The Arrangement

S.S. Sahoo

A Public Knighting

I was at home baking cookies. I know it sounded lame, like some sort of housewife from a million years ago, but I loved to bake.

ANGELA

I was a fan of anything that required me to use my hands to create something, anything that came with a recipe. I had just popped the cookies into the oven when I heard the elevator buzz to life.

I glanced down the hall at my room, wondering if I'd have enough time to get there before the elevator doors opened.

But before I could finish the thought, the doors opened. And there Xavier was, eyes red, suit jacket slung over his arm. Before I could get a word out—or think about getting a word out—he was marching over to me, words tumbling from his lips.

"Who the FUCK were you shopping with today?"

"What?"

"My friend? Dustin." "Oh. Dustin," he said, and it was clear he was mocking me. "Let me make something very clear to you, Mrs. Knight.

"Who was the man?"

Everything you do in this city comes back to me. EVERYTHING."

"Yes, but I didn't mean to interfere—"

I was so confused I didn't even know where to begin. I thought back to shopping with Dustin. "I had a business meeting with Graden tonight," he slurred. Oh. We'd run into Jessica. There was my answer.

"He said his wife saw you shopping ...with a man." Was that jealousy I detected in his voice?

jealousy, I thought. "But you don't interfere with my business. You will not embarrass me again. Do you understand me?"

"I don't give a shit what you do on your own time, in your own space," he said, getting right up in my face. Maybe not

"LISTEN TO ME." He slammed his hand onto the kitchen counter. "You are not to be in public with any man that is not me. You might've cost the company the fucking DEAL. Do you get that? Do you get how stupid you were? I forbid you from seeing that man until the deal closes."

"You forbid me?" "You heard me. You're living under my roof, using my money, you can abide by a simple fucking rule. Besides, if good old pops was to find out you were doing anything to screw with this deal, you'd have more to answer to than just me."

His words were so thick, so sharp, that I felt them cut through me. I didn't have any fight left in me. I thought about Mr. Lemor's text messages, about my dad, and looked around at my new life. I was tired of fighting to find the up-side.

Seeing the resignation on my face, Xavier turned and marched into his bedroom, slamming the door.

laugh it off, making sure he knew how absurd I thought it was.

But Dustin hadn't laughed.

It was my husband, too.

How long could I be this lonely?

Unknown

Stop ignoring me.

You'll be sorry.

Who did they think they were?

Then my phone rang.

making—and answered.

But I didn't wait for him to speak.

"He's my only friend," I said softly to the empty kitchen, like saying the words would help make what had just happened less real. But nothing came in response. I looked around, feeling lost. It was still just me and my cookies. ***

Sure, I'd felt alone in this bedroom a hundred times before. But this was the first time I didn't have Em and I didn't have Dustin. Both of my New York City safety nets, old and new, didn't want anything to do with me. I'd called Dustin after Xavier blew up at me, telling him about the rule forbidding me from seeing him. I'd tried to

"Xavier Knight forbade you from seeing me? Like, me, specifically?" "Yeah," I'd answered. "But it's just until this deal closes—"

"It feels like there's a target on my back or something." "What? No, Dustin, he's just overreacting—" "Angela, I gotta go, okay?" And then he'd clicked off. Just like that, our friendship had felt like it was over.

"That's messed up. Seriously messed up. I can't have the biggest name in the city hating me like that," Dustin had said.

I guess I understood what he was so rattled about. I knew what it was like to be singled out as the enemy by a person in power. How scary it was to know they had more control over your future than you did. But now, it wasn't just Mr. Lemor controlling my life.

It was bad enough I had to live with Xavier, had to hear him scream at me for the smallest reasons. But now he was actively cutting into my personal relationships, like my life didn't matter one bit. He clearly had no respect for me. He thought I'd married him for his money and his name, and I couldn't defend myself or explain anything—not without breaking the rules.

How many weeks, months, years could I go without having a real friend? My sorrow turned into frustration, then rage—rage at Xavier, but also rage at life's unfairness. I was starting to really fume, when my phone lit up with a text.

Unknown

control every waking minute of my day; it was unbelievable.

