The Arrangement

Teetering on the Edge

"Here's your chamomile," I said, placing the steaming mug in front of Zoe.

DUSTIN

"Thanks." She smiled up at me. Zoe was a mess. Her hair was tied up in a loose bun, her large-framed glasses doing nothing to hide the bags underneath her eyes.

She took up the largest table in the cafe, the surface littered with piles of paperwork that towered haphazardly like a

drunken game of Jenga. "Need anything else?" I asked.

I threw a disapproving eye over the table before me.

"Looks like you could use some help."

"Nope, I'm good. Thanks, Dustin."

She sighed, looking at the mountain of work before her.

"Yeah, well, Angela is probably on her way back from the Swiss Alps by now

she went on vacation?" "Well, it's not a *vacation*," Zoe said. "She told me that her husband needed her help to, um, test the facilities."

I pulled up a chair next to Zoe as I processed what she was telling me. The line at the counter was slowly building, and I could see the desperate glances that my new hire was throwing at me from across the room.

"Wait a second," I said, frowning. "You're telling me that Angela left you with all of this work over the weekend while

I spared him a small shrug, my eyes conveying one simple message.

You can handle it. "The facilities at the new resort in the Swiss Alps?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"So she's skiing."

"Um, yeah."

Zoe sighed again.

"Girl, that sounds like a vacation to me."

I placed my hand over hers and gave it an encouraging squeeze. "You always have a choice, Zoe."

Zoe took a sip of her tea, shrugging. "The workload is tough, sure, but Angela pays well. I was able to finally get my little brother that PlayStation he's

always wanted for his birthday!" She smiled, but the moment was quickly gone. "Too bad I can't be there for the party."

"Then what are you doing here, you dummy? Go attend your brother's party!"

I gasped in horror.

She shook her head and offered me a half-hearted smile.

"Sure, Dustin. Thanks."

I got up, swooping in for the rescue.

PENNY

PENNY

PENNY

PENNY

Xavier!

I guess I should help out before I lose another one.

The press caught wind of your arrival

Try to keep your cool, okay?

Angela was working this poor girl to the bone.

"Do you want a carrot cake muffin?" I offered. "It's on the house."

She laughed. This time her smile was genuine.

She returned her focus to the page in front of her, and I shook my head in wonder. I knew that *I* wouldn't have put up with something like this.

I laughed, the irony not lost on me.

PENNY

...there's going to be a whole circus at the airport

Answer me, please

I didn't want to hear her voice. Not until I had to.

I stared out of the window, fuming in my seat.

Who leaked the video?

I imagined it was Henry's neck.

He was *pissed*.

When he hated my guts.

weeks.

Penny?

Nah.

Our private jet was about to land, on final approach to the airport.

We don't want to add any more fuel to the fire.

the damn match.~ I felt the leather of my armrest creak under my hands as I squeezed my anger into the chair.

No, this didn't seem like her style. She was more the type to fuck her way into power.

This had Henry written all over it. When I get my hands on that fucker

I sat across from Xavier on the jet, my stomach a knot of anxiety.

before we renewed our vows for one another, when our relationship was still bound by paper and ink rather than trust and love.

The best thing I could do was just to be close by. I'd be ready to support him when he wanted it.

There had been another controversial video leak, and the New York media was once again in an uproar over Xavier and the future of his company.

each other? Constant struggle and drama?

Ultimately, it didn't matter.

I'd pay any price to be with Xavier.

I nodded, giving his hand a squeeze.

until it was just an unintelligible uproar.

But the reporter wouldn't give up.

He stopped short, his eyes widening.

"I'm so sorry," he said over the roar of the press.

There was a shocked silence, everyone's eyes on Xavier.

Xavier's eyes as he stared down at the bleeding reporter.

I couldn't help but wonder how far Xavier would go to protect me.

"Are you hurt?" Xavier asked, his eyes overflowing with concern.

"No," I lied. My ankle throbbed, but I didn't want him to get even angrier.

I'd never seen Xavier look so ... vicious.

I genuinely feared for that reporter's life.

cried out in pain.

"It's okay—"

the ground.

"Xavier! Why are you so abusive towards your employees?"

"Always."

"Angela!"

I flinched.

Still, it would be nice if we caught a little break

Though I suppose my dear hotheaded husband wasn't exactly helping in that regard.

