

The Arrangement
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Family Ties

ANGELA

Dustin's coffee shop was buzzing when I arrived. He practically screamed when he saw me. All the hipster customers turned to stare.

While I blushed, he gushed, and he led me to my favorite table, marked with a handmade "RESERVED" sign.

"Give me ten minutes, and then I'm all yours."

I smiled as I watched him retreat behind the counter, his apron tied behind his back.

I decided to take the opportunity to call Rupert from the party in LA. Holding his business card in my hands, I tried to quell my nerves while the phone rang.

"Rupert Hall!" a friendly voice greeted.

"Oh, Rupert! Hi. This is Angela. From the Hollywood Knight party."

"Angela, I'm so glad you called. Are you still interested in helping with my opening?"

"I am! I was wondering if you could give me some details."

"Fantastic. Do you have a pen? I'll give you the specs."

I opened my little notebook and began to take notes.

"Okay, the event is next Friday, so we'll have a little over a week to plan it. I'd love to have a jazz quartet like you had in LA. We'll need a caterer and a bartender. Marlena wants us to serve sliders, but I'm a vegan ..."

I was scribbling as fast as I could, trying to get down the details that kept coming and coming.

"And I want prints of Marlena's paintings, poster and postcard size, that we can sell night-of ... and you'll need to find art handlers to install the exhibition. The canvases are being flown from Berlin so they'll need to be restretched ..."

Rupert went on and on, barely describing one complex task before blasting off to the next.

I looked up to see Dustin sitting across from me, his eyes wide as if to say, *What the fuck~ is more important than ~me~ right now?~*

"Rupert, I—"

"I know, darling. We had really better meet. If you're up for the job, that is. Oh, and our budget is quite generous — \$80,000 — and we'll take good care of you on top. What do you say?"

"I'll take it!" I said to Rupert as I smiled at Dustin.

"Fantastic," Rupert sighed. "We'll be in touch, darling. Enjoy the day."

I hung up the call, and I couldn't help but squeal in delight. After googling Rupert's name, I found out that he was a hugely successful gallerist, and his NYC debut was much anticipated.

I could hardly wait to be part of it.

"So ... who was that?" Dustin asked, pushing a lavender latte across the table to me. The flower in the foam was perfect.

"Thanks, Dustin. You're improving!"

"Oh, no. The cute new barista I hired made that." He rested his chin on his hands. "So ... I need to hear *everything*. But first, tell me who was on the phone."

I leaned into my friend, mocking his gossipy body language.

"That was Rupert Hall, a gallerist opening a new space in SoHo." I flicked my hair behind my shoulder. "And ~I~ am planning the event."

Dustin sighed out of his nose.

"You lucky bitch! You totally deserve it, though. Can I come?!"

"Of course! You have to come," I said, sipping my latte. "I'm actually kind of nervous. It's going to be a *crazy* amount of work, and that's only what I heard today ..."

Dustin looked at me pensively, twirling the rings on his fingers.

"I know," he said with a grin. "Hire an assistant! How cute would *that* be?"

I couldn't help but smile back. *Me*, have an assistant? But then again, why not? Before, I felt like I was playing pretend as an event planner. But now, I was the real deal.

"You know, Dustin, I like the way you think."

My friend shrugged and pretended to flick his hair like I had. Rolling my eyes, I put my latte back on its saucer.

"Okay, now I *have* to tell you about Bali ..."

XAVIER

I turned the key in the lock and opened the door to the penthouse. I was so thankful to see my angel on the couch in the sitting room. With a groan, I immediately belly flopped onto the couch opposite her.

"Welcome home, baby!" she sang, as if I didn't look and sound like death.

I looked to my side to find her busy on her laptop. She wasn't even looking at me!

"What are you doing?" I grumbled.

She closed the computer and smiled.

"I just posted an ad. I'm planning the art opening gig that Rupert and Marlena mentioned in LA, and I'm going to hire an assistant!"

Her excitement was almost enough to pull me from my depressed stupor. But not *quite* enough.

"Long day at work?" she asked, her brow furrowing. She sat beside me and leaned down to kiss my neck.

Just being close to her made my body melt into the soft leather couch even deeper.

I sighed.

"The longest day ever."

"Tell me about it."

I turned over so I was lying on my back. She unbuttoned my shirt and ran her hands over my chest. The gesture soothed me, and I looked up into her loving eyes.

