

**The Arrangement**  
S.S. Sahoo

## Closing the Deal

### XAVIER

"Don't worry, Dave! There's more where that came from," I shouted as I poured a few fingers of Jameson Gold Reserve in his tumbler.

Sure, work hadn't exactly been a walk in the park lately. But here I was, doing what I did best...  
Closing the fuckin' deal.

A ski resort, mountain included, is just what Knight Enterprises needed to take it to the next level of luxury service. And in the Swiss Alps, no less.

I was this close to making it mine.  
I sat casually on my desk, facing the two businessmen gathered in my corner office.

"Here's to the Alps!" I toasted. We all clinked our glasses together. After I took a swig, I continued, "And to many ski trips with the wives — eh, boys?"

They cheered, eating it up.  
It was too easy. I knew what men wanted to hear, and it was a pretty simple combination of liquor flowing and bills rustling.

"My wife can't stand the cold," Joseph complained, studying his handful of gold rings.  
"Then bring the mistress!" Dave shouted, clapping him on the back.

We all guffawed until we were red in the face.  
Of course, I was a new man now — loyal to my wife, in touch with my emotions, and so on — but these guys didn't need to know that.

"Now, gentlemen," I began, ready to go in for the kill. "Shall we talk numbers for a minute?"  
"Not so fast there," Dave said, draining his glass. "Let's do a shot, X. What do you say?"

"Of course!" I agreed, though in my head I cursed the bastard. He wouldn't be satisfied until I was stumbling in a drunken stupor. I finished my glass and refilled both of ours with whiskey.

"Not so fast, X!" Dave yelled, lowering himself down on one knee. "You're gonna kneel for it! Just like my brothers used to at Alpha Delta Phi!"

*Fucking shit.*  
I wasn't in the mood to relive Dave's frat fantasies, but I knelt beside him, and we let out a rowdy "Cheers!"

With my head tipped back, I heard the door of my office open. I nearly spit up my shot when I lowered my glass — Penny had just entered the room.

"Penny?!" I barked.  
"Hello, gentlemen." She smiled, dropping into the free leather seat and crossing her shapely legs at the knee. "Joseph, it's nice to see you again."

"You, too!" the poor bastard blurted. His eyes roamed over her body, her modest business-casual dress hinting at the shapely body she had underneath.

I returned to my spot on my desk, folding my arms over my chest and willing the room not to spin.  
It took all of my composure not to yell at Penny to leave.

I saw what she was doing.  
Penny was usually a quiet and reserved girl—at least until she hit the stage. I could see she was channeling that same energy in this meeting.

And these poor fuckers were falling for it hook, line, and sinker.  
I decided I would just continue the meeting as if she weren't there.

"So, let's get back to it. The numbers ...," I began.  
"Oh, Xavier, now *that's* no fun," Penny interrupted.

Who did this bitch think she was? Smoke must have been coming out of my ears—I was so angry.  
"I promised Joseph I would tell him our plans for the spa," she continued.

The two men were hanging on her every word. I could hardly tell her to piss off.  
Fine then. I would play her game and play it better.

"Oh, yes," I said. "The renovation we're planning will totally revitalize the existing space. Think more glass, more fireplaces, everything white as the snow outside the floor-to-ceiling windows."

The men nodded at me approvingly before their gaze naturally drifted back to Penny's bare calves.  
"Precisely. And we will be able to utilize the water of nearby Lake Moritz, creating a freshwater indoor pool—the only one of its kind in all of Switzerland!"

"Ooooh," Joseph gushed. "Now that's just fantastic, Penny."  
*Jesus Christ.* I rolled my eyes.

"We think so, too," my former flame agreed.  
"All right, all right. We can talk deal now," Dave asserted.

*Finally.* I leaned in, ready for him to say the number ...  
"We can sell you the property for thirty million, and moving forward, we'll split the profit seventy percent for you and thirty percent for us."

*Perfect.* The numbers rang in my ears like bells. It sounded like sweet victory.  
"We'll take —"

"We'll take some time to look at other properties," Penny cut in. "We aren't willing to settle for a seventy percent stake, but I appreciate you taking the time, gentlemen."

*What. The. Fuck?*  
Who did this woman think she was? I jumped down from my desk, clamoring for a way to save the deal.

"Guys, I—" I began, but wasn't sure what to say. Dave's mouth was hanging open in shock. Joseph searched his business partner's face.

Penny was standing up, smoothing her pencil skirt.  
As I glared at her, she winked.

"It was nice to see you again, gentlemen," she chirped, ushering them out the door. "You'll hear from us soon."  
Joseph and Dave left in a daze of shock and alcohol. Once the doors closed, I turned to Penny, ready to let her have it.

She collapsed into the leather chair with a big sigh.  
"Ugh, I can't believe we pulled that off!" she said.

She fanned her red cheeks with her hands.  
"I've never actually closed a business deal before. Sure, I've practiced, but it's way different when I'm alone in my room in my pajamas ...," She laughed, shaking her head in wonder.

For a second, I was speechless.  
It was like she was a different person.

"Closed a business deal?!" I demanded. "More like ruined! What the hell are you thinking?!"  
"Huh?" Penny's eyes were wide with confusion. "We talked about this yesterday, Xavier. We were running the good guy, bad guy routine, right?"

