S.S. Sahoo

The Arrangement

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The Right Price
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Didi are you okay?

Didi you promised

Didi I will

Didi there are some things I need to still work out

Didi

soon

Didi okay Didi let's meet up

Didi

I can explain

me, and I'd been beyond worried that I looked like a tourist. Now, I knew the subway system like the back of my hand. And while getting driven around by Marco had made commuting a lot more hassle-free, there was something so liberating about navigating subway platforms by myself. It was like a breath of fresh air, right when I needed it. At the same time, I could barely feel it. I was swollen with the searing reality that Xavier had a daughter—with Claudia.

What if she isn't coming? I thought. ~Will I have to hide the truth from Xavier forever? ~ Just as I was about to hop off the swings and run the heck out of there, Claudia scurried up to me, looking a little frazzled and cold. Yet somehow, her bright red hair was perfect, even in the brisk wind. "Hey, so sorry, work ran late," she said.

loved.

"When?"

"When I can."

his life to take from him.

It wasn't fair.

make ends meet.

needed support.

Claudia said, her voice cracking.

I waited by the playground.

desperate for a distraction.

Unless you count me, I reminded myself.

earned my place in the untouchable family.

"No problem ..." I muttered, unsure of where to start.

I slowed down the swing. She sat down beside me.

Claudia took a deep, pained breath. "Things aren't so good for me financially at the moment. Working for a nonprofit, is, well, not that lucrative. Sophie needs so many things, and I can't give them to her. If I go to Xavier now, he'll think I'm after his money, that I'm just trying to use him—"

I bit my lip, wondering if I could...if I should.

wrap her head around telling Xavier about his daughter.

"But why? Why would you help me?" Claudia probed.

I shrugged. "If that's what you need, why not?"

Was that really what I was offering?

It did seem like the best solution.

could do in return to lighten her load.

"We both just want this to work, right?" I said. "For Sophie. You two don't have to be in this alone. I can help you. Xavier could help you. But you need to be honest and tell him the truth." "Okay," Claudia said as she grabbed me, pulling me into a warm hug. "Thank you," she whispered into my hair. "Thank you, Angela. Thank you so much," Claudia repeated, her voice still quivering. ***

him.

Gross.

I tried to keep the bitter taste in my mouth a secret—and not laugh that Dustin wasn't even particularly great at making coffee. But I had to admit, when it came to taking weird risks, my friend was the first to try florals in coffee. That was worth something. "That's not true," I assured him and then redirected us back to the problem at hand. "So you think I shouldn't do it? Give her the money, I mean."

and trampled in a crazy nightmare.

It tasted like I was eating muddy plants.

I waved him off, sipping my lavender latte. Then I coughed.

"Who?" Dustin rolled his eyes at me. I sighed. "Confident. She's pretty, too." "Get specific. Do you think Xavier has a type?"

does she look like?"

"I think I need to give her the money," I decided aloud.

After leaving Dustin, I trotted over to the bank. The teller smiled up at me as I put in my pin. Her eyes bulged as soon as she saw the amount in the joint Knight bank account. She narrowed them as I requested the money.

"Are you the sole account holder?" she asked me.

and she needed help.

latte into the trash and start on some fresh ones.

Since when had I become such a hypocrite?

I felt my cheeks burn. I knew the draw of money all too well.

looking poorly on a woman in a similarly desperate situation.

"I'd, um, like to withdraw sixteen thousand dollars please," I practically whispered.

The teller looked me up and down, switching from sizing me up to sizing up the screen.

I wasn't doing anything illegal. *Everything will be fine*, I tried to assure myself. But still ... it was bad. It was very, very bad. I didn't want Xavier finding out about his daughter like this, because I'd been betrayed by a bank! And he would know that not only had Claudia lied to him but I was also in on it. I was in on it, and the only reason he found out was because ... because ...

This is it.

was blowing up.

Unbearable screams.

There would be no quietness.

This was it. Everything was about to explode, all because I'd been too dumb to realize I couldn't just withdraw thousands and thousands of dollars without someone finding out.

I took a deep breath.

Is everything okay?

Brad

Brad Brad

Brad Angela!!!

Angela What does soon mean? Angela What things? Angela Maybe I can help Angela I didn't want Xavier to know where I was going. That meant Marco couldn't know either. So, I took the subway out to the Bronx, rushing from train to train in the bitter cold. The last time I'd taken the subway to the Bronx had been right when I moved to the city, when the trains still confused

Angela

Can we meet up?

Angela

Angela

Angela

Angela

I'm not sure I can keep this secret much longer

But I don't like keeping things from Xavier

I really think you should talk to him...

Yes, it's just...

Angela

I know

months in advance." "Oh." Could I just say it? I wondered. ~Could I just tell her that Xavier needed to know?~ If she couldn't tell him, I would. I couldn't help it. I've never been good at keeping secrets, let alone from someone I "Listen...I am going to tell Xavier about Sophie," Claudia asserted before the words could bubble out of my throat. "Why can't you do it now?" I wondered out loud, thinking about how much easier it would be to have the truth *out*.