"It was so bad, Angela. You won't believe it." Just talking to her made me feel like I dropped a heavy weight from my shoulders. She didn't say anything as she waited for me to continue.

"So, not only is Penny a shareholder, she's working in the office! And not *just* in the office, she took over ~Dad's~ office! She's on the goddamned ~Board of Executives~ and she doesn't know ~shit~ about business."

I covered my eyes with my hand and sighed again. I hadn't even told her the worst part yet.

"Doesn't Penny have a business degree?" Angela asked. "I remember Brad kept bragging to me that she'd graduated summa cum laude."

"Sure, she's smart, but that doesn't mean she can just *jump right to the top!*" I groaned. "It's like my dad didn't trust me enough to take care of the business on my own."

"Oh, Xavier. I'm sure that was so hard for you ..." That was the understatement of the century. "So if she's on the board, she has a lot of power?"

"She gets a vote. Just like I get a vote."

I watched Angela scramble for a positive response.

"Well ... you're a good leader, baby. And I think she's always liked you. Maybe you gained a new ally."

"It gets worse, Angela," I said, pushing up on my arms so I was seated on the couch, leaning against the armrest.

Her brow furrowed deeper as she became even more concerned.

"She's also my stepmother," I sighed. I felt tears rise to my eyes, but I didn't break her gaze.

"What do you mean?" Angela whispered.

"Dad married her, Angela. They eloped. She's a Knight. And, technically, she's my stepmother."

I shook my head. As if it wasn't enough for my dad to date my old flame, he had to *marry* her, too.

Since my father died, I had become all too familiar with feelings of loss and sadness. But now, I was confused and angry, and the conflicting emotions made my heart feel like a chew toy shared by a pack of Rottweilers.

Angela placed her hands on my face, cradling my head.

I stared into her eyes and tried to smile. She winced, and I knew my expression was mangled at best.

"That's *crazy*," she said, finally.

I had expected her to try and rationalize the situation, to say that my dad had his reasons, that he deserved to be happy, that he wanted what was best for us.

I knew all that was true, but it wasn't what I needed to hear.

I needed someone to tell me that I wasn't crazy. I needed to hear that the whole world was crazy, and I was stuck in the middle. And I didn't know until she gave it to me.

"I love you," I sighed, pulling her perfect face close to mine so I could kiss her.

ANGELA

My heart swelled in my chest as I kissed Xavier. I wished I could take away all of his pain.

"I love *you* Xavier," I said.

He looked like a kicked puppy. All I could do was scratch him behind the ears, but I wanted to make it all better.

"And everything here," I went on, gesturing to our apartment, and then pulling him closer to me, "is good. It's under control. And it's all up to us."

He smiled.

"How do you always know what to say?"

"I don't!" I countered, leaning in to kiss him.

"You *do*. You make me remember what's important. And this, you and me, is all that matters." Xavier kissed my neck before looking at me intently. I held my breath, wondering what he would say.

"You're my family now," he went on. "You're all I have. It's just us and the family we make together."

He wrapped his arm around my waist.

"That's what I want more than anything," he whispered. "To have a family with you."

Little fireworks went off in my heart as I stared at the man before me.

The road that led us here was rocky and winding. It had been so rough that at times I had wanted nothing more than to get out of the car.

But now, I was so thankful I had held on. Only because we traveled through such darkness were we ready to drive into the light ...

The warmth in my heart radiated out, into my hands that undid the rest of the buttons on Xavier's shirt.

I reached beneath the fabric, feeling his skin and the taut muscles of his abdomen.

Our kisses became deeper, more desperate. He stood up on his knees, then pushed me back down onto the couch, lowering himself on top of me.

When I felt his erection against my thigh, I moaned, reaching for it.

"I want you," I whispered as I squeezed him, feeling him grow even harder under my touch. "Let's make a baby."

His hands were all over my body, reaching under my dress. He held my ass and then moved his fingers over the center of me, feeling the wetness that already soaked my underwear.

I undid his belt and then the button of his pants while I massaged his member with my other hand. He groined.

Finally, he reached under my panties and gently drove his finger inside of me. I moaned, and his naughty smile made me want to know exactly what dirty thing he was thinking ...

But just before I could find out, our intercom sounded. It was the doorman, alerting us of a visitor.

"Again?!" I burst out, and Xavier put his finger on my lips. I took it in my mouth but stayed quiet, praying the visitor would go away so we could finish what we started.

But then the knocking returned.

"Are you *fucking* kidding me?" I groaned.