

The Arrangement
S.S. Sahoo

Invasion

ANGELA

Dustin
Hey booo 🍷

Dustin
I gotta surprise for youuuuuu

Dustin
Your MASTERPIECE is almost ready 🎨🖌️👉

Angela
I am so excited!

Dustin
You can swing by my studio today if you want

Dustin
I am DYING for you to see it

Angela
I can pop in this afternoon, if that's okay?

Dustin
sure thing

Dustin
later babe 🗑️

Xavier dropped me off outside Dustin's studio and kissed me goodbye. He was heading home to try and get some more work done.

This new fragile *something* was growing stronger between us. Since our conversation in Central Park a week ago, when he had opened up to me, we had found comfort in each other.

I told him what had happened to me in France, though I didn't tell him that it was someone he knew. Still, I felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders when I told Xavier my story.

"Hello?" I called, pulling open the sliding door to Dustin's studio. In reality, it was a cramped loft in a refurbished church in Brooklyn.

I'd been here only once before, around the time of his show. As I stepped into the room, the paint-flecked floor, huge windows, and the damp smell of drying brush calmed me just as they had the first time.

"Perfect timing!" Dustin said, stepping out from behind an easel. He was barefoot and wearing a grungy apron. "Take a seat."

Careful not to jostle the canvases stacked along the walls, I made my way to the couch and plopped onto the full cushions, sending dust motes scattering through the afternoon sunbeams.

"Tell me about your week. I just need one second to finish this up," Dustin muttered, frowning at the painting in front of him.

"It was ...great," I told him, knowing I was smiling too big.

"Great?"

"We kissed."

"About time! If you waited any longer, I was going to go for it. What was it like? Is he good with his tongue? I bet he's a biter," Dustin rambled excitedly, fluttering from thought to thought.

"I don't know if I should say," I admitted, making Dustin roll his eyes.

"Girl, please. You know I won't say anything. No one would believe me anyway. Besides, if I was gonna tell that lady on Fox anything, I'd wait for something better than a plain old kiss. No offense."

"None taken."

Dustin waved me over. "Forget that for now and come check out this."

Sending more dust flying as I stood, I stepped around discarded tubes of paint and brushes to his side. "Oh wow."

I couldn't help the small gasp as I took in the painting before me. The canvas was as tall as I was, swirling with murky grays and blues, flecked with gold and red. In the center, there were two figures.

The first was an angel with long gold hair that fell past down-feathered wings. She looked serene, regal, draped in her glittering ivory gown.

She held out her hand toward the second figure—a dark knight. With his head bowed, he knelt at the angel's feet, his blood-stained shield and sword discarded behind him.

"It's beautiful," I breathed, unable to find any other words.

"Right?" Dustin gushed. "I'm so happy you like it. You --still --haven't given me a tour of your whole flat, so I'm not sure where you'll put it. I figure there has to be some place in that penthouse of yours though."

"I know just the place," I promised. "Thank you so much, Dustin, really."

"Don't thank me yet. I have to keep it just a touch longer. I'll have it delivered to your house ASAP though."

After leaving Dustin's studio, I swung by Whole Foods and grabbed the ingredients I needed for dinner.

I wanted to make a pot pie, using the recipe my mother taught me when I was little. Today felt like it needed that little something special.

I picked up some extra snacks, too, so some of Em's favorites would be stocked when she came over for more wedding planning.

I would have to invite Dustin next time too, and then he could see his painting hanging in the apartment.

I hopped in a cab with my grocery bags, so Marco didn't have to drive across the city, and headed home.

Finally, things felt easy, right. I found, for maybe the first time ever, that I was excited to be heading back to our apartment. The feeling was foreign to me after months of dreading the huge white space, and I wasn't sure what to do with it. It had to be too good to be true.

I practically skipped through the lobby to the elevator when I was dropped off.

Xavier was there. I could kiss him hello.

As the elevator slowed to a stop at the top floor, I thought I heard the muffled sounds of men laughing and frowned.

Xavier had said he had work to do, so why did it sound like there was a party going on?

The doors pinged open, and I stepped out into the living space as another round of laughter erupted.

The air was thick with smoke, and the stringent smell of booze made my still-sensitive stomach turn over.

"Xavier?"

No answer.

I followed the sounds into the sitting room to find five men, in equally posh clothes, lounging on the sofa and chairs.

"Angela," Xavier smiled, hopping up from the chaise longue.

He took the shopping bags from me, then threw his arm over my shoulders. "Gentlemen, for those who haven't met her yet, this devastatingly beautiful creature is my wife!"

The men whooped and cheered as Xavier gave me a sloppy kiss.

"I'm sorry for the surprise, Angela," Xavier said, just to me. "I pushed my meeting with these guys yesterday so I could spend the weekend with you. I figured the least I could do was invite them over so we could do business over a proper drink."

"No problem," I told him. "Should I make some snacks?"

"That would be wonderful!"

Xavier kissed my cheek again and then rejoined the men.

I was about to turn for the kitchen when my blood ran cold.

Because there, sitting on the last seat of the sofa, whiskey in hand, was Jacques.

And he was staring right at me.

My hands shook too much to chop veggies for crudités. Instead, I filled bowls with chips and laid out crackers and cheese on plates. Every motion felt stiff and automatic, like I had turned into a 1950s robot wife.

Jacques is here. Jacques is here. Jacques is here.

The thought circled in time with my heartbeat.

My attacker was in my living room.

Why hadn't I told Xavier who my attacker was? It had seemed like the right decision at the time, but now *my attacker* was in *my living room*.

