

## **The Arrangement | by S.S. Sahoo**

### **All Laced Up**

XAVIER

I don't know what came over me when I decided to pay Angela's family a visit for Thanksgiving.

Maybe it was morbid curiosity.

Maybe I wanted to see what a gold digger's family looked like.

Maybe I wanted to get dirt on her so I could run her out of the city before our dreaded wedding day came.

But all I found was an awkward time around the dinner table and a shitty meal.

I took another bite of turkey, somehow managing to keep a straight face.

No matter how much I drenched it in gravy, it still felt like taking a bite out of the fucking Sahara Desert.

"More stuffing?"

I looked up to find the oldest brother offering me another spoonful of muck. He was obviously trying to be polite, but I knew he was forcing it.

I could feel the straight-up hostility rolling in waves off of them all.

"Please," I said, holding out my plate for more tasteless stuffing. "My compliments to the chef."

"At least someone remembered to bring the pie," the other brother commented. He was trying to fill the silence. "You could've just told us you were bringing him along, Angie."

"I-I wanted it to be a surprise," Angela choked out.

“Well it sure as hell was a big one,” the dad muttered. He stared at me, and I plastered a fake smile on my face in return. He was definitely wearing his years pretty heavily. It looked like he’d just gotten out of the hospital.

“So, how did you two meet?” he grunted out.

“It’s a funny story, actually.” I gave my gold-digging fiancée a razor-toothed smile. “But Angela tells it better than I do.”

She immediately turned beet red. Her face looked like it had been cooked in an oven for way too long. I poked at the dry slab of meat on my plate.

*I’m sure you can relate, you poor bastard.*

“We kind of met unexpectedly...”

I sat back and listened as Angela spun some bullshit tale of how we met at a hole-in-the-wall dim sum place. I contributed with nods and smiles and a chuckle or two at the appropriate times.

I’m not sure what I’d expected to find by going to Angela’s house.

*A den of snakes?*

*A traveling gypsy family of scammers?*

I’d expected them to try and butter me up. To suck up to me, to try and flatter the big fish that their daughter had caught on her string of lies.

But as far as I could tell, they looked like a boring, regular old family. They were overprotective and worried about their precious daughter and sister. In their eyes, she could do no wrong.

She was a saint.

An angel.

But this *angel* was lying through her teeth.

I watched her with narrowed eyes.

Speaking on a completely superficial level, Angela was a stunner. There was no denying that. She had luscious blonde hair, bright, intelligent eyes, and the type of body that would have any man daydreaming.

She was *girl next door* meets ~Playboy magazine pinup girl~.

“Sounds like you two are moving real fast,” the dad said. “What do you like about Angela? What made you propose to my daughter?”

“Dad!” she protested.

I glanced at Angela. Her doe eyes were wide and pleading.

I could have just spilled out the truth of it all right then.

Told her family her dirty little secret.

But that wouldn't have done me any good.

All I knew was that if I married this woman, Dad would guarantee me my position at the company. That I would eventually be given my birthright as CEO of Knight Enterprises.

And if that meant fooling this hick family from New Jersey, then so be it.

“What's not to like?” I asked. I gazed into Angela's eyes. “Your daughter is beautiful. She's compassionate, and the kindest woman I've ever met. And I know that she's going to be *honest* and ~loyal~ for the rest of our lives together.”

Angela flinched, and she had the decency to look down in shame.

“Hmm...” Papa Gold Digger grunted and shoved a spoonful of mashed potatoes into his mouth.

He didn't look entirely convinced, but he let it drop for now.

I felt Angela's hand squeeze mine underneath the table. She glanced over at me and mouthed a silent *thank-you*.

For a split second I felt the tension in my shoulders relax. My annoyance and anger faded away underneath her touch, and I found myself lost in her eyes.

But then the rational part of my brain curbstomped the stupid, sentimental side.

I pulled away from her, angrier than before.

*Don't fall for her tricks.*

*All women ever want is your money.*

*Your status.*

*And if you let your guard down even for a second, they're going to rip your fucking heart out.*

"Looks like the game's back on," one of the brothers said. The men jumped at the opportunity to escape the awkward dinner conversation. I didn't blame them.

"I'll take care of the dishes," I said as they began to pick up their plates. "It's the least I can do, being a surprise guest and all."

