

The Arrangement
S.S. Sahoo

Highs and Lows

ANGELA

"Angela?" the voice on the phone asked.

"This is she," I squeaked.

"This is Hannah Flintour."

I sat down so I wouldn't fall to the ground if I passed out.

"So," Hannah Flintour went on, "we all loved your Chaos and Order proposal."

I beamed.

"Dionysus and Apollo. So clever and *on brand*."

"Thank you!" I gushed, my smile taking up my whole face.

"We just had a long discussion here at Vague ..." Hannah began, and I held my breath. "And we would love to work with you for the Gala!"

O. M. F. G.

Was I dreaming?!

Or did I just land the *Gala*?!

"I am so happy to hear that!" I burst out. My knees were bouncing up and down with excitement.

"Now, Angela, before we make any deals here, I want to be honest with you for a second."

"Okay ..." I said, certain that nothing she could say would make me change my mind.

I was going to plan the Gala.

"Working with us on the Gala is any event planner's dream. But it's *incredibly* difficult work."

"And I'm up for—"

"One minute, darling. This task will require *all* of your attention for the two months leading up to the event. It is more than a full-time job. It is not easy, and it is not for the faint of heart."

I gulped. But still, there was no doubt in my mind.

"I understand, Hannah," I told her. "And I'm ready for the challenge."

I exhaled, settling into the reality of my new job. "It is such an honor to work with you on this!"

"I'm glad to hear it, Angela. I'll be in touch tomorrow with more details. Ciao ciao!"

"Amazing. Thank you so much! Ciao ciao!"

I stared at my phone.

Did I just say *ciao ciao*?

Who was I?!

I was the woman who was planning the *GALA*!!

I stood up and did a happy dance.

There were so many people I wanted to tell.

But first?

Zoe!

ANGELA
Hey, girl.

ANGELA
I have BIG news.

ANGELA
Are you free to meet tomorrow morning? At Dustin's?

ZOE

Yes!

ZOE

Can't wait.

I was too excited to stand still. I continued my silly little dance all the way to the living room speaker.

"Alexa, play something I can dance to!"

I couldn't wait for Xavier to come home, but until then, I would celebrate with Alexa.

ABBA poured from the speaker. I turned it up.

"Oh, yeah!" I sang, playing air guitar and bounding around the room.

XAVIER

I came home to find my wife having a dance party alone in the apartment.

It was late, and I was drunk. I was happy to see her, but I wasn't in the mood to dance. Though I had my usual rowdy fun at The Hatchback, things started to feel significantly less fun once Penny left.

Sure, I'd been crude and mean. But I was just shooting the shit. Everyone knew that.

Right?

"Come on!" Angela called, pulling my hand so I would join her.

"I'll wait here," I said, dropping onto the couch.

My body sank into the soft leather. I felt like a deflated balloon.

I watched my wife do the cha-cha, and then she turned around and shook her shapely butt at me.

"Sit with me!" I begged.

I was happy to see her so happy, but all I wanted was to be close to her. So close I didn't have to think about anything else ...

She leapt onto the couch and straddled me.

"So tell me what made you so happy," I requested, gazing up into her sparkling eyes.

The music was still blaring, so she leaned down and cradled my face with her hands.

"I got the *GALA*!!!" she burst out, squealing with delight.

I stared at my wife. Her words didn't register.

How drunk was I?

"I know," she went on. "I can hardly believe it either!"

Then it hit me. Angela was going to plan Vague's Annual Gala.

Of course, I knew Angela had real talent. But for some reason, I hadn't considered that it would all come together ...

"Congrats, baby!" I said, pulling her down so I could kiss her. "I'm so happy for you."

"Thank you," she gushed. "It's going to be so much work ... but I can't wait."

"How much work?" I asked.

"Long days," she said. "Hannah said it would be more than full-time until the Gala! I'll be working overtime, just like you!"

She was still smiling, expecting that I would celebrate with her. But I just couldn't muster up the enthusiasm.

Maybe, somewhere in the back of my mind, I hadn't *wanted* Angela to get the Gala gig. Of course, I wanted her to reach her dreams, but I hadn't realized that her dreams were about work.

I thought they were about making a family. With me.

"When's the Gala?"

"In two months," she answered, her brow furrowing.

"*Two months*, Angie?"

I knew my disappointment was clear, but I was upset. I couldn't deal with this right now.

I thought that in two months, Angela could be pregnant. And we would be well on our way to having a family together.

To fulfilling my father's last wish ...

I suddenly stood up. Angela stood up beside me, placing her hands on my chest.

