

**The Arrangement**  
S.S. Sahoo

## Cold Dim Sum

### XAVIER

I stared at the ceiling, feeling distinctly uncomfortable as Angela adjusted my tie for me. She patted my chest when she was finished, smoothing out the creases in my suit.

She smiled when I looked down at her.

"You're going to do great," she said.

I bit back the bitter response that wanted to form on my lips, giving her a tight nod instead.

The elevator doors slid open behind me, and I stepped inside, feeling like I'd boarded an express ride straight into the mouth of an active volcano.

"Good luck!" Angela smiled at me, and I plastered one on my own lips in return.

After the doors closed, I sighed, sitting down on the plush bench.

I had a goddamned job interview.

The doors opened into the lobby, the floor in front of me feeling more like a gangplank on a pirate ship than an elegant marble pathway.

I walked out of the front doors and into the beamer, where Marco was already waiting for me.

"Going to StelComm, right?" Marco said from the driver seat.

"Unfortunately."

Marco nodded, quickly merging into the city traffic.

Stellar Communications, or *StelComm*, for short, was a multimedia juggernaut. Run for generations by the Stevenson family, they'd effectively become the top telecommunications company in New York City.

And Steve Stevenson (*I know*), the son of the CEO Stephen Stevenson (~tell me about it~), just so happened to be a drinking buddy of mine from The Hatchback.

We'd shared many pints during my tenure at the renowned watering hole, and I'd called in a favor to land an interview—at Angela's encouragement.

*Maybe another job is just what you need*, she'd said with her trademark angelic smile. ~I'll keep you out of those scary bars I keep asking you to stay away from.~

As much as I hated the idea of working underneath someone, Angela had a point. I couldn't wallow in a pity party forever. I had to be productive.

That started with finding a job.

Still, that didn't mean I was thrilled about the situation.

I used to be the CEO of a company worth *billions* for Christ's sake. Now, here I was, interviewing for a ~consultant position~ at a local mom-and-pop business in New York with a value that barely scraped nine figures.

One of the popular news headlines flashed into my mind.

*Xavier Knight—Fall From Grace.*

I scoffed.

That was putting it lightly.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, interrupting my brooding.

**Steve**  
hey x, change of plans.

**Steve**  
we have to move your interview back 2 hours.

**Steve**  
people from HR are here and they're making a big fuss.

**Xavier**  
seriously?

**Xavier**  
what am i supposed to do for 2 hours?

**Steve**  
you're a smart guy.

**Steve**  
you'll figure something out.

I threw my phone onto the seat next to me.

Steve, *that son of a bitch*.

HR fess my ass. That asshole always liked to make my skin crawl. I stared out the window, suddenly finding myself with some time to kill.

At least StelComm was in Midtown.

There was a lot to do in the middle of the city.

Lots of bars.

And my throat *did* feel a little dry.

I could use a little something to take the edge off before my interview.

"Hey Marco," I called.

"What's up boss?"

"Take me to The Rum House," I said. "I'm just gonna go for a quick drink."

### ANGELA

"No!" Zoe and I squealed in unison.

"Yup," Dustin confirmed, actually looking a little bashful for once.

"You're going to propose?" My voice increased an octave with every word, so by the time I said propose I was pretty sure I could crack glass.

Dustin nodded with a thousand-watt smile.

Zoe and I clasped hands, bouncing in our seats as we screamed in excitement.

"How do you know he's the one?" Zoe asked.

"How are you going to propose?" I demanded.

"Did you already get a ring?" Zoe added.

Dustin laughed, holding up his hands, enjoying the attention.

"Don't you bitches have an event in Tokyo to plan?" he asked.

Zoe and I scoffed, choosing to ignore the mountains of paperwork on the table in front of us.

"This takes precedence right now," I said.

Zoe nodded vigorously beside me.

"Spill it," I demanded.

"How do you know it's him?" Zoe pressed.

Dustin picked at his chocolate chip muffin, a faraway look in his eyes. I'd never seen him look so serious. He was usually so animated, his personality just so loud and *...out there*.