I wished I didn't know how that felt, but I could vividly recall how Xavier had hated me when he thought I was only in

"I promise, Angela, I will reach out as soon as I have enough money to make sure our daughter is in preschool. Just

I was living the good life with Xavier, eating caviar and sleeping in silk sheets, while Didi and Sophie could barely

I'd watched my dad raise my brothers and me as a single parent. I recognized the same struggle in Didi, now. She

"What would it take to fix this?" I asked. Didi had helped me so much with my career. Surely there was something I

I could see she was using all of her might not to cry, and my heart felt heavy in my chest.

give me a little bit of time. I won't sleep until I can fix this. I haven't actually had a good night's sleep in a long time,"

Claudia had to say something about it. To him. I didn't know how much longer I could torture myself keeping her

We met at a park in her neighborhood in the Bronx, which was good. We'd never see a Knight in this part of town.

I wondered if I was really a Knight now. Scheming, meeting women behind my spouse's back...maybe I had finally

Claudia wanted us to meet by the swings. She wasn't there. I waited, sitting on one, my legs pumping me back and

"I've been working a lot of extra hours. Preschool's about to start, and of course, they want the tuition paid in full

forth in anxiety. As Claudia went from being five minutes late to ten, and then to twenty, I swung higher and higher,

"What do you mean?" Claudia responded, the tears in her eyes transforming into a glimmer. I shrugged, trying to think of things that might have helped my father when I was growing up. "I could help you find a babysitter, buy you some groceries... What do you need?" Didi's eyes dropped to the ground. "The down payment for her preschool is what's hurting most right now." I took a deep breath in. I knew preschools didn't come cheap, although a few grand would hardly put a dent in the Knight bank accounts. I was sure Didi would repay me as soon as things turned around for her... "If you didn't have to think about the preschool bills, would you tell the truth to Xavier?" I wondered. "You could do that?"

Getting Sophie in a preschool would take a lot of pressure off of Didi. Maybe with less stress, she would be able to

I hugged her back, hoping that this wasn't a mistake. Hoping that this would bring Xavier closer to his daughter and not rip him and me apart. "OMG, you gave her the money?" Dustin screeched, spilling the lattes he was serving me. "Well, not yet wondering if filling him in was a good idea. "Damn. Well. I wish I could have a bazillionaire's love child. Instead, I'm just a starving artist, making coffee, trying to sleep my way to the middle," Dustin joked. "Dustin," I scolded, looking at the coffee-sipping customers around us and hoping that none of them were listening.

The last thing I needed was news of Xavier's love child hitting the papers before Didi had the chance to speak with

Dustin shrugged. "If this painting thing doesn't work out, I'll need someone to take care of me. I have no other talents."

..." I said,

"If I told you Xavier knocked me up, would you give me money?" "This isn't a joke, Dustin. This is serious," I whined, dropping my face into my hands. "Sorry, Angie. I know it is. I'm glad you came to me to vent," Dustin noted, reaching across the table and patting my hand. "Even if I'm making it worse, at least you were laughing a second ago, right? Even if it was just at the lavender latte?" At that, I smiled. I was glad I'd come to him too. The secret had made me feel so alone, as if there were a glass box around me and everyone else was just looking in.

Someone needed to know what I was doing, just to make sure I didn't feel like this was all just me dreaming, trapped

"I don't know what to tell you, Angie," Dustin admitted. "I think you need to trust your gut. What feels right?"

I glowered at him. Nothing felt right anymore. I didn't know how I had gotten myself into the middle of this big

"Lucky bitch." Dustin winked then leaned in closer, his eyes gleaming like they always did when he gossiped. "What

tangled mess. I knew that I didn't like the thought of Didi struggling alone, though.

"Well...she's a redhead. Her clothes are louder than a rock and roll concert," I noted. He looked at me, concerned. "Does that mean something?" I asked, my eyes widening. "Um...of course not. Maybe she was blonde when they dated," Dustin replied. "What do you mean? Do you think he'd rather be with someone like her?" Dustin took a sip of his coffee, his nose wrinkling from the taste. "Sweetheart, your last name is Knight. That means you're his type." "What if types don't matter? I mean Xavier's everyone's type. I've never met a girl who wasn't interested in him."

"Money is some pretty alluring cologne, babe," Dustin reminded me as he walked back behind the counter to throw his

When you looked at it objectively, money was how I had wound up married to Xavier in the first place. And now I was

It shouldn't matter who Xavier's type was, who was married to him, or who had his child. Didi was a friend, my friend,

"Excuse me?" I replied, confusion rippling through me. *The sole account holder?* "Well, for an amount that high, we have to notify the account custodian of the withdrawal," she said. "I'll just check the account file." "The account custodian? What does that mean?" I questioned. "We're just going to send a quick email to the person who started the account to see if they approve of the transaction." My pulse quickened. Sweat began to form along my hairline.

"Wait...never mind," I squeaked out to the teller. "I don't need the money anymore, so if you could just cancel the—"

Any chance of redemption, of rescuing Xavier from the whirlwind he was about to be sucked into, was gone.

In fact, I could already imagine the type of volume that'd surround me as soon as everything became clear.

The whole point of getting the money, of helping Claudia out financially, was to keep things quiet, but now everything

"I already sent the request," she interrupted, irritation dripping from her tone.

Shouts. Questions and answers, flying through the air. All directed at me. BEEP. BEEP. The sound of an incoming message on my phone rang through the air, making me wince.

I'd let everyone down, Xavier, Claudia, and even poor Sophie, all in one single careless sweep.

And then I took my phone out of my pocket, looking right at the screen.

Why do you need so much money? Is your dad sick again?