Trying to pull the lid off a container of dip, I hissed when I sliced my finger open along the seal. Blood beaded to the surface of the fresh wound. I stuck the finger in my mouth and sucked on the skin.

"Need any help with this?"

I jumped, heart hammering, and backed into the fridge.

Xavier. It's just Xavier.

His brow furrowed, and he took a step closer. "Everything okay?"

This is it ...now is my chance.

Only, the words wouldn't form. It was too crazy. Was that really Jacques? How was he here? How well did they know each other?

I found myself nodding. "Y-yes, of course. You can ...you can take the chips out. I'll come behind you with the rest."

Xavier reached for the full bowls. "You'll sit with us? I'll pour you a glass of wine."

I waited until he'd returned to the group, then crept to the doorway. Being as still as possible, invisible, I tried to listen.

"My old lady would kill me if I went away for longer than a week," said one of the men. I think I'd heard someone call him Carlos.

"That's because you gotta train them right," replied someone else. "I just send mine to the spa when I need some alone time."

"Fuck off, Jim," Carlos answered through a mouthful of chips. "Your wife was at the Praxel Inc. boys weekend last year."

"There was a spa at the resort, wasn't there?"

They broke out laughing again.

"I think Jacques is the one who's got it all worked out," Paul quipped. "Leaves his lady here while he runs around Europe. How does that work?"

"That's not exactly right, though. Penny dumped his ass." Carlos sniggered

"Did I hit a nerve?" he taunted Jacques. "Come on buddy, we're just messing with you."

After a moment of silence, Jacques said softly, "Penny's just playing hard to get. Nobody says *no* to me."

XAVIER

I took a sip of shiraz, letting the notes of toffee soak in.

As expected, the boys' visit had shifted from business to pleasure. In the circles we ran in, it was sometimes hard to distinguish between the two.

Normally, I'd be right there with them, trading war stories. Tonight, for some reason, their tales of conquest didn't sound so funny.

I'd been hoping that Angela would join us and that having her in the room would make them change the topic, but she must still be in the kitchen.

Something had felt *wrong*, but she'd insisted she was fine.

"Come on," Jim groaned, bringing me back to the present. "What's your secret, Jacques? Sure, Penny dumped you, but I saw the way she was hanging on your arm, Jacques. That girl wants you inside her."

"I'm a handsome Latin lover," Carlos piped in, "and I'd still get my balls ripped off if I didn't see my girl for a month."

Jacques took a sip of his scotch and glanced up at me for a brief moment before turning to Carlos.

"We're both single. I'm sure she sees other men, and I see other women. It just takes a little open-mindedness."

I swallowed hard. Does he know I slept with Penny?

If he did, it didn't sound like he cared.

My hand tightened around my glass. The poor fucking girl deserved better than that.

Wait.

Where the fuck did that come from? Since when did I care about such trivial things like fucking around?

Jim laughed. "Yeah, they all tell you they are open-minded until they find out you've had a little something on the side. Then they go nuts! I bet that's how Jacques got that scar on his neck. Penny fucking walked in on him mounting some whore and tackled him from behind."

I ground my teeth together, trying not to say something I'd regret. Normally, I'd laugh at a comment like that, but something in Jim's tone made me bristle.

"Almost right," Jacques swirled the amber liquor in his glass. "I got this from a woman in Paris."

He quirked his lip, eyes flashing in my direction again. "It was at a ball. A woman ...she was little and blonde with large breasts. A ...how do you say? Cocktease. The whole night. She wanted me. What could I do?"

I clenched my jaw.

Jacques continued. "We went to a private room. She ripped my clothes off. Asked me to say she was beautiful."

"Then?" Carlos asked.

"I couldn't lie," Jacques shrugged. "I told her it was not true. So she threw her shoe at me."

"You're shitting us," Paul said. "Things like that don't happen in real life."

The guys burst out laughing.

I heard Angela run down the hall and slam the bathroom door.

"To the weaker sex," Paul raised his glass.

All of a sudden, I wanted them all gone.

Something was definitely wrong with Angela. She'd been through hell these last few months, largely at my hands, and I'd never seen her react like that.

I wanted to go to her, help her.

I just had to get these fuckers out of my house first.

"All right, boys. Party's over," I declared and gulped the last of the wine.

My colleagues looked at me, bewildered.

"You heard me. I have shit to do."

They all grumbled but got to their feet, too buzzed to give a shit about my manners.

I tossed in a "good to see you" as they pulled on their jackets, just to save face.

Jacques stopped in front of the elevator, letting the door close with the rest of the men inside. "I do hope your wife is okay."

I pressed the button to call the elevator. Pressed it again. "Me too."

"Please give her my regards. I hope I have the chance to see her again soon."

"We can call and set something up," *Where the hell is the elevator?*

I didn't hear his reply or the words he spoke after that. I was too focused on getting to Angela.

Finally, the elevator doors slid open again. Jacques smiled and patted my arm as he stepped inside. "If not, I will cherish the memory of last year's gala"

The second he disappeared, I turned on my heel, heading for the bedrooms. I was in front of Angela's door, hand on the doorknob, when Jacques's words sank in.

Last year's gala?

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

I hurried to Angela's room, where I found her shaking under her blanket.

"I'll never get away from him," she wept.

I ran my hand softly across her forehead. "Who, my angel? Please, let me help you. What is the matter? Who are you afraid of? No one will ever hurt you again while I am breathing."

She sat up and clung to me fiercely, I rubbed her back as she broke down into sobs.

I held her until her tears ran dry, and then she whispered his name into my ear.