

The Arrangement

S.S. Sahoo

Unknown

Hi, Angela?

Unknown

This is Betty. From Curixon.

Unknown

I am Mr. Kinfold's assistant.

Angela

Hi?

Angela

Oh!

Angela

What can I help you with?

Unknown

I actually think I can help you ...

Unknown

Would you be able to meet me for coffee this afternoon?

Unknown

Starbucks at 54th and 3rd.

ANGELA

I was a block away from the Starbucks where I was supposed to be meeting Betty. Mr. Kinfold was a big-time VP of an important tech company, and I really thought I'd nailed the interview. I'd walked out of the midtown office afterwards, convinced I had the job.

Mr. Kinfold was a nice man. He had a daughter my age and was quick to tell me how impressive my GPA was. We got along well. So, when I got the rejection call a few days after the interview, I was speechless. I hadn't gotten the job. I wasn't good enough.

But now, with his assistant reaching out to me, I felt the little excitement butterflies in my stomach start to flutter. Maybe Mr. Kinfold had realized his mistake and had sent his assistant to apologize to me, to see if I was still in need of a job.

I took a deep breath to calm my nerves and pulled the door open, letting a businessman walk out before I stepped inside the busy coffee shop.

I looked around, seeing many suit-clad workers typing away on their laptops and phones, coffee in front of them. I was trying to remember what Betty looked like. Did she have red hair? Or was it dark brown and curly?

But then I heard, "Angela! Over here!"

I turned, following the voice to a small table toward the back of the store. It was cramped between two other tables, one taken by a college kid who reeked of cigarettes, and the other by a nanny with two squirming blonde toddlers. Betty, who indeed had dark brown, curly hair, was standing with a polite smile on her face. She looked nervous.

"Hi," she said, offering her hand out for a shake.

"Nice to see you again," I said, shaking it. We both sat down.

"Thanks for meeting me," she began, and I saw her scan the Starbucks like she was making sure nobody important would overhear her next words.

"I know this isn't exactly conventional, and I know that the last you heard from us, you didn't get the job ..."

Here we go, I thought. This is the moment I'll remember forever.

"But I just ...I wanted to let you know why. Why you didn't get the job."

"Oh ..." I trailed off, my disappointment palpable. This wasn't a job offer. It was a detailed analysis of where I'd gone wrong.

"Mr. Kinfold liked you. You were his top choice, actually."

"I was?"

"I was already writing your contract up when he got it."

Got what?

I'm sure I looked every bit as confused as I was. And her eyes darting nervously around weren't helping. She leaned forward, her elbows on the table and her face just a few inches from mine.

"You were working at Gelsa Inc. before, right? In Jersey?"

I nodded.

"Mr. Kinfold ...he received a document from Gelsa. From Mr. Lemor, specifically." I cringed at the name, and then I felt my whole body shut down. Mr. Lemor was my old boss. He was the reason I'd moved to New York City.

"Mr. Lemor wrote a letter to us ...it was a warning."

"A warning about me?" I asked, incredulous.

"No. More like a warning for us. Gelsa is a multinational corporation with power over many of our clients. It has the ability to interrupt our business on a massive level. And Lemor ... He made sure it was clear that if we hired you, he'd make things hard for us."

"But that's ...that's illegal," I choked out.

She sighed. "Illegal, immoral, it's all of those things. Lemor's known in the industry. He's the guy who fights every battle like it's World War III, you know? Mr. Kinfold's a good man, but he didn't want to risk it."

"Not when there are so many entry-level mechanical engineers. I get it," I said, even though I was flooded with self-pity.

"I wasn't even supposed to know, but I read the letter right when we got it. I read most of Mr. Kinfold's mail, but this I'd never seen anything like this. I could get in real trouble if anyone finds out I told you, but I thought you deserved to know," she said, reaching across the table and patting my hand. The physical contact surprised me, but it felt genuine.

"I don't know what happened between you and Lemor, but he's clearly keeping tabs on you. And he has pull over most companies. So just ...be careful," she said. "Powerful men don't think twice about screwing over young women, you know?" She gathered her coffee and her purse and stood.

"Thank you. For telling me," I said, and she nodded before walking away.

Her words kept playing in my mind. Powerful men don't think twice about screwing over young women.

She was right. And I knew it firsthand. Mr. Lemor was the man who I had dreaded seeing most for eleven months. He wasn't just my boss. He was the man who had sexually harassed and stalked me. And he was also, apparently, the man who wouldn't let me forget what saying no could do to my career.

XAVIER

Today was not my day. And after the commotion of the wedding, having my new wife move into my penthouse, and having last week's property deal go through at a higher price than I'd thought, I really needed it to be my day.

It had started fine enough. I got my morning gym session in without anyone trying to talk to me. Nothing annoyed me like gym interruptions, where a girl in a tight tank top or a bro in a muscle shirt would recognize me and try to start a conversation. I don't go to the gym to converse. I don't go there to meet girls, and I sure as shit don't go there to meet dudes.