The fuck is she talking about?  
My expression was apparently all the answer she needed. She seemed to deflate, her excitement disappearing.

"You weren't listening, were you?" A look of concern flashed over her face. "Oh my God, if you didn't know, it must've looked like I trampled all over you there. Gosh, Xavier, I'm so sorry."

I took in a deep breath as I thought back to yesterday.  
I vaguely remembered a meeting we'd had ...but I'd been distracted. I had a lot of shit to deal with, and Penny's insertion into the company was not an easy thing to get used to.

"It's fine, I guess ...," Penny sighed. "Trust me, okay? Things will work out."  
She got up and left me alone to fume.

Trust Penny?  
That was definitely something easier said than done ...

### ANGELA

"So, this Marlena's website." I angled the screen towards Zoe. "Check out these sculptures she made a few years ago! Aren't they crazy?!"

My new assistant and I gazed at my MacBook, captivated by the fluorescent silicone monsters that Marlena had created.  
"Incredible. And look! They were huge! There's a picture of Marlena beside them."

A neon yellow hippo-bunny hybrid stood practically to Marlena's chin. The artist peered mischievously out at us from behind her signature red glasses.  
I smiled at Zoe. She was still looking at Marlena's work, and her genuine excitement thrilled me.

When I offered Zoe the job in the park, she accepted right away. I invited her to come over to the penthouse for some coffee and planning, and so we could talk about the details of the job.

Well, I had said "apartment" when I invited her, so Zoe was naturally quite surprised at how ... comfortable the place was.

"So the only gig I have lined up right now is the gallery opening ... but I'm hoping to have more work soon. How about I pay you just for the first month, and then we go from there?"

Zoe nodded. "That sounds great."  
"Awesome. So the job will be part-time, about twenty hours per week, but sometimes more. How does \$3,000 per month sound?"

Zoe could hardly conceal her shocked expression. I knew it was a lot of money, but I wanted to help this young woman.  
"That's so generous of you."

I shrugged. "So now that *that's* taken care of, let's talk planning!"  
I took out my notebook and looked over my tasks.

"So, Marlena's paintings have to be stretched in the gallery, so we'll need a great team of art handlers ..."  
I was about to type a Google search when Zoe spoke up.

"Oh, I know a great team! My older brother actually runs an art handling business."  
"How fantastic!"

"He'd love to help. I'm sure. I'll shoot him a text now."  
I made a check next to my "art handling" note.

"You have quite the talented family," I said.  
"My parents are musicians," she explained, "and they always encouraged us to be creative."

"Like the concert you organized in the park the other day?" I smiled. "Do you play an instrument, too?"  
"No, I just like to listen," Zoe said. Then she blushed. "I love to dance, though."

I couldn't help but be charmed by the young woman. Her brown eyes were honest, and she was clearly humble, even though she was so capable.  
I could tell Zoe was shy, but she was young. She reminded me of myself just a few years earlier. Fresh-faced and wide-eyed ...

"I love dancing, too!" I cried. "Well, my husband and I love the bolero."  
She giggled. "The bolero is super fun."

"So, I'll let you go for today," I said, rising from my seat and pulling her into a quick hug. "Thanks so much for your hard work! I can't tell you how lucky I am that I found you. Are you free to meet again tomorrow?"

She agreed, and then I walked her to the elevator and sent her out into the day.  
Alone in my apartment, I practically skipped back to the dining room table. I felt like I found the perfect assistant. And I had to admit — I loved being a boss!

It felt amazing to give someone an opportunity, to lead a promising young woman through a project.  
I sighed happily, leaning back in my chair.

I decided to tackle one more thing on my event to-do list, and I picked up my phone.

**ANGELA**  
Hey chica! How are you?

**EM**  
Hey

**EM**  
God

**EM**  
So tired

**EM**  
But good 😊

**ANGELA**  
I have a question for you!

**ANGELA**  
It involves 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

**EM**  
🙄

**ANGELA**  
Would you be interested in making arrangements for an art gallery opening I have coming up?

**ANGELA**  
Will be amazing!

**EM**  
Uh...

**EM**  
I don't think so, Angie. I'm sorry.

**EM**  
I just want to focus on Bella right now.

**EM**  
Hope you understand!

**ANGELA**  
Of course 😊

I put my phone facedown on the table.  
Did I understand? Of course I did, in theory. But then why did I feel sad suddenly, after I had been so happy? And why did I feel so far away from my best friend and sister-in-law?

Because even though she was just in New Jersey, we were in totally different places right now. And I hadn't realized it.  
Em was married, but I was too. And Xavier and I were also planning to make a family.

Of course, Em had a baby, and babies changed everything. Perhaps I just hadn't realized how much ...  
Em seemed so willing to put aside a huge job to spend time with Bella. Could I soon put aside my career? Right when it was just starting to take off?

I shook my head and stood up from the table. I was thinking too much.  
Looking out at the penthouse bathed in midday sun, I knew just what could distract me.

Xavier and I had arranged Brad's diaries on a special shelf. As if drawn by a magnet, I walked towards them.  
I picked up a thin leather book and flipped open to a random page. I immediately gasped. Nothing could have prepared me for the first words of Brad's entry ...