Our plane came to a stop, and I saw the sea of reporters and paparazzi on the runway.

Nothing I could tell him now would console him.

Sometimes it was best to let him fume.

I adjusted the ice pack against my ankle.

"Don't talk to anyone out there. Marco is nearby with the car." His voice was tight and controlled, a well of fury roiling just beneath the surface. "Stay close to me, okay?"

The doors to the jet opened, and I was immediately blinded by a storm of camera flashes. The screaming and yelling

We walked down the stairs, Xavier's security detail helping us to wade through the sea of reporters.

"Rumor has it that you were involved with that woman in the video. Are you cheating on your wife?"

came shortly afterwards, like thunder after lightning. The noise was a physical wall, voices slamming into one another

Xavier gently pulled me along, glaring at the reporter. *If looks could kill ...*

"Is he abusive at home? What can you say about your husband's actions?"

A roar of questions split the air around me, camera flashes blinded me, and the next few moments were a blur. The security team converged around us, moving us even faster through the agitated crowd.

Before I knew it, I was in the back of the beamer, Xavier at my side, Marco driving us away from the melee.

My heart still pounded, adrenaline roaring through my veins from the mob of the press. I could still see the look in

He leaned over and ripped the camera out from the stunned man's hands, his nose a bloody mess.

"He hurt you first," he growled. "It was an accident," I insisted. "And all of those people saw, too "I'll handle it, Angela. Don't worry. What's important is that you're safe and that we're on our way home."

It felt like an omen ...

She took off her glasses, rolling her shoulders and pinching the bridge of her nose. "Well, she's the boss. I don't have much of a choice, do I?"

"Why not?" I asked. "Well, his birthday is today."

"Thanks, Dustin, but I told Angela I could handle all of this by the time she gets back. Don't worry about me, really. Besides, event planning is kinda my thing." I squinted, looking at her closely. She clearly had a passion for her work. But she looked exhausted. And there was just so much of it

You hired one hell of an assistant, Angela. Don't mess this up. Ben randomly flashed into my mind, the nice barista boy that had suddenly quit on me a few months ago. I looked up at my new barista, drowning under the flood of orders behind the counter. Speaking of horrible bosses ...

PENNY Please?

XAVIER

If Penny had never entered The Hatchback in the first place, none of this would've happened. That place was my haven to let off some steam and vent. And she walked in, the source of my stress, completely ignorant of the place's unspoken rules. *Add fuel to the fire*, I spat in my head. ~You're the one that dumped a liter of gasoline when you walked in. You even lit

The plane touched down, and I could already see the gaggle of reporters lined up by the terminal.

I tossed my phone into my bag, putting it on silent before Penny eventually decided to call me.

My grip on the armrest tightened.

I could hear the leather groaning under his grip from here. I wanted to go and comfort him, but I recognized this type of behavior from Xavier. I hadn't seen it in a while, since

ANGELA

I wouldn't be jogging for a while. But that was the least of our problems.

Trouble seemed to follow the two of us around. We attracted it. Like magnets. Was this the price we had to pay to love

It was nothing too serious, just a bit tender. I could walk fine, but any strenuous activity was ruled out for a few

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach. I hated being in the spotlight. Xavier rose to his feet, offering a hand to steady me.

emboldened by my response, straining through security. "You have a limp, Angela. Did Xavier hurt you? He did, didn't he?" "Um, no ..."

He managed to push past security, his momentum sending him barreling into me. He stepped on my hurt foot, and I

Xavier's fist collided with his face. I heard a sickening *crunch*, blood spraying in the air as the reporter was hurled to

I inadvertently stopped in my tracks, stunned by the reporters' accusations. The cameraman surged forward,

"Don't you ever fucking touch my wife again, you piece of shit." Xavier's voice was deadly. A cold shiver of fear ran down my spine. I actually felt like Xavier would kill him if he touched me again. Instead, Xavier raised the camera above his head, slamming it savagely into the ground, shattered pieces ricocheting into the crowd. That broke the spell.

"Henry, that bastard. He's behind this, I know it." I placed a hand on Xavier's leg. "Xavier, you hurt that man."

I nodded, wanting to believe him. There was a knot of doubt worming its way into the pit of my stomach. I took a deep breath to try and calm my frazzled nerves. It was probably just the stress of all of those reporters. But that feeling of dread wouldn't go away.