"Of course it's in two months," she said, and her voice was small. "What's wrong, baby?"

I shrugged away from her touch, not meeting her eyes.

I couldn't tell her what I felt.

"Please!" she said, trying to hold on to me as I retreated to my bedroom. "Tell me what's wrong!"

"Alexa, turn off the goddamn music!!!" I yelled. Finally, it was quiet.

I sighed. This week had been a century. All I wanted was to go to sleep.

"Angela, I thought we both wanted to have a family. Like, starting now. But now I see what your priorities are."

Her face fell. I saw that what I said hit a nerve.

"Baby ..." she tried.

I wasn't sticking around to hear her explanations.

"I have to go to sleep," I said.

"I still want a family! What're a few months?! It'll fly by. We can keep trying now!"

She rambled on desperately, following me as I undressed in my room.

"Everything will be okay, Xavier. The Gala won't change anything!"

Stripped down to my boxer shorts, I climbed right into bed. I was too fucking tired to brush my teeth.

"We can—"

"Angela," I said, my voice straining. "I need to go to bed, and I think it would be best if I sleep alone tonight."

My eyes were already closed, and I pulled the blanket over my head.

ANGELA

How was it possible to go from being so happy to so sad?

If life was a series of peaks and valleys, I was below sea level now. And I had fallen from the top of Mount Everest.

I dragged my feet to the doorway of my bedroom and stared at the lump on the bed.

If only I could burrow under there with my husband and wrap my arms around him so tightly that I could undo the night we just had.

Maybe if I'd brought it up with him differently ... if I'd showed him that our family was still first on my list of priorities ...

But, honestly, getting pregnant hadn't even crossed my mind during my phone call with Hannah Flintour. I was focused on fulfilling my dream.

And I didn't want to apologize for that.

I lingered in the doorway for one moment more. As much as I hated to leave him, I wanted to respect Xavier's wish to be alone.

The dark living room was a ghost town without the dance music. I pulled Brad's diary from the shelf and took it with me to the guest room.

I turned on the light of the bedroom that used to be mine.

As I crossed the carpet and sat on the bed, I thought of all the nights I spent here. How strange Xavier was to me then. And how unfamiliar his world ...

It might as well have been a lifetime ago. My husband was a totally different man than the playboy I first married.

His world of power and luxury had become *my world*.

I brushed my teeth in the adjacent bathroom. Realizing all my pajamas were in the master bedroom, I undressed and put on the bathrobe that hung on the door, as if our apartment was a hotel.

I tore back the duvet cover and climbed into bed. The expanse of white sheets welcomed me and somehow soothed my sadness.

Not wanting to get lost in my own thoughts, I grabbed Brad's diary from the nightstand and pressed the leather book to my chest.

If only you were still here.

I knew Brad would understand this feeling of being torn between work and family.

I opened his diary to the place I left off earlier tonight, when Amelia had just left Martha's Vineyard, and Brad was lying in the sun, missing her ...

BRAD

Now I'm sitting on the beach with Mom, cursing myself because I never asked Amelia what she thought about Martha's Vineyard.

If I knew that, maybe I would be able to figure her out. She was always thinking, quietly taking in the scene, and I thought she was having fun, but now I can't be sure.

I just hope she liked it here. If she really liked it, that might mean she really liked me.

I guess I just don't know what to make of it all, and now that she's gone, I wonder what she left me to hold on to.

It's not like she was so easy to be around, which seems like something people want...

I often felt nervous with her, like I wasn't sure if I said the right thing. Usually, I never worry about things like that.

But whenever Amelia was around, she was the only person I saw. She was the brightest thing on the island, and now that she's gone, I'm in the dark.

I think all the sun is getting to my head. And Mom keeps asking me if we plan to keep in touch...

I'm just going crazy thinking about it all, and feeling kind of lonely.

A few more weeks before I go to New York. I've always thought that's when my life will really begin. Especially now that Amelia might visit me there...

I think I'll go for a swim. Maybe then I'll be able to stop thinking.

ANGELA

I closed Brad's diary and laid my hand on its soft surface.

I wished I could reach back in time and comfort him when he was so young and afflicted. I would tell him not to worry because he and Amelia found true love.

They would build a beautiful life together.

Don't worry... It will all turn out okay.

I tried to hold on to these words. Reading about Brad's loneliness while I was so alone eased my burden somehow.

I closed my eyes, thinking of Brad, young and lying in the sun, and Xavier, sleeping alone in our bedroom. And then I too drifted off...