The Arrangement S.S. Sahoo

The Aftermath

Angela

Angela

Are we still on for today?

Good! I need some advice.

Dustin

Dustin

Yes, ma'am!

Dustin

Dustin You've got my attention!

Do I get a clue?

Dustin

Oh, c'mon. It can't be that bad.

No, I don't think I do

Dustin oh

ОННННН

Dustin

It wasn't the only canvas either. The walls were now covered in his paintings. I was supposed to be meeting him and Em for our weekly catch-up, but it looked like Dustin had his hands full already. "Wow," I said, stopping in the middle of the small space.

"You like?" Dustin called.

"What boss?" Dustin laughed. He finished hanging the painting in his hands and began descending the ladder. "I bought the place." "What?"

"I love," I replied, eyes running over the brightly colored works of art. "Is your boss okay with this?"

appreciate art without the pretension of a gallery. I figured this was the perfect compromise."

Dustin held his arms out. "You heard me. I needed somewhere where I could show my work. Somewhere people could

"Thanks, I—" A bang from the back room cut him off. Dustin rolled his eyes and then shouted, "Ben!" A lanky teenage boy in an apron tumbled into the cafe.

I smiled and finished crossing the cafe to wrap my friend in a hug. "Congrats!"

"Don't forget it." Dustin pointed to the espresso machine. "Now, make us two lattes." Dustin took a seat at our regular table, his paintings forgotten for now. I sat across from him, still trying to take everything in.

"You buy it.' I know," Ben finished.

"What was that?" Dustin asked, hands on his hips.

"I, uh, I knocked over a stack of coffee filters," Ben murmured.

The boy's eyes flicked to me for a second and then to the floor.

"Well, remember what I said," Dustin said. "If you break it

Dustin's face fell. "Well, if you put it like that...You're not mad, are you?" Was I mad? Mad that my friend was finally achieving his dreams of being a successful artist? I couldn't be, even if he was profiting

My stomach turned. "You made money from my kidnapping?"

from being my friend, from the fallout of a terrible night.

I blushed as the memory of last night burst forward. "I, uh—"

I was saved by the chime of the bell, signaling someone else's arrival.

Dustin waved him away.

Em?"

in person again.

and lust?

Em gasped. "Did you and Xavier

Em patted my arm. "Keep going."

was...you know."

"What?" Em asked.

"Left?" said Em.

"Xavier said he was going to shower. So

I forced the word out. "Masturbating."

I shook my head. "No! No, I left."

Dustin frowned. "Like, ran away?"

"If he's doing *that*, what does he need me for?"

frustrated he's getting. I'm being a terrible wife."

When would he be getting home?

What would he want for dinner?

What movie would we watch together?

Angela had caught me masturbating.

There was no other way to spin it.

Only reality could have trumped my imagination.

her hand around my cock.

from the room.

I wasn't like her.

What did she expect?

I wasn't a goddamned monk.

I needed sex. I needed to come.

He'd let himself into my office.

Just what I needed.

raised an eyebrow.

"And?"

"Xavier!" Dad shouted suddenly, making me jump.

I jumped upright, running a hand through my hair.

I glared at him. "Aren't you supposed to be retired?"

"Mmm hmm," I replied, flipping open my laptop.

"So was that singer. Some lungs on that one."

"I'm in the middle of something, Dad."

"Was just clearing out my office."

I could at least pretend to be busy.

"Did you help him finish?" Dustin said, not missing a beat.

I shook my head. "Not quite."

"I don't mean to be rude, but how did you afford to buy this place?" I wondered.

of throwing the little money he did have around. I just didn't want to see him in any trouble.

It wasn't that I wasn't happy for my friend. I knew Dustin didn't make much from his art, though, and he had a history

"Well," he began. "It all started a few weeks ago, around the time you were taken by that terrible French man. I guess

Sometimes I could have sworn he was more invested in my and Xavier's lack of a sexual relationship than I was.

Em and Lucas had left on their honeymoon a couple weeks after I'd been released from the hospital. We'd texted a few

times since they'd left, and I'd seen photos of their trip to Greece on Instagram, but there was nothing like seeing her

a few people saw the painting that he stole on the news. I've been selling pieces pretty steadily since then."

Dustin and I both looked to the door then jumped to our feet to welcome the guest. "Em," I cried, pulling my friend into a hug. "It's so good to see you!"

"Hey, girl! Sit, sit," Dustin said. Then louder: "BEN! CAPPUCCINO, NOW!"

"Magical," Em said, eyes glassy. "You guys just wait. You'll see what I mean, one day."

Em pulled a chair over to the table and joined our little circle.

"How is everything?" I asked, reaching for my coffee.

I felt a pang of hurt in my chest. Just because Xavier and I hadn't married for love didn't mean we couldn't share the same connection as any other couple, did it? Maybe it did.

She gave me an apologetic glance like I wouldn't have a clue what she was talking about. Like I would never know.

As he scuttled away, I found myself defensive. "Well, I wanted to. I was going to do. See, we arrived home from Brad's retirement party and started kissing in the kitchen." "That's hot," Dustin interjected, making me blush.

Ben arrived then, delivering Em's drink, giving me a minute longer to collect my words.

"You're gonna have to decipher that a bit for us, Angie," Dustin said. "How can you 'not quite' do it?"