"LEAVE. ME. THE FUCK ALONE!" I shouted into the phone.

Then I heard a calm voice, so controlled it sounded almost syrupy, on the other end.

drum. I was shaking as I waited for a response—anything.

"You're going to wish," he said, "you hadn't said that to me."

relieved. Danny's name flashed across the screen.

you gotta come down to see dad

Why did they think they could boss me around like a child?

You've GOT TO BE KIDDING ME! I let out the most animalistic growl—a sound I didn't even know I was capable of

I was panting. I don't think I'd ever spoken to anyone like that before, and my heart was pounding louder than a

And my blood boiled even more. I knew it was Mr. Lemor. The audacity of the men with power and money to try and

I threw my phone across the bed, as far from me as possible.

My hands were still shaking.

Danny

Danny

angela

I jumped at the sound of incoming messages. Part of me wanted to ignore the phone, but my curiosity got the best of me. I needed to know what he was saying. It was like driving by a car accident on the highway. You had to look because, somehow, not knowing was worse.

I crawled over to the corner of my bed, where the phone lay face down, and slowly flipped it over. I'd never been so

Angela

Angela

why?

???

Angela

Is everything ok??

Danny

Danny

Danny

he's fine

Danny

but he's putting up a tantrum

"Dad?" "Come in, sweet pea," he said, clearly straining to get every word out. "Danny said you were feeling better."

apparently you've been avoiding talking about your marriage

I just didn't have the heart to keep lying straight to my dad's face. But that was the only option other than avoiding the

I let out a big breath and climbed out of bed, stripping my PJs off. I pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, laced up my

"I am, I am," he said, taking my hand and kissing it. The silence stretched out for a second before his eyes crinkled up

But instead of a cookie jar I was neck deep in a web of lies and deceit. A billion-dollar secret where my dad's life hung

"Hey, lighten up," he joked. "I'm not mad. I'm not going to tell you how reckless and crazy getting married so fast was."

I nodded. I felt like a child about to be scolded. Like I'd been caught red-handed with my hand in the cookie jar.

he doesn't want to put it off any longer

Shit. Another problem to deal with.

I *had* been avoiding talking about it.

Converses, then headed for the door.

But I had to be strong, for his sake.

in the balance.

"You just did."

Especially not when he was in such bad shape.

in a smile. "You can't avoid the talk forever."

I took a deep breath, bracing myself.

hand now, and another tear fell.

"Don't cry."

"I'm sorry."

"So, tell me about him."

"You met him at Thanksgiving, remember?"

I was nervous about the secret getting out.

"Jeez, that's a rock," he said.

talking about Mr. Lemor.

"Yes, ma'am."

"It'll work."

to see them.

breathing?

hadn't.

from my waist up. And I was naked.

Unknown

Unknown

Mr. Lemor.

Of course.

Em

Em

Em

ANGELA!!!

DID YOU SEE? WTF???

YOURE EVERYWHERE!!!

Oh my God. Oh my God.

respectable, some less.

over my chest.

Danny

Angela

I wanted to kill him.

You'll never work again.

I always deliver.

right," he'd said, "where's the son of a bitch?"

"So, your trial treatment's starting tomorrow?"

just one. My problems were not the only problems.

to him, I was. So I nodded, a tear escaping down my cheek.

I wasn't sure if I'd be able to keep up the lies in front of him.

topic, so I'd have to do it.

If he knew the truth he might just have another heart attack. "Pea, look at me," he said, his eyes turning pink. "Are you happy?" I looked down at my dad, the man I'd loved the most for the longest. My favorite person. Being there with him, talking

"Then don't you worry about me. Got it? I'm happy. I'm happy for you. I'm *proud*. My baby's a wife." He squeezed my

"Ah, I guess I did." He chuckled, and I couldn't help but laugh ruefully along with him. I kept my gaze on the floor.

pass out at any second back then." "I was just nervous about what all of you would think," I said. And it was true. But probably not for the same reasons Dad was thinking about. I wasn't nervous about introducing my fiancé to the family.

I lifted my left hand to wipe the tears from my cheek, and Dad whistled, eyeing the ring on my finger.

