



The Arrangement

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Amira Press
Charlotte, NC 28227
www.amirapress.com

ISBN: 978-1-936279-57-9

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Dedication

To Monique and Ana for believing in me.

Chapter One

“I’ll do it, but there are conditions,” Leonardo da Silva said.

His name meant “strong as a lion,” and he was aptly named. He had the strength and cunning of the large cat, and he never hesitated to tear apart his rivals in business. His ruthlessness was not a personality trait that made him well-liked in the business world. It made him a worthy adversary, feared more than respected.

Alexa da Silva held her breath as she stared at the broad, muscular back of her soon-to-be ex-husband. Her eyes were drawn lower to his butt, shown to advantage because he’d chosen to shove his hands into his pockets, which stretched the tailored trousers taut against his firm posterior.

She lifted her gaze, reminding herself why she was there. She had just asked him to help her brother, Xander, out of a financial debacle. She’d known there would be a catch, of course, but what exactly he would demand in return remained to be revealed.

It had taken every ounce of courage she’d had to walk through the doors of the high-rise building he owned in Atlanta and ask for this favor, buoyed by her brother’s pleading request.

* * * *

“Lexie, please, you’ve got to ask him. Leo is the only person I know who has enough money to get me out of this.”

“I haven’t seen Leo in months,” she’d explained to her brother. “It’s only a matter of time before he files for divorce. I’m surprised he hasn’t done it already.”

“All the more reason to ask him now, before he does it,” Xander had offered helpfully. As if it were as simple as merely asking for Leo’s help.

Sighing, Alexa had shaken her head. “I don’t know if I can do that, Xander. I left him, and now you want me to go back and ask him for money? He’s not going to just hand it over to me. There’s just got to be another alternative.”

* * * *

But there hadn't been, despite leaving no stone unturned. No one else they knew had the kind of money Xander needed, and given the financial straits he was in, getting another loan was impossible.

Now here she was, sitting across from the modern, minimalist glass desk and the floor-to-ceiling windows Leonardo was staring out of, hoping he wouldn't laugh her out of the office because she had the audacity, after all this time, to come ask him for money. This was a low point in her life, but she and Xander were close, and she would do anything for him.

With trepidation, Alexa asked, "What are your conditions?"

She stiffened her spine, ready to negotiate on whatever point her husband would bring up. Even as she thought about it, she almost laughed at the idea that she could negotiate on the same level as him. Leonardo was a shrewd businessman, having expanded his family's multimillion-dollar telecommunications enterprise into a multi-country empire that worked on projects across the United States and Europe.

He turned, as if suddenly remembering she was in the office. Alexa braced herself. When he faced her, she noted how the angular lines of his face looked harsher, more pronounced than they were before their separation. Still, he was handsome, despite the hardened square jaw and unwelcoming charcoal eyes.

Half Brazilian, he had his mother's dark coloring and spoke with a slight accent because he'd spent thirteen years of his life in Brazil after his parents divorced when he was five. His wavy dark brown hair, which he tended to wear a little too long, curled along the collar of his shirt. He was a big man, with a powerful chest and large, muscular arms.

His mother had married the eldest son of a wealthy Georgia family who owned the number one telecommunications company in the South. Proud of her heritage, she had insisted he should be born in Brazil. After the divorce, she returned to Brazil with him. She resorted back to her maiden name and changed Leonardo's as well. It had been a crushing blow to his father.

Leonardo returned to the States at the age of eighteen to go to school and work at his father's firm. As was expected, when Leonardo's father retired, the reins of the company were turned over to him. At thirty-three years old, he was already a seasoned professional. He'd taken Radiant Communications from a regional powerhouse and transformed it into one of the largest firms in the industry.

"First, he has to agree to hire an office manager to help him manage his bills and payments."

Alexa nodded in agreement. No argument there. It was something she herself had told Xander on more than one occasion he needed to do, but he was the stubborn, creative type, more concerned with the culinary arts than managing the business side of things. That explained how he'd gotten into this dire situation.

"Second, I want you to come home and resume our marriage."

Alexa's eyes widened. It was amazing how he managed to state so calmly a sentence that obliterated every ounce of oxygen from the room and shattered what little peace of mind she had left.

She laughed, stunned. "What did you say?" She must not have heard him correctly.

"You heard me," Leonardo replied, his face betraying no emotion. He walked over to the desk in front of which she sat and braced one hip against the edge, crossing his powerful arms and looking down his hawklike nose at her.