"Well," Dustin said, "Angela was just about to share her own exciting news."

I nodded, sure I was the color of a tomato by now. "Oh, Angela." Dustin threw his hands up. "That was a perfect in!" "How so?" I murmured. Walking in on Xavier hadn't seemed like any sort of in. It had seemed more like a "get out."

Dustin and Em exchanged looks before Em took my hand. "It's clear that Xavier wants more, Angie. What's holding

She was right. I was thinking about this too much. It had been playing on repeat in my mind for weeks. Every thought

Xavier

"Fuck that noise," Dustin said. "You'll have sex when you are good and ready. If Xavier tells you any different, he's a pig. Don't let anyone force you into anything, not even Em and me." Em nodded. "You're thinking about this too much, Angie. You just need something to take your mind off things."

I'd had since returning from the hospital revolved around Xavier.

I was left to my own devices again, left with only Xavier to worry about. Surely, that couldn't be healthy. Suddenly, an idea hit me. "Guys, I think I know how to fix this."

If not by her hand, then mine. I was going to have to speak to her, to tell her that I was a man. A man with needs.

I'd touched myself for women before, jacked off for them, on them. Normally it was a fucking turn-on.

This time had been different though...probably because of the horror that had crossed Angela's face before she'd run

"So, that party was something, huh?" Dad continued. "It was," I agreed.

Dad looked between Ron and me. "Son, I leave you in good hands."

I balked. "You're expecting me to take him on board?"

need to have a fresh start. You have to understand that."

"Very well," Dad said. "Come on, Ron. I'll buy you lunch."

He stepped toward the door, but Ron seemed to be frozen beside my desk. "I can't believe it."

"Ron has served me well for ten years," Dad said, clapping his assistant on the back.

Ron smiled and had the decency to look at least a little embarrassed. "It's been an honor, sir."

"He's not a building or a contract, Dad. He's a person. Your person at that. I won't have it." Dad frowned. "What are you saying?"

"Of course," Dad said.

I blinked. "What?"

He couldn't possibly expect ...

I sighed. "I can give Henry a call. He might know about an open position. I'm sure there is another executive out there who will take you." "But I've dedicated my whole life to Knight Enterprises for ten years," Ron said, his brow furrowing.

excuse me, I have a call in two minutes."

"Ron has been a loyal—"

Right on time. With a groan, I picked it up. It wasn't an incoming call though. Instead, a message from Angela lit up my screen.

My day couldn't possibly get any worse.

My phone buzzed beside my head.

Angela

We need to talk.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I can tell how much he wants to have sex. It just feels so important, though. I don't want to mess it up." things." I wrinkled my nose at my friend's advice. I didn't want to think about her and my brother discussing those types of things, let alone doing them. She was right though. Maybe I was looking at things all wrong. Maybe I had overreacted a little.

you back?"

How much would I miss him when he traveled for work? With my dad feeling better, and Xavier and me on good terms, there was little else to occupy my thoughts. The only thing that had kept me from going crazy the past few weeks was planning Brad's party. Now that it was over,

I grimaced, lowering my head to my desk. It was just my fucking luck. I had women lining up for the chance to fuck me, and I ended up with the only woman who couldn't stand the sight of my cock.

He plopped down in the chair on the other side of my desk, looked around my empty office, at my empty desk, and

I glanced up over the top of my computer screen. "Penny?" "Is that her name?" Dad said, suddenly very interested in straightening the file folders on the corner of my desk. Luckily, Ron chose that moment to interrupt us. "Everything is ready to go, sir," he told my father. "The car is loaded." "Excellent!" Dad jumped to his feet and waved Ron over. "Then there is only one thing left to do."

He sure wasn't making this easy. I let out a breath and turned to Ron. "You're fired." The blood drained from the poor bastard's face. "W-what?" he stuttered as Dad began, "Xavier—" "No," I interjected. "It's my company now, Dad. I can't feel like you're looking over my shoulder twenty-four-seven. I

Dad sighed and turned around. "We'll find you a job somewhere else," he promised Ron, throwing his arm over his shoulders and guiding him toward the door. "Maybe there is even a space open in another department." As soon as the pair were out of my office, I let my head drop back down onto my desktop.

Angela Angela I caught Xavier, you know

> Angela **6** 8

Angela

Angela

Yeah I'll be there in 30 mins

When I stepped into the cafe, I found Dustin halfway up a ladder along the far wall, a huge canvas in his hands.

"N-No, I'm happy for you," I managed to tell him as Ben arrived with our lattes. He lingered a beat too long, until "So, tell me *exactly* what happened." Dustin leaned forward, always eager for the latest gossip. "Or should we wait for

Maybe there would always be a sort of disconnect between us and we'd be held together only by forced dependency

...so I followed him. When I stepped into the bathroom to join him, he

"Well, maybe it's time you talk to Xavier about how you feel. You can't expect to have good sex if you don't talk about "I feel terrible." Tears brimmed in my eyes. "Like I am disappointing him. The longer I make him wait, the more

I'd dreamed of her walking into that bathroom for weeks. Fantasized about her stepping into the shower, wrapping

"And I wanted to pop in and say hello to my son." He smiled a Cheshire-Cat smile.

"I'm sure Ron is a great guy, but he's your guy. My decision is final." I looked between the two of them. "Now, if you'll