, and sutures.

"Was I ...?" I couldn't say the word.

Xavier's eyes grew wide with understanding what I was asking. "No. The doctors checked."

A sudden weight lifted from my shoulders. Jacques hadn't succeeded. He hadn't raped me.

"And Jacques?"

"Dead," Xavier replied, not looking the least bit sorry. "Shot by the police."

I nodded, hoping the touch of sorrow that fell over me at the news didn't show on my face. Jacques had done terrible things. I knew that, but I also knew he'd done them out of pain. He'd lost the love of his life and his career. People had done much worse for far less.

"And you, Xavier? Were you hurt?" Based on his wrinkled shirt and the scruff on his jaw, Xavier hadn't been home recently.

"Just a few scrapes and bruises," he dismissed. Then he reached for my hand again, holding it in both of his. "I was terrified. Angeli."

"I'm here," I told him, lifting my free hand to his cheek. "I'm here because of you. I don't know how to thank you."

"Seeing you smile again is more thanks than I could have ever hoped for," He lifted my hand to his lips and placed a delicate kiss on my knuckles. "There are some people outside who will be very happy to see you awake."

My eyebrows shot up. "Here? Now?"

"Yes, angel. Are you up for it?"

"Of course."

Xavier stood and crossed the room, disappearing out the door. He returned a moment later with a whole crowd of people in tow. Dad, Brad, Danny, Lucas, and Em all piled into the hospital room.

"Sweet pea," Dad said, hurrying to my side. "It's so good to see you up."

His bright blue eyes swam with tears. I reached for him and held tightly to his large, weathered hand. "Didn't think you could get rid of me that easy, did you? How are the Giants doing?"

"They're headed for the Super Bowl," he replied, smiling brightly.

Em came next. She threw her arms around my shoulders as best she could with all the monitors and tubes surrounding me. "Don't you ever do that again!"

"I'm so sorry I ruined your wedding," I told her, squeezing back.

"Don't even start with all that!" Em said.

"But—"

"I said don't. I'm just happy to have my best friend back."

They sat a while longer, laughing and hickering among themselves. I leaned back against the hospital bed, listening, watching, soaking in my family.

I felt like the luckiest girl in the world.

I was getting a second chance, a fresh start.

There would be a new morning, and another after that, and I would get to see them. Get to see Em and Lucas's children. Get to watch the Giants with my dad. Get to watch Danny fall in love.

And Xavier would be there. At my side. Always. Just like he'd promised.

Later that day, there was a knock on the door of my hospital room. Nurses didn't knock, my family had left, and Xavier had gone home for a shower. Who could it be?

"Hello?"

The door inched open, and Dustin poked his head into the room. "Hey."

I smiled, pushing myself upright in the hospital bed. "It's so good to see you!"

"Really?" Dustin's eyebrows shot up. He quickly shut the door behind him and stepped up to the end of the bed. He was carrying something large and square and wrapped in brown packing paper.

"Of course," I told him with a frown. "Why wouldn't I be happy to see you?"

"Because you getting kidnapped was all my fault?"

My chest grew tight, my heart aching for my friend. "Is that really what you think?"

Dustin's shoulders drooped. "If I hadn't sold your painting to that awful Frenchman, none of this would have happened. I was completely selfish."

"You had no way of knowing what would happen, Dustin. I understand doing desperate things when money gets tight. I forgive you for selling the painting, but Jacques would have found a way to get to me one way or another. This wasn't your fault."

"Well, I made you a new painting. A better one," Dustin said, lifting up the package. He rested it on the foot of the bed and began ripping off the packing paper.

I gasped, hands flying up to cover my mouth as the painting beneath was revealed. "You've outdone yourself."

The painting was not as fantastical as Dustin's usual style, not as obscure as the angel and the knight. Instead, there was a couple dancing in the middle of a busy New York street.

A few days later, I was discharged from the hospital.

Xavier was adamant about being the one who picked me up and refused to let me walk to the car. Instead, he pushed me through the halls and outside in a wheelchair.

He'd been overprotective the last few days, even more so than usual. Yet, every time he fussed over my feet getting cold or a nurse not fluffing my pillows, I felt those three little words bubbling up to the surface again.

I couldn't remember much about the night I was kidnapped, but I knew one thing for sure. Xavier had come for me. He'd saved me from Jacques. It was the most brave and selfless thing anyone had ever done for me.

Though Xavier hadn't said it, I knew he felt for me the same way I felt about him. He'd proven it that night and every day since as he sat by my side in the hospital.

"Good to see you again, Ms. Knight," Marco said, holding the back door of the car open for me.

"It's good to see you too, Marco," I smiled, accepting Xavier's hand as I stood from the wheelchair and slid into the backseat of the car.

Xavier climbed in next to me and reached for my hand again, letting our intertwined fingers lay on the open middle seat between us.

"Are you excited to get home?" he asked as we pulled out into traffic.

"More than you can imagine."

My stomach fluttered a little at his words. *Home*. We had a home together. Xavier and I. I belonged somewhere. To someone.

It seemed impossible. After everything we had been through, how far we'd come, Xavier and I were still together.

Dad was healthy.

My family's restaurant was no longer in debt.

Em was happy.

There was nothing else I could hope for.

We pulled to a stop outside our building, and butterflies started fluttering in my stomach.

Xavier helped me inside and through the lobby to the elevator.

Slowly, we ascended, climbing higher and higher toward the penthouse.

When the elevator doors slid open on our floor, Xavier stepped forward, only to be stopped as our still-linked hands grew taut between us.

I was frozen, both feet firmly planted in the elevator.

"Everything okay, Angela?" Xavier frowned.

I smiled, happy tears brimming in my eyes. "It's just—"

The single step seemed like an impossible distance. Like a finish line I hadn't known I'd been racing toward.

In the elevator, the old world remained, a past filled with hate and hurt.

One step away was Xavier, an impossible future, one that beckoned to me, waited for me, if only I was brave enough to seize it.

I was balanced, carefully, on the edge of a cliff. All that was left was to jump.

I was overwhelmed, exuberant, and the words tumbled from my lips.

"I love you."

I jumped.

End of Book 2