"I don't know," he began. "It's just that...he's always the first thing I think about when I wake up—and before I go to sleep. I look at him and I see home. When I think of the future, his face is always there."

"Oh, Dustin," I sighed, touched by his romantic words.

"You big sofie!" Zoe laughed.

"Shut up, girl," Dustin teased.

"Do you already know how you're going to pop the question?" I asked.

"I haven't settled on anything, but I've got some ideas," Dustin said mischievously, his eyes shining.

"Like what, like what?" Zoe asked, bouncing in her seat.

The door chimed as a few customers walked into the cafe. Dustin saw his chance to escape and took it. The crisp autumn wind gusted inside, rustling our piles of paperwork.

"Well, would you look at that," he said with exaggerated emphasis, "looks like I have to go take care of some customers!"

"Tease!" I cried out after him.

Zoe stuck her tongue out.

Dustin winked as he flashed us a middle finger, snatching up his muffin as he went.

"Focus on your work, ladies, and *maybe* I'll grace you with more juicy deets later."

I pouted as I looked at the paperwork.

Judging by her expression, Zoe was trying to burn it away with her eyes.

We looked at each other and broke out laughing.

"We really should finish this up," I admitted. "We only have a few weeks left."

"But it's so *boring* compared to Dustin!" she whined.

We laughed again.

"Okay, okay. Where were we?"

"We were deciding on the ice sculpture," Zoe reminded me.

"Ah, right." I pursed my lips, tapping my pen against my chin. "It should be of something local, don't you think? We're going to be in Japan, after all."

Marlena Marlboro had contacted Zoe and me to plan the unveiling of her latest art collection, themed around a surrealist take on nature and spirits. Zoe and I had suggested we take the gala to Japan, to the scenic Lake Tanuki.

Marlena had agreed.

"Well, the gala is taking place on Lake Tanuki, right?" Zoe flipped her laptop screen around to show me a picture of an adorably fluffy raccoon-dog. "Why don't we have a Tanuki ice sculpture?"

"Perfect!"

Zoe nodded, and began searching for a perfect reference photo to send to the sculptor.

I looked at the endless stack of permits and contracts that I needed to review, piled high like a sloppy Jenga tower.

Lake Tanuki was a beautiful location that featured a breathtaking view of Mt. Fuji. The outdoor gala would put patrons right at the heart of the haunting beauty of the locale: nature reflected in both the art pieces and in their surroundings.

As amazing as the concept was, it was a logistical nightmare.

Patrons had to be taxied to the venue and back to their hotels. The art pieces had to be carefully transported and stored, food servers and performers had to be looked after, power generators had to be secured and triple-checked

Not to mention the inherent risk of inclement weather.

I rolled up my sleeves and took a big gulp of lukewarm tea.

*It'll be worth it.*

I hunkered down and got to work.

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I sat alone in the kitchen, absentmindedly picking at the dim sum plate in front of me. I glanced at the clock.

Almost midnight.

I unlocked my phone and dialed Xavier's number, although I already knew that he wouldn't pick up.

I'd picked up our favorite order of dim sum on the way home from the coffee shop, too tired to cook something when I got home. After a long day at work, the idea of cuddling up next to Xavier with a steaming pork bun in my hands sounded divine.

But when I got home, I'd found the penthouse dark and empty.

Xavier should've been home before me.

I curled up in my chair, a half-eaten bun cold and forgotten on the table in front of me.

*Maybe the interview got delayed*, I thought. ~Or it's just a really intense interview ...~

I dialed Xavier's number again, if only to fill the silence.

His voicemail message played, a recording I'd heard far too often lately.

"This is Xavier Knight. Leave a message and I'll get back to you."

"Hey babe," I said into the phone. "I'm just wondering where you are ...call me when you can, okay? I hope the interview went well! I bought some of your favorite wontons for dinner, but they're cold now ..."

I trailed off, letting the call end itself.

I closed my eyes, fatigue making them feel like lead weights.

*Where are you, Xavier?*