

The Arrangement

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Marlena’s Opening

ANGELA

As I gazed out at the gallery over the top of my martini glass, I realized I was getting used to this feeling:

Pride.

My heart was as big as a marshmallow in a microwave.

Even I had to admit that I had outdone myself with this event. Rupert was sipping on the evening’s signature cocktail, the Marlena Martini, and a crowd gathered around the merch table to purchase a print of the artist’s work.

Zoe was smiling and chatting with Marlena.

I knew that my new assistant was a big part of why the event was such a success.

The past few days, Zoe and I had spent countless hours in the gallery space. We’d been curators as well as party managers, helping Marlena decide where her pieces should be hung after the canvases had been re-stretched.

Marlena’s work looked amazing in the open gallery space. Her exhibition was titled “The Friends of Lady Liberty,” and it featured lighthearted and colorful depictions of “Mademoiselle Magnificence” and “Señor Sovereignty,” among others.

“Another fantastic event,” a low voice whispered in my ear.

“Xavier!” I gushed, twirling around to hug my husband. He was still in his suit from the office and his hair was slightly unkempt, which only made him sexier.

He kissed me, running his fingers through my hair, which I had worn down for a more casual look. We were in the Village, after all.

I felt eyes on us. This was another feeling that I had grown used to.

“Look at the love birds!” my father’s voice rang out, and I turned to see him approaching us with Em and my brothers at his side.

“Hey, mama!” I greeted, pulling her into a hug. I squeezed my best friend’s shoulders. She looked exhausted, but she had on makeup, which I hadn’t seen her wear in weeks.

“This is my first time out since the baby,” she gushed, “and I am so happy you chose cranberry martinis for the event. I can’t even ~tell~ you.”

“That’s the *Marlena Martini* to you,” I joked. “But I was happy to hear it was her favorite drink, too!”

We settled into our family small talk, Xavier asking my father about the repairs to the deck and Em divulging the hardships of breastfeeding.

After a few minutes, I drifted away to find Marlena and Rupert. Sure enough, the two were giggling together in front of Marlena’s painting of Lady Liberty wearing a bikini, climbing back onto her stand in the Upper New York Bay.

“Congratulations, both of you!” I said. “The opening is a huge success.”

“Oh, darling! I have you to thank!” Marlena gushed, her eyes shining behind her red frames. “And you, my dear friend!”

I watched as Marlena and Rupert embraced one another.

When the lovefest was over, Rupert turned to me.

“Seriously, Angela, you have made this event so *seamless* for me! I can focus on what really matters ... the art! We’ve sold five paintings already!”

“Wow!” I exhaled. I didn’t even want to ask how much a Marlena Marlboro cost.

“Oh! Hannah! Please, meet Angela, party planner extraordinaire.”

Rupert was standing next to a tall woman wearing sunglasses indoors. She exuded style and power with her harsh bangs and angled bob.

I shook her hand and introduced myself, but the mysterious woman said nothing. And then, as quickly as she came, she drifted away.

“Who was *that*?” I asked Rupert-~

“That was Hannah Flintour,” he whispered. “Editor in *Chief* of *Vague* magazine. She’s looking for someone to help with their annual gala. Their planner fell through and they need a replacement stat ...”

I raised my eyebrows. How very interesting ...

I caught Zoe’s eye from across the room and waved her over. Grabbing martinis from a passing waiter’s tray, I supplied my assistant and our clients with fresh drinks.

“To the show! And many more!” I cried. We all raised our glasses.

“To your fantastic team!” Rupert echoed.

“To... what do you call yourselves?” Marlena asked, taking a sip.

“Uh, I don’t have a name yet, actually,” I said. I hadn’t thought about it much before.

“Perhaps ‘A to Z!’” Marlena suggested.

A to Z Events, I thought to myself, smiling at my assistant. Now, that didn’t sound half bad.

DUSTIN

The second I stepped my Jimmy Choo block-heel bootie into the gallery space, I knew that Angela had done it again.

Only my own exhibition had been as star-studded and glamorous, back when I was a starving artist.

I chuckled to myself, thinking of that time, practically eons ago now, as I grabbed a martini and struck a pose.

