

**The Arrangement**  
S.S. Sahoo

## Babysitting Bella

### XAVIER

Trying to make the best of my hangover and marital stress, I headed to the office early.

Bethany brought me my latte and some Advil, and I consumed both as I stared out at the Manhattan skyline.

This was the view of a CEO.

I looked down at the chaos of traffic below and the commuters scurrying around like ants.

It grounded me. It took my mind off my fight with Angela the night before, and brought me back to who I was.

CEO of Knight Enterprises.

My father's son.

A goddamned *leader*.

With my Tod's loafers resting on my desk, I felt a rushing calm. I was going to have a good day. The tension surrounding the Swiss resort had begun to fade, and we were at a standstill, waiting for the contractors to begin.

I could focus energy elsewhere ... and I knew just what to do.

I wouldn't stay here, looking down at New York City like a lone hawk. No, I would go out and see the people.

Put in some face time. "Take the temperature of the company," as my dad used to say.

I stood and buttoned up my jacket. After one last admiring glance out at my city, the best fuckin' city in the world, I blazed out into the office.

I found the normal state of commotion. Phones ringing, frenzied typing, impromptu meetings by the copy machine.

Ah, yes. This was my niche in the concrete jungle.

"Looking sharp, Austin!" I called as I rounded the corner of the bullpen, charging towards the espresso machine.

I found two women standing in the kitchen, and both of them were unfamiliar to me.

"Morning!" I greeted. "Are you our newest receptionists? It's my pleasure to introduce myself. Xavier Knight, CEO."

I shook hands with one of them.

"I'm actually your newest consultant," she explained. "Riley Smith. We have a meeting with Penny in a few hours."

I gave her my winning smile.

"My mistake! When I read the email, I thought Riley was a man!"

The woman beside her coughed.

"Happens all the time," Riley assured me.

"And you are —?" I asked the remaining woman, but was cut short because Penny entered the kitchen.

"Good morning, Riley and Marla!" Penny sang, chipper as a bird. She hardly looked my way as the espresso machine whirred to life. "Xavier."

"Penny."

So she was still miffed by my bad behavior at The Hatchback. Oh well. She'd get over it sooner or later.

When the machine stopped, I was confronted by the dull sound of rain pouring from the office speakers.

"What the hell is this?" I asked. "It's like we're in a fuckin' rainforest or something, huh, guys?"

"I like it!" Riley beamed. "And it's good for productivity. It's a hot trend on Wall Street."

"I think it's nice, too." Marla glared at me. Damn, she was a bitch! "Was it your idea, Xavier?"

"It was mine," Penny said, stirring in sugar.

I crossed my arms, focusing on the little knot of sleek black hair tied at her neck. Back when Penny and I used to fraternize, she wore her hair loose and curly, cascading down over her back, above her knockout ass. ... uh,

It was kind of sweet that she played dress-up for the office.

"Penny, I'd like to go over a few things with you before the meeting later," Riley requested.

"Well, let's talk now!" I cried. "I'd like to hear what you're working on, too."

"It would take too much time to fill you in," Penny said, finally facing me, "after you missed our last meeting."

"When —?"

"Yesterday," Penny glared, "when you left work early."

Fuck. I'd left for The Hatchback a little shy of closing time.

Penny lifted her mug. "We'll all talk in a few hours, Xavier."

She left, and the two women followed after her.

I watched them go, and then I was left alone in the kitchen. I clenched my hands into fists. Why were these women, *my employees*, deferring to Penny? As if she was their leader?

I charged back to my office, where I would attend to *real* business. I would keep my head down all day, crossing tasks off my list. I would show the whole team I was a capable leader.

Sitting down at my desk, I opened up my laptop, which beeped with each new email that came in.

I picked up my desk phone and hit the speed dial.

"Bethany, bring me another latte!"

### ANGELA

Zoe arrived at Dustin's coffee shop just as Dustin was delivering two oat milk lattes to our table.

"Good, you're both here!" I shouted, putting my hands on the table, bracing myself to deliver the news. My best friend and my assistant stared at me intently.

"We got the *GALA!*"

I'm pretty sure my smile could be seen from space. I'd only found out last night, but it felt like I was keeping the news to myself *for ages*.

"I *knew* it!" Zoe cried.

"Me too, bitches!" Dustin responded. He took the remaining coffee from his tray, surely bound for some other customer, and held it in the air. "Cheers to you! And the party of the *century!*"

We happily clinked our mugs.

"I have to go make another caramel macchiato," Dustin explained after he drained his drink. "You party girls have fun!!"

I watched happily as my friend sauntered off, and then I turned to Zoe. Her eyes were wide and sparkling. She was the only other person who understood that this was a *huge deal*. And it was all ours.

"Tell me everything about the meeting," she ordered. "I *knew* they would love you!"

I blushed, thinking back on that terrifying meeting. *Had* they loved me? They chose me, so I guess they did!

"Zoe, it was *insane*," I began. "It was a table full of super-intimidating people. The most stylish group you've ever seen. And Hannah Flintour kept her sunglasses on ~the whole time.~"

"*No!*" Zoe exclaimed.

