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S.S. Sahoo
Sticks and Stones
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The Arrangement

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ANGELA
I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Xavier, buck naked, walking toward me. Was he about to try something? I
instinctively stepped back, scared, but to my surprise, Xavier just walked right past me and into the shower.
I held on to my breasts for dear life. I didn't want him seeing ANYTHING, but I had seen him and
                                                                                                                ...WOW.
That was all I could think.
That was all I could say.
I kept staring, I couldn't stop. I wanted to
No, thank you very much, I didn't want anything! I wanted to run as fast as I could out of the bathroom, but I felt like
my feet were tied to bricks. Like I was frozen.
Xavier stepped into the shower and turned on the water. I watched as it splashed against his body. Against his
                                                                                                                               ...you
know what ...
Jesus, I needed to stop this!
"Um, sorry," I said stupidly. "I'll just
"I left the shower door open for a reason, Angela," Xavier said with a smirk. "You're welcome to join me. We both need
a rinse, right?"
I definitely needed to shower, but NO WAY was I about to enter that shower with him and with
                                                                                                              ...that.
I couldn't believe how forward he was. But then I remembered how many women he'd slept with, and it all made
Remembering those girls, their moans, their eyes open wide in ecstasy, I had a sudden vision of myself being one of
them.
But no.
I would not give Xavier Knight the satisfaction.
I was about to turn away when Xavier turned and I saw his exposed back. The long scar going down it.
The same one he had told me about on the island. I wondered again how exactly he had gotten it. What were the
circumstances?
But as long as Xavier was unwilling to open up, I was unwilling to consider myself attracted to him. Even if my body
begged to differ.
I turned and stormed out of the bathroom, hearing Xavier call after me.
"My sweet wife is such a prude!"
Ugh. I was so embarrassed. Even though I'd left the bathroom, it felt like his image had been burned onto my retinas.
Seeing Xavier naked was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. It got my pulse racing, my skin tingling, my core
heating up to maximum temperatures.
My body was reacting without consulting my mind, and I couldn't help but wonder when it'd happen again.
When would I get to see my husband's naked body again?
"Oh. My. God. ANGELA!"
Dustin nearly dropped my cappuccino to the floor when I told him what had happened between Xavier and me in the
bathroom.
He quickly sat down across from me, sliding over the cap, ignoring the two other customers waiting for him to return
to the bar so they could order.
"Details, girl. I need them. Right now."
I blushed, hardly knowing where to begin. I couldn't stop replaying the scene over and over in my head.
Xavier catching me half naked.
Xavier stripping.
Xavier in the shower, water glistening against his muscular chest, dripping down to his
"Hellooooo?" Dustin said, waving his hand before my eyes. "Stop daydreaming and start talking, missy."
"Uh, well ..." I said, uncertain. "I thought for a second he was coming toward me, but
                                                                                                 ...then he went into the shower."
"And he left the shower door wide open, right? Basically saying: come in. In more ways than one."
I gagged a little at that joke, but Dustin howled with laughter, thinking himself the funniest man in all of New York
City. I shook my head.
"No, I think he was just messing with my head. He doesn't really want—"
"Angela!"
Dustin threw up his hands and sighed, exasperated. "Your life is finally starting to get interesting! Why are you trying
to tone it down when it's so exciting?"
"I'm just being realistic, Dustin," I said defensively. "He's not into me. He sleeps with whoever he wants. I'm just the
girl he has to live with."
"And who he strips in front of."
"I guess ..."
Dustin smiled mischievously. "So?"
I frowned, confused. "What?"
"Did you see it?"
I looked away, feeling the color rise to my cheeks. "Dustin," I said under my breath, "please, we're in public."
"You totally did! You saw it! How big was it? Was it huge? No, it was tiny, wasn't it? That would explain his obsession
with all those massive Knight hotels. Overcompensating. Am I right?"
"NO!"
I shouted without even meaning to. I put a hand to my mouth, covering it, surprised with myself. The two customers,
now tapping their feet impatiently, gave me curious glances.
Dustin's grin grew even wider. "So it's not small. I see
In truth, seeing Xavier's ...ahem ...was certainly memorable, but it was not what I found myself fixating on. All I could
think about was that scar on his back.
To me, it was a reminder of how close we had become on the island. How he had finally opened up about the car
accident, only to shut me out again.
I so wanted to know the whole story, but how was I ever supposed to ask him?
"Please, Dustin," I said, trying to change the subject. "This is already so weird for me. Do you have to make it even
weirder?"
"Sorry, Angie," he said with a shrug. "Can't help myself. I'm a penniless artist in need of inspiration. What can I say?"
I laughed and rolled my eyes. "Hardly penniless lately from what I hear."
"It's true," he said with a gracious nod. "I'm doing way better, thanks to all your help. With the gallery and everything.
But I'm also sort of a big spender, so
"That's why you still work here."
"Yup."
"How have they not fired you yet?"
"I have NO idea. Hold that thought."
Dustin finally stood up and approached the customers, now looking positively furious at how long they'd had to wait.
Dustin didn't seem to mind in the slightest. He just flashed a smile and took their orders.
I laughed to myself. There was nobody like Dustin in the whole wide world. Sure, I could talk to Em about most stuff,
but when it came to anything sex-related, Dustin was always my first stop.
Because he had a lot of it and liked to talk about it, and somehow, even as a gay man, he knew way more about female
bodies than I did.
Also, it wasn't like I could talk to Em about this stuff when she was dating my brother. I had no interest in hearing
about their sex life or risking opening the door to that conversation.
Ew. Just thinking about it made me want to throw up.
It was all super confusing, but when it came to talking with Dustin, I wasn't complaining. As a twenty-three-year-old
virgin, I needed all the insight I could get.
I was about to take a sip of my cappuccino—quickly getting cold—when I felt my phone buzz in my purse. What now?
I asked myself, sighing.
  Unknown Number
  Hello beautiful lady
  Unknown Number
  Did you miss me?
                                                                                                                             Angela
                                                                                                                             ????
                                                                                                                      Angela
                                                                                                                      Who is this?
  Unknown Number
  Oh Angela ...
  Unknown Number
  Dont act like you dont know
                                                                                                                             Angela
                                                                                                                             Um.
                                                                                                           Angela
                                                                                                           This is kinda weird.
                                                                                                       Angela
                                                                                                       Please leave me alone.
  Unknown Number
  (3)
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## I dont think so **Unknown Number** We both know you miss me