Going to the gym in the morning had become my outlet, ever since everything happened with ...her ...at the beginning of the year. Pumping iron made me forget about the fact that my heart had been smashed. It got my stress and aggression out. That is, until I left the gym and it all returned. But while I was there, it made me feel competent and in control. Like a man.

So, the gym this morning was fine. That wasn't the problem. The problem came later, after lunchtime, when I got a call about one of our properties in Paris. Delayed development, the contractor said. Some problem with getting city passes, and it all sounded like bullshit to me.

And Dad, of course. He wasn't too thrilled to hear the news. Because anything that goes wrong while I'm in the office is a reflection of my work.

"You're not on your A-game, Xavier," he'd said.

"This was out of my control."

"Nothing's out of our control. You've had a distracting couple weeks. I understand—"

"I'm not goddamn distracted."

"Watch your tone."

And that was how it went. A boat could sink in the fucking Arctic, and if I were sitting in my office, he'd find a reason to make it my fault.

So, the gala I was trying to avoid, the one scheduled a few weeks from now at one of our other hotels in Paris, now I'll have to go to it. So that I could check up on the contractor in person and spend some time 'showing face' around the city.

'Showing face' was how my dad liked to describe intimidating people.

"When they don't see you, they can't fear you," is what he always says. Not that Brad Knight is the most intimidating guy in the world. Hell, you wouldn't cross the street if you saw him walking toward you at night. But he's a man with endless artillery and the sense to employ those who know how to use it. So, yeah, I learned from the best, I'd say.

But the last time I'd been in Paris, I was there with the one who fucked me up. The one who took my heart and dropped it off the fucking Eiffel Tower like it was a piece of chewed gum. And we were there shopping for her wedding dress—the one she nearly wore down the aisle, on her way to me.

I had Marco pick me up from the office early so I could try to calm myself down. I was trying to brainstorm if there was any way I could get out of Paris, out of going to the gala and showing face, when the car huffed to a stop. We were nearly home, just crawling up 6th Avenue, but the car stopped moving.

"What the fuck was that?" I yelled at Marco.

"Not sure, boss," he responded, and then he put the car in park and climbed out.

He went around front and popped the hood.

I saw steam through the windshield. Fuck this, I thought. I'm not dying in a car explosion in midtown. I climbed out, noticing the cars and pedestrians around me watching.

I put my sunglasses on and walked away from the car, from Marco, without another word.

ANGELA

I'd left the Starbucks in a daze. If Lemor hadn't sent that letter, I would've been working for Mr. Kinfold. I wouldn't have needed to accept the arrangement from Brad Knight, and I wouldn't be the punching bag of Xavier Knight. Everything would be normal with my best friend, and my family would be proud of me.

I was walking up 6th, almost at 57th, when I spotted the same charcoal Bentley that Xavier drove. Well—not drove, but got driven in. Marco the driver drove it. I squinted my eyes, reading the license plate.

What do ya know, I thought. That was Xavier's car. And it was crammed between cars, stuck in gridlocked traffic.

Suddenly, the car let out a sound and halted, coming to a full stop. After a few seconds, Marco stepped out of the driver's seat and went around to the hood, pulling it up. I saw smoke cloud around him.

Probably an overheated engine. I wondered if Marco was smart enough to keep coolant in the trunk. I was about a half-block from the car when I saw Xavier jump out of the back seat and slam the door shut, putting his shades on and walking up the sidewalk without a word to Marco.

I thought I'd seen him at his worst, but the man kept proving me wrong.

When I got to the car, I saw Marco pushing and pressing things under the hood.

"Hey," I said. "You need some help?" It took him a second to recognize me, but then he did.

"What do you know about cars?"

I bent down and pointed to the coolant hose, the thing that was so degraded you could practically see holes in the steel. "The hose needs to be replaced," I said. "But, for the meantime, a coolant flush will do. You got any in the back?"

He looked at me like I was speaking Latin.

"Probably a blue bottle," I said, but this time slower. "It'll say, 'coolant.'"

He looked at me, probably trying to figure out if I was making fun of him or not. When I offered a smile, he gave me a nod and went to the trunk, returning a few moments later with coolant.

"Awesome, thanks," I said, and I got to work.

When Marco and I got back to the building fifteen minutes later, I'd learned a little bit about him. He grew up outside of Boston and did two tours in the Navy before getting hired by Brad Knight's security team, and now his job was to look after Xavier. And drive him around. Not exactly a promotion, if you ask me.

Marco came around to open the back door of the car for me, and when he did, I asked him, "Hey, Marco? Do you mind keeping this between us?"

"What do ya mean?"

"That I helped with the car. I don't want Xavier to ...uh, to find out."

"Why?"

"It just ...feels a little out of place, I guess."

"Oh. Okay, sure," he said, his confusion apparent.

"Goodnight," I said, heading right through the doors. I didn't know if I could trust Marco to keep it between us, and I couldn't already feel the nerves hitting me. I knew, if Xavier found out, he'd find some reason to chastise me. And I couldn't take any more hostility today. That much I was sure of.