Of course, I was in an outfit that demanded attention. I wore my most breathable pair of black leather pants with a simple white linen button-down, which I spruced up with a veritable pile of gold necklaces I’d sprung for at a vintage store in SoHo.

On my head, I sported the fedora that Angela herself had bought for me back when we were just becoming friends. A gold hat could be considered gauche, but *not* the way I wore it.

“Angie!” I called as I strutted through the crowd, heels clacking. I spotted her gorgeous waves. I would recognize that natural blonde anywhere.

“Dustie,” she sang, reciprocating my double-kiss. “You’re finally here! And this is just the woman I want you to meet.”

Angela stood back, widening the circle, and I saw before me the most fabulous dowager I’d laid eyes on.

I recognized her instantly.

The Marlena Marlboro.

“Marlena,” I whispered, my mouth hanging open.

She gave me a coy little smile, as if she recognized me as one of her own. Little did she know!

“Dustin is a painter, too. And he’s a dear friend of mine.”

I held Marlena’s decorated little hand in my own.

All the beautiful things these hands have made ...

“Yes, I heard of your fabulous show,” Marlena crooned. “Word of your paintings traveled all the way across the Atlantic to Berlin!”

“Wow!” I yelped.

The conversation drifted on, but I kept my eyes on this divine creature, her bright red lipstick, and those *adorable* statement glasses.

I want to be just like you when I grow up, I thought to myself.

“You know, I would recognize that hat anywhere,” came a deep voice, as if from a dream.

I turned away from the circle to find a devilishly handsome man standing before me. *Close* to me, might I add.

He had coiffed, curly hair, and his beautiful green eyes shone out at me. I swallowed.

“Have we ... met before?” I managed, feeling as if the gallery grew a few degrees hotter.

I risked a glimpse down, checking out the mysterious man’s outfit. He wore a bold paisley shirt beneath an elegantly tailored suit. I trailed my eyes up from his gleaming shoes, admiring his athletic build.

“No,” he said with a smile. A smile that almost made me topple off my booties. “I know the hat...”

I narrowed my eyes at him, raising my martini glass to my lips and waiting for him to go on.

“I should, after all, since I’m the man who designed it.”

Now it was my turn to smile.

“Anthony Jacobs? In the flesh?” I laid it on thick, showing him my best smolder.

“Indeed,” he returned. “And to whom do I owe the pleasure?”

“Dustin Sterling,” I said. “And the pleasure’s all mine.”

Anthony extended his hand, and I took it, surprised by his firm grip. *Pleasantly* surprised, of course.

“You know, Dustin, I used to want to forget I ever designed such a gauche accessory ...” He leaned in, the corner of those perfect lips turning upward. “But I’ve never seen anyone wear it like *you*.”

The compliment made my heart sing.

“That’s because there’s no one like me.” I winked.

XAVIER

I grabbed Angela’s hand and led her away from the chatting group. I’d had about enough of the introductions and the small talk ... I wanted to be alone with my wife, if only for a second.

“You *know* I can’t leave the party,” Angela scolded, guessing my plan as I headed for the bathrooms.

“I’m just looking for a little privacy,” I said with a shrug. I ducked behind a wall, and we found ourselves alone.

I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her in for a kiss.

Now *that* was better.

She pulled back, touching my face, and smiling knowingly.

“Come on, horn dog,” she growled.

We headed back into the party, and when I saw who stood before us, I wanted to race for the men’s room. But Angela and I had been spotted.

It was Penny, and she looked as if she had just seen a ghost.

“Beautiful show, Angela,” Penny managed, trying to smile but it came out as a grimace. “Xavier, I need to talk to you.”

“Angela and I were just about to leave ...” I said through gritted teeth, ready to bolt out of the place even if I had to jump through a window.

“It can’t wait!” she blurted.

I was about to lead Angela across the gallery for the third time, but my wife refused to move.

“What is it, Penny?” she asked.

Penny looked between us before she sighed.

“Our stock value’s been plunging all month. We haven’t released information about our new deal, and the market assumed we were stagnating without Brad ...” Penny explained, catching her breath before the final devastating blow.

“Someone snatched up a thirty percent stake of Knight Enterprises. It was Henry Knight. Your cousin just bought a seat on the board.”