Alexa shook her head, nervously running her fingers through her short black curls in a futile attempt to calm the erratic beating of her heart. His unexpected request rattled her more than she wanted to betray. She took a calming breath.

"You're being absurd, Leo," she said, looking up at him. From her seated position, he looked formidable. "I wouldn't move back into the mansion if you were the last man on . . ." Alexa let her voice trail off when she realized what she had been about to say. She forced herself to calm down and think of Xander. She couldn't screw this up. He was depending on her.

Leonardo lifted one thick eyebrow in mock inquiry. “If I were the last man on earth who could get Xander out of the mess he’s in?”

Alexa pressed her lips together before answering, taking time to formulate her words carefully. “We’re getting a divorce.”

“Are we? Did I miss something? I was never served with divorce papers. Should I contact my attorney to find out if he’s forgotten to send me the documents?” His tone was mocking.

“You’re going to divorce me.”

She was certain of it. It was only a matter of time. She had embarrassed Leonardo by leaving him, and there was no doubt in her mind he would eventually eradicate her from his life completely. That’s how he operated. When he was done, there would be no trace of her left in his life.

“I’m not the one who walked out,” he said pointedly. “You did. I never wanted our marriage to end. Have you forgotten?”

Alexa took a deep breath and got to her feet. “I haven’t forgotten, and you know why I left.” She threw all caution to the wind. “It’s not as if you paid me any attention when I was there. You never acted like a man who was married. Between the long hours at work and the women falling all over you everywhere we went, I’m surprised you even noticed I was gone.”

A muscle in his jaw tensed. “Oh, I noticed.”

He spoke quietly, but Alexa heard the menacing undertone as loudly as a drumbeat. She knew she had grated on a still raw nerve.

Alexa took another deep breath. “Leo, this is ridiculous. I’m not moving back in with you.”

She turned around, about to snatch up her purse from the chair, when he said, “So what are you going to tell your brother?” His voice was still quiet.

Gritting her teeth, she flashed him her most withering gaze. “You’ve reached a new low,” she bit out.

Leonardo smiled, completely unmoved by her disparaging remark. He had the upper hand.

“There’s the fire that I’m used to,” he murmured. “That little helpless act you came in here with was not very convincing.”

“It wasn’t an act,” Alexa said, standing tall. “But it seems you prefer for me to come out fighting. I would have thought you’d want me begging for your mercy—groveling, on my hands and knees.”

He tilted his head, as if contemplating what she said. “Hmm . . . just on your knees . . . doing those amazing things you do with your . . . mouth.”

Alexa inhaled sharply, shocked at the suggestion and the images it conjured. Her heart rate picked up as she recalled a time when she had done just that in this very office, unselfishly offering pleasure to the husband she adored. The honeymoon period didn’t last long, though. About one month, to be exact, before business took precedence in his life and her own self-doubt exacerbated the tension between them.

“That was out of line.”

“No, it wasn’t, *querida*.” He smiled, the devastating smile she found irresistible. “You’re my wife, and you do have an amazing mouth.”

Alexa clenched her purse, ignoring the heart-wrenching familiarity of the Portuguese endearment and fighting back the sensuous images that were now emblazoned in her mind’s eye. “Yes, I’m your wife, but we both know that’s in name only. We haven’t lived together as husband and wife for months.”

“That’s easily rectified by a mutually satisfying arrangement,” Leonardo reminded her.

“What is it that you’re suggesting? That we just pick up where we left off and act as if we’re reconciled?”

“That’s exactly what I’m suggesting. It would be perfect—like a business deal where both parties get what they want.”

“You’ve ventured into a new business now? Buying and selling women?”

She saw the anger flash in his eyes before he could conceal it, and she gloated a little that she’d gotten under his skin.

“You should be careful what you say. Remember, you’re the one who sought me out to ask for money.” He brushed imaginary lint from his shirtsleeve. “Maybe we should forget the whole thing.”

He turned away from her in a dismissive fashion, and she panicked.

“No, wait!”

Alexa grasped onto his arm as if it were a lifeline, feeling the heat of his muscles bunch against her palm. He looked down at her fingers, and she released him. He turned slowly, and she knew in that moment the tables turned. He knew how desperate she was, and he would use it to his advantage.

“Yes?” One dark brow lifted toward his hairline.

“I can at least hear you out,” Alexa said. She couldn’t believe what she was saying, even though the words fell from her own lips. “What would you . . . expect?”

