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THE ARRANGEMENT

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CHAPTER 1

The Authorized Expense

The desk sat in the corner of the den where the morning light came in late, and by the time Evelyn opened the checkbook the sun had moved off the blotter and onto the floor, which was better for reading the stubs anyway. The household account was hers to work. Richard had said so the first year, in his way, which was to hand her the folder and the bank statements and say, You're better at the arithmetic than I am, and then to ask, every so often, what she had done with it, in the tone of a man who already believed the answer would be fine.

She wrote the check to Verano alterations on Hillhurst for eight hundred dollars and entered it in the ledger under household maintenance. The entry looked like every other entry. Roof cleaning, the gardener's bill, the man who had rehung the closet door in Nora's room. Eight hundred dollars was not a strange number for a house this size, and the dress was not a strange thing to spend it on. It was her green dress, the one Paul had never liked and Richard had never seen her wear, and it needed to be let out through the waist and taken in at the should-

er, which was two kinds of work and two kinds of charge, and Mrs. Verano had quoted her the eight hundred over the counter with the pins still in the fabric.

A loan, she said to herself, and the sentence was true in every part that could be checked. She would pay it back. She knew the exact mechanics of paying it back, which was the difference between her and a person who simply took: she would put the eight hundred back into the household account before Richard's year-end with the accountant, folded in among the ordinary entries so that even the repayment would look like nothing. Where it would come from was a question for the fall, and this morning it did not have to be answered.

She was still squaring the ledger against the statement when the phone rang on the den line.

"Evelyn Marsh."

"Evelyn. Howard Lim." He always gave his name as though she might have forgotten it, which after four of her tax seasons with him was its own kind of accounting. "I'm looking at June. I have the statement here and I have some of the receipts, and I want to make sure I see the month the way the bank saw it."

"You usually do."

"There's a payment on the fourteenth I don't have paper for. It shows as a household expense, maintenance, but I don't have a receipt for it and I don't have an invoice. When I close a month I like the file to match the statement. I don't like to guess at what an entry was."

"It was maintenance," she said. "Work done on the house. I have the receipt somewhere, I haven't filed it yet. It's been a busy month." Both of those sentences were true, and she said them in the order that put the receipt first.

"Then send it to me," Howard said. "That's all I need. I don't need an explanation, I need the paper. If I have the paper then nobody has to have any conversation about anything. That's how I like a quarter to look. Send me whatever else you find for the month, too, because I'm missing two small ones, the plumber and the chimney."

She wrote maintenance, receipt to follow on the margin of the ledger, in her own shorthand, and said she would have everything to him by the end of the week. He thanked her, said something brief about Richard's restoration mix and how much of the year it was going to eat, and hung up on his own schedule the way he always did, without a goodbye that took any time.

She put the receiver down and looked at what she had written in the margin. Receipt to follow. There was a real invoice for the chimney and a real one for the plumber, and there would be a receipt for the dress too, a true one, which said alterations; she would decide later whether Howard needed to see it. By the end of August there would be six of the eight-hundred entries in the ledger, each one a loan she had every intention of repaying. She squared the checkbook, closed the ledger, and put the green dress's claim ticket in her purse where the household receipts were not.

* * *

The appointment was at four, her own, the one she had made at the hair place on Vermont and then moved once already because Richard had needed her home on the Tuesday for a delivery. She had it written in her purse calendar in ink, which around this house was beginning to look like a joke.

Richard came into the kitchen that afternoon with his glasses pushed up into his hair and the cordless in his hand, not his own line, the kitchen line, which he preferred when he was making arrangements because he liked to stand where the light was.

"The Sub-Zero man can come today," he said. "Between four and six. I got him to move a week up from where he was, which took some doing. You'll be here."

"I have a four o'clock," she said.

"For your hair." He said it as if she had told him about a television program. "Move it. Or keep it, and he comes anyway, and I'll cover whatever they charge you to cancel. What is it, twenty dollars?"

"Twenty-five."

"Twenty-five," he said, and reached past her for the cookie jar, which had never once held cookies, and took out a twenty and a five, and set them on the counter next to her hand with the exactness of a man balancing a register. "There. Now nobody's out anything and the ice maker gets fixed. Sam's mix is due at the stage Thursday and I can't sit in this house all afternoon waiting for a man to look at a fan motor."

She looked at the two bills. They were real, they were hers now if she wanted them, and the appointment was her own and the money was hers too, and the whole thing had been arranged in the time it took him to walk in from the den. The freezer had been rattling for three weeks and she had mentioned it twice, and this was the trouble with Richard: you could not say he never listened, because the proof that he had listened was standing on the counter in exact change.

"I'd rather keep the appointment," she said.

"Then call them back and reschedule it. Evelyn, it's hair."

"It's four o'clock today," she said. "And the twenty-five dollars isn't the point."

"Then what is the point? I fixed the time so you don't have to sit here, I'm paying your fee, the man's coming at the hour you'd be home anyway if you hadn't made a—" He stopped, because he had heard himself, and put his glasses back down on his nose. "All right. What's the point?"

"Ask me first," she said. "That's the point. Before you book somebody into an afternoon, ask me whether the afternoon is free. Not after, and not with the fee attached, as though the fee settles it."

He considered this with his mouth in the shape it got on the mixing stage, she had seen it through the glass, when a director wanted a thing brightened that was meant to be dark. "You'd rather I cleared it with you," he said. "Fine. I should have asked. I'm asking now: can you be here between four and six for the Sub-Zero man?"

"And I'm saying next time, before." She picked up the twenty-five dollars and put it back in the jar, which he watched with a small hurt line coming in at the corner of one eye. "I'll call the salon and move it. Thursday. It's only hair, you said so."

"You want to fight about the order of operations," he said, "and I want a working freezer, and both of those things can happen." He came around the counter and put his arm across her shoulders and pressed his mouth to her temple, and he smelled the way the stage smelled, coffee and the rubber of the potting compound on the cable ends. "I'll be home by seven. If the man gives you any trouble about the fan, get his card and I'll call him myself."

Nora came in with Luke behind her, the two of them on their way to the refrigerator like animals to a water hole, Nora reaching past Richard without altering her path. She had her headphones around her neck and a geometry book under her arm and she took out the orange juice and poured two glasses and handed one back over her shoulder to Luke, who was reading the side of a cereal box.

"Mom, I'm at the library until dinner," Nora said. "Dad's picking me up Sunday, so the ortho thing Saturday still works, right?"

"It works," Evelyn said. "Saturday at ten, and don't eat anything after you brush Friday night, he can tell."

Luke set the cereal box down. "Is that the fridge guy coming today? I heard it stop rattling and start again."

"Between four and six," Richard said, pleased, as if Luke had endorsed the plan. "You'll probably hear the whole thing from the driveway."

They took the juice and went out through the door to the pool, arguing about something Evelyn couldn't make out, and the kitchen was quiet again with just the ice maker ticking its small failing tick. Richard finished his coffee and carried the cup to the sink and rinsed it himself, which he did everywhere, even at other people's houses.

"Thursday," he said, on his way back to the den. "Your hair. I'll be listening for it."

She waited until he was down the hall, then dialed the salon and moved the appointment to Thursday morning and apologized to the girl who answered. She wrote the new appointment over the old one, in ink.

End of sample

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