"Sure, but I barely know the guy. As far as first impressions go, I wasn't impressed. You looked like you were going to

"Well, Xavier's a Knight, after all. You don't need to worry about anything." Dad's eyes narrowed just enough for me to notice, like he was piecing together the coincidence of everything, but then they returned to normal. I wondered if I'd imagined it.

"Well, I'm just happy my little pea has someone to take care of her, that's all. After that last douchewipe." He was

My brothers had filled him in after I quit the company and helped explain to Dad why I was quitting such a perfectly

But I didn't want to think about Mr. Lemor or Xavier now. I needed to put the focus back on Dad.

He looked at me, his eyes turning pink again. "You bet your ass it will," he said.

suited job. When they'd told him, Dad had run into his room and emerged a few seconds later with a baseball bat. "All

go back to the city soon, but for now, I just wanted a little more time with my dad. *** I was back on the train. There was something so soothing about watching millions of trees pass by. I liked to think about those trees, about how they'd be there, growing and dying, growing and dying, whether or not anyone was there

It was humbling to think about. The world spins on, with or without you. That really put my life into perspective. I was

But enough, I told myself. ~No more dwelling.~ Tomorrow was a new day, and I was ready to take it on without any

I was scrolling and scrolling, trying to find an article to read, but nothing caught my attention. I needed something

I was scrolling through the *Yorker*, a gossip blog based in NYC, moving through stories about the Bravo Housewives

Well, that was what this was. My heart stopped. The noise around me receded until I couldn't hear anything. My vision

There was a picture of me and Xavier on our wedding night. Smiling for the camera, looking like we were in love. And

I was looking right into the camera, my damp hair hanging straight down. My eyes were wide. The shot showed me

How can this be? I'd never taken a picture of myself nude in my life. I'd never even had a boyfriend! ~How could this

And then it hit me: the gym at Gelsa. That was the only gym I'd ever gone to. This was taken in the locker room. I

was clouded by white spots. I had to hold my phone right up to my face to read anything, and when I did, I wished I

Have you ever felt a reaction so viscerally you thought it might be fatal? Like a panic attack so bad you stopped

entertaining. So I did what any twentysomething would do. I went into the world of online media.

and Miss Teen America's latest scandal, when I saw something that stopped me cold.

beneath that picture, there was another picture. One that featured me—only me.

background. Lockers? My mind raced. Where had I been with lockers?

sort of chip on my shoulder. I pulled out my phone, looking for a distraction. I thought I'd try the ~New York Times~.

I pulled the visitor's chair up close to his bed and tucked my feet under me, holding his hands tight. I knew I'd have to

picture exist? And, how is it plastered all over the internet?~ I tried to calm myself down. *Okay, Angela. Be smart. Look for clues.* I squinted at the picture, thanking the lord for the black bar that covered my breasts. I noticed lockers in the

must've been changing, but who would have been able to take a picture like this without me seeing?

I was so overcome with rage and humiliation that I didn't have it in me to think back to how he could've done it. Not now. Now, I needed to get in contact with the *Yorker* and have them remove the article. Then I'd need to scour the rest of the internet for residual—

Xavier Your nudes are on the internet. Xavier

I was exposed for the entire world to see.

It was bad enough that Em was reaching out to me. She'd been ignoring my texts for days.

Okay, relax. Google yourself and find the sites with the photo and calmly ask them to remove it.

I Googled myself. And found the same picture, on various websites. More websites than I could count. Some more

And those unregulated sites, the ones that aimed for clickbait at any cost? They didn't bother putting the black bar

Danny Now

Danny Call me

Remember when I told you NOT TO EMBARRASS ME?

It felt like I was standing on a high cliff, teetering on the edge. My breath came in short gasps as I looked around the train. Was I imagining it, or was everyone sending me weird looks?

I shrank down into my seat, squeezing my eyes shut.

pitchfork. ~What about the rest of New York?~

I couldn't believe my eyes. My best friend, my husband, my brother. They'd all seen the picture of me topless. They'd all assumed I'd taken it myself.

I closed my eyes, and the little devil in my mind laughed. *That's who you're worried about?* she asked, dancing with her

My life is over ...