"Yes! So, I pitched the Future of Fashion theme, and they didn't seem very into it ..."

I didn't want to admit to my assistant that they had already used the theme. I hadn't meant to lie, but the moment passed, and I left out the detail.

Zoe hung on my every word.

"But then I pitched Chaos and Order, and they *loved* it!" I gushed.

"Oh my god!!" Zoe squealed. "So we're using my idea?!"

I shrugged. "Well, yes, if you want to think of it that way!"

"Did you tell them I came up with it?" Zoe asked, still hardly able to contain her excitement.

"Well, not exactly ..." I said. Should I have? "There wasn't really an opportunity to bring that up ..."

Zoe's smile faltered.

"Right, of course," she murmured, gazing into her coffee cup. The energy at our table changed immediately. What just happened?

"I have to use the bathroom," Zoe said quickly, standing up without meeting my eye.

I nodded. Then Zoe rushed from the room so quickly it may as well have been on fire.

"Where's she off to?" Dustin asked, sliding into the free chair.

I sighed. "I'm worried Zoe's upset."

But how could she be? I was paying her for her work and her ideas. We were a team. It would have been weird to credit her for the theme in the Vague meeting. Right?!

I explained the situation to Dustin. He furrowed his brow, thinking.

"I don't know, Angie," he eventually said. "It was her idea. Maybe she feels underappreciated."

I bit my lip, lost in thought. I didn't like to see my assistant upset. But if Zoe was feeling unvalued, I knew just how to show her how much she meant to me.

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A few hours later, I was at Washington Square Park to meet Em and Bella. I was excited to take my best-friend-turned-sister out to lunch and spend some time with the baby.

Em was running late, so I sat on a bench watching a mime juggle bowling pins.

"Angie!" An exasperated voice called my name.

I turned to find Em, pushing Bella's stroller and looking totally bedraggled.

"Em." I jumped up to hug her, hoping that my face didn't betray my shock.

When I held her at arm's length, she was in rougher shape than I'd ever seen her. She had dark bags beneath her eyes and a sort of dreadlock sprouting from the right side of her head.

"The baby just fell asleep," she said with a sigh. I gazed down at the perfect little baby sitting in the carriage, as peaceful as an angel.

"Thank *God!*" she went on. "Bella has been keeping me awake for days. Let me tell you, Angie, all the awful things they say about being a mother are true."

She plopped down on the bench and closed her eyes.

"Geez, Em," I said, settling beside her.

"I'm sorry I don't have more energy," Em started, turning towards me again. "I wanted to, but I haven't been sleeping much, and Bella keeps—"

"Em," I interrupted. "I have a better idea. I'm saying this as your sister—you're exhausted! As much as I want to spend time with you, what you need is a moment to yourself."

She looked at me as if she was about to burst into tears. So I went on:

"How about this. You take the afternoon and go to the spa. I know a great place right by here. It'll be my treat. And *I'll* take Bella for the afternoon."

"I don't know, Angie ..."

I could see the hesitation in her eyes. I knew she didn't want to let me down, and she definitely didn't want to admit she needed a break.

I pulled my sister into a big hug, trying to tell her with my embrace what I couldn't say with my words.

*I love you.*

*I understand.*

*You deserve this.*

"You really are a fuckin' angel, Angela," Em said, smiling, tears glistening in her eyes.

"Don't cry!" I chided.

"I know, I've been so emotional these days. Maybe it's because I don't sleep anymore." Em sighed again and rocked Bella's stroller gently with her hand. "You sure you can handle her?"

"Of course!" I promised. "I'm excited to have some alone time with my niece."

Em spent the next five minutes detailing how to care for a five-month-old. She showed me the enormous kit of supplies she brought with her everywhere, which included toys, formula bottles, and pacifiers.

After she said goodbye to Bella for another few minutes, I finally convinced her to go.

"Geez," I whispered under my breath as I stood alone by the carriage.

Em never had a sentimental bone in her body. But having a baby turned her into a pile of mush.

I looked down at little Bella, asleep and totally oblivious to all the fuss we made over her.

"Hi, little one." I gazed down at her, captivated by her face. Her tiny nose with even smaller nostrils on either side. Her little lips, puckered and perfect.

She was a cherub. And she was my *niece*.

This divine little specimen came from my best friend and my brother. And she changed all of our lives forever.

Of course, as I looked at this beautiful baby, I wondered what it would be like to have my own. Imagine how much love I would feel for something that came from *me*.

I loved Bella like crazy, but Em showed me that nothing could compare to a mother's love.

My fight with Xavier was still heavy on my mind. I resolved right then that I would show my husband just how serious I was about making a family together.

I wanted my own little baby doll, with Xavier's blue eyes. I wanted to look at someone the way Em looked at Bella.

"All right, baby doll," I said to the peaceful child. "Let's go for a walk."

As soon as I started pushing the stroller, Bella opened her beautiful little eyes.

"*Hello*," tiny cutie," I cooed.

She looked at me for just a moment before her eyes closed again. Her face scrunched up and turned bright red...

Then she screamed bloody murder!