“I would expect you to resume all your wifely duties, including sharing my bed.” He didn’t flinch.

She swallowed. “Think about what you’re asking me to do.” Alexa faced him full-on. “I’m not a prostitute.”

“I agree. Once again, you’re my wife. All I’m asking is that you behave like you are.”

“Why are you doing this? It’s been four months.” Alexa was appalled by the near panic in her voice, but she was ill-prepared to conceal it. This was like something out of a nightmare, and she wanted no part of it, but Alexa knew if she didn’t comply with his demand, he would allow her brother to be crushed. If she could just reason with him, then maybe they could agree to an alternative. “There must be another way—another answer.”

“When you think of it, let me know,” Leonardo said, just before he folded his arms across his chest again.

Standing before him, all of a sudden Alexa felt much smaller than her five feet five inches, despite wearing heels that added another four inches to her height. He was just that tall—and broad, too. She felt like an insignificant little pea.

The ball was back in her court, and they both knew she could offer nothing to bargain with. He was in an enviable position, with nothing to lose. She needed him, not the other way around.

“I shouldn’t have come here,” Alexa said, her voice laced with bitterness. “I should’ve known you wouldn’t show me any mercy.”

“I’ve shown you plenty of mercy,” Leonardo said, placing his fingertips on the cool glass surface of the desk. He leaned toward Alexa. “I’ve allowed you to enter my office, when I could have refused to see you and asked my assistant to tell you to leave. Or better yet, I could have had security escort you from the building.”

He looked her up and down, a withering appraisal that silently shredded the sleeveless ruffled top and flowing skirt.

“You want mercy after what you did? After you walked out on me and I didn’t hear from you for months?” He laughed, but there was no humor in the sound. “Now you come back here, asking me for money. What would you do if you were me, Alexa?”

“If it makes you feel any better,” he continued, “you’ll only have to suffer through our marriage for two more months, and then I’ll give you the divorce you’ve obviously been wanting but were afraid to ask for.”

“Two months?” she repeated, frowning. “Why two months?”

“I have my reasons,” he said in a clipped tone.

“What if we get tired of each other before that? What then?”

The grim set of his face betrayed no emotion. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

For several moments, Alexa mulled the idea around in her head. “Two months?” she asked. “That’s it—nothing more?”

“Unless you want more?”

“You wish.” Alexa turned her back on him to think clearly.

Two months. Sixty days. Not an eternity, but it could seem like it if she moved back in with Leonardo and was subjected to whatever his demands were. There was no telling how many ways he had conjured up to punish her for what she did. She knew he would be merciless because she’d seen how he handled business opponents who crossed him.

“Come now, Alexa,” he crooned, directly behind her now.

She could feel his warm breath fan across the nape of her neck. She shut her eyes briefly and wished she didn’t enjoy it, wished she didn’t want more than that featherlight sensation. She shouldn’t. She needed his help, but he

was still the enemy, and her body refused to acknowledge that. Instead, a tingling sensation crept along her inner thighs.

“Even if we were not compatible in other areas of our marriage, we never had problems satisfying each other in bed.”

Alexa’s pulse quickened at the intimate tone of his voice, the way it dropped several octaves and whispered across her skin like a caress.

“That’s beside the point.”

She swallowed past the lump that formed out of nowhere in her throat. She didn’t want to admit how correct he was. They had always been great together. She had always found him irresistible, with his strong jaw, smooth, beautiful bronzed skin, and a perfect, muscular male body that could put any Greek god to shame.

“The choice is yours, Alexa. You came here for a reason, to get money for your brother. I’m willing to give you the money.”

She whirled around, drawing a sharp breath at his close proximity. She made an impulsive step back.

“You’ll do it, but for a price. There’re strings attached.”

“Did you think you could come here and charm me into handing over such a large sum of money—for nothing?”

She hadn’t really thought that, but she’d hoped it was a possibility. She wouldn’t admit it, though. It was ludicrous for her to even have considered coming here, much less asking for money. If she hadn’t been so desperate to help her brother, she would have never needed to step foot in Leonardo’s opulent office again. She decided to try one more time to reason with him.

“Are there any other terms you’d consider? We could pay you back, Leo. It would take time, but—”

“You couldn’t afford the interest,” he interrupted in a brusque tone. His chiseled face became as hard as stone. There was no softness in him at all toward her or her predicament. “Your brother’s a high risk. Besides, that’s not what I want. I told you what I want. Now you need to make a decision.”