"Thanks, Skip," Father Longtooth said. He began to wheel himself over to the living room before he stopped and looked at me. "You a football fan?"

"Of course," I said. "Fuck the Eagles."

He grunted his approval before disappearing into the living room, his sons following him.

But the most problematic of the bunch decided to stay.

She silently helped clear the table, refusing to meet my gaze.

"What's in this for you?" I demanded.

ANGELA

I nearly dropped the plate I was holding.

"Do you have some dirt on my dad or something?" Xavier continued. "Why the hell does he want me to marry you?"

"I'm not blackmailing anyone," I said.

“Then what the hell is going on?” He stepped closer and towered over me. But he wasn’t trying to intimidate me.

For the first time since I’d met Xavier, he looked sincere. His open, confused expression wasn’t an act.

“Be honest with me,” he said, his voice low.

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach.

My heart pounded in my ears.

This was a glimpse of the man behind the cruel mask.

He was extending an olive branch.

*Will everything be okay if I tell him the truth?*

*Will he hate me less? Hate me more?*

*Will we be able to have an actual relationship?*

I opened my mouth, but the words wouldn’t come. The truth was sealed behind the contract I’d signed with Brad.

“I...I just really like you, and I thought we could have a happy life together.” The words sounded flimsy and weak, even to my own ears.

Xavier’s face darkened, and I watched the olive branch catch fire before me. He withdrew from me, that cruel, cold mask slipping back into place.

“You’re wrong about that,” he said, his words as sharp as a knife. “Our life together is going to be anything *but* happy.”

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“THIS ISN’T REAL! THIS CAN’T BE REAL!”

Em mirrored my thoughts as she kicked off her shoes and ran across the heated marble floors.

I looked around at the bridal suite of the Knights’ Tribeca hotel. The place looked more like a museum than a room. It was all so picture-perfect.

But I couldn't even muster the slightest bit of excitement within myself.

In the week between Thanksgiving and the wedding, Dad had had another stroke.

They'd put him into a medically induced coma a few days ago. I'd wanted to rush to his side, but Lucas and Danny told me there was nothing I could do. He was stable.

And they didn't know how long he'd be in a coma for...

I felt tears welling up in my eyes.

Dad wouldn't be there to walk me down the aisle.

Em returned from the grand kitchen and handed me a glass.

"Mimosas?" I frowned down at the drink. "It's barely past lunch."

"Girl, if there's any day you can drink a bit earlier, it's today." She sipped at her own cocktail. "You're getting married."

I'd told Em the same story I told my family. I'd been telling the lie so often I was almost starting to believe it myself.

"A toast to you," Em said, clinking her glass against mine. "I'm so happy you're happy." She looked right at me as she said it, her eyes searching mine. It was almost like she was waiting for me to confirm it.

A knock at the door saved me from answering. Em scurried over and opened it, revealing a gaggle of fabulous-looking women in all-black uniforms.

"We're the bridal team," the one in front said. I noticed Sky, the makeup artist from the photo shoot, among them.

The women marched into the room and began setting up their stations in the bedroom-sized bathroom. One of them pointed at me and, with a rough flick of her chin, gestured for me to follow.

They worked on me for what felt like hours. The women were like a quartet of angry fairy godmothers, whipping Cinderella up into shape before the ball.

I wasn't used to being pampered. Whenever I lifted a finger to adjust something, I'd be scolded with hard stares and sharp hisses.

They used beauty products on me that I'd never seen before in my life.

Apparently my dress was personally designed by somebody named Alexander Wang.

I felt numb. Almost like I was having an out-of-body experience. But when they were all finished with me, when I saw myself in the full-length mirror, everything came into sharp focus.

*That isn't me. There's no way.*

But it was. My skin was wrapped in a gown meant for a queen. The way it draped and clung, the way the ivory made my skin glow, the way the corset hugged my figure and the train fell straight behind me on the floor, it was all perfect.

Too perfect.

"OHMYGOSHOHMYGOSHOHMYGOSH," Em squealed and ran toward the reflection, ogling the dress.

"You look so beautiful. You look so *royal*. What is this dress? Where can I get one?"

"Em," I said after a few seconds, my eyes still locked on