**Unknown Number** 

**Unknown Number** 

**Unknown Number** 

So cute when you resist

Unknown Number

**Unknown Number** 

**Unknown Number** 

No one says no to me ...

You know the truth

Please, Angela

Angela

Stop.

Angela

Angela

This isn't funny.

I'll go to the police.

Angela

I'M SERIOUS.

You NEED me

**Unknown Number** 

**Unknown Number** 

Oh no no

## I threw my phone aside as if it were aflame. I skidded back in my chair. I couldn't breathe. My hands were shaking. My teeth, chattering. My toes, numb. I was scared out of my mind. It couldn't be *him*, could it?

I whipped my head around, eyes bulging, certain I was about to see him materialize. But it was just Dustin.

I shook my head. I could barely utter his name aloud. Was it like that childhood game Bloody Mary, say the name into

Dustin's face went pale. I had told him all about my old boss, how he'd made it his life's mission to destroy me, to make

I nodded, leaning forward to unlock it for him so he could read the messages. But to my surprise, Dustin frowned.

"Are you sure it's him? He's in jail, right? That means he would need to use the prison's messaging system. This

My eyes widened. *Prison messaging system?* How did Dustin know anything about that? He gave me a sheepish smile.

"But it has to be him, Dustin," I said, shaking my head. "There's nobody else who wants to hurt me the way he does.

Dustin nodded but shrugged. "Even if it is him, Angie, I can tell you this much. They're just words. He's behind bars.

I was surprised by how serious Dustin was becoming now. He'd never really opened up to me about his past before. So

Dustin tapped my phone reassuringly. "This is the same. Empty talk. You're going to be A-okay, my friend."

"Don't mention it. Now, you better let go. There are more customers who look like they want to kill me."

I felt so comforted by Dustin, so nurtured, that I couldn't help myself. I threw my arms around his neck and hugged

I laughed and let him go, watching as he walked over to take more orders, grateful beyond words that someone was

It felt like a phrase I could apply to almost any situation. If Em was telling me *way* too intimate details about her and

"Angie?"

He looked worried.

"Who? You mean Xavier?"

"I think it's ...Mr. Lemor."

"Angie, what's the matter? You look as if you've seen a ghost."

the mirror three times and he'd pop up and grab me?

sure I was never hired by any company again.

All because I'd had the audacity to reject his advances.

"Can I take a look?" Dustin asked, grabbing my phone.

Especially after what I did. How I got him sent to jail."

"Don't waste time imagining the worst-case scenarios. Trust me."

this was a new shade of my usually happy-go-lucky friend.

He can't touch you in real life. You're safe."

promises, they're just that. Empty talk."

there to calm me down when I was scared.

I was being crazy, but I didn't know how else to be right now.

"Angie, talk to me!" Dustin said, sitting down across from me, grabbing my hands.

"I...I..." I stuttered, unable to speak coherently. "He texted me, Dustin."

## After Brad had ensnared him in that honey-pot trap a few months ago, I thought I'd never have to hear or think his name ever again. He was in jail now! How could he be texting me?

number is unlisted."

"But what if—"

him tight.

my brother?

Just words.

Just words.

If Xavier was yelling at me?

Leaving? To where?

Just words. Just words.

"Pack your bags. We're leaving for the weekend."

"Thanks, Dustin."

"Since I was a kid, my uncle has always reached out and made these promises from jail. Saying he's getting out soon. Saying he's going to take me to Disneyland. Then, when I got older and came out, to Milan for fashion week." I smiled. "He sounds sweet." "He is," Dustin said, smiling sadly. "But he's also a liar, Angie. He's never getting out of prison. All his messages, all his

"I have a weird uncle I've been visiting in prison for years. You learn these things."

\*\*\* I ran back home, feeling caffeinated, rejuvenated, and ready to take on the world, Dustin's reassurances playing on repeat in my head.

They're just words, I repeated to myself. They can't hurt you. You're safe.

If the doctor was describing even more things that could go wrong with my dad?

So when the elevator doors opened, I felt prepared for whatever his latest attack or weird move might be. Imagine my surprise when I saw him rolling a suitcase toward me. Oh my God. Is he ...moving out? "You're finally here," Xavier said. "Hurry up and get showered." "Wait," I asked, confused. "What's going on?"

Suddenly, I realized there was only one problem with Dustin's mantra. *Just words* didn't help when action was required. "Where are we going?" I asked Xavier as he passed me by, heading into the elevator. He considered me and half smiled, half shrugged. "Spoil the surprise? Where's the fun in that? Now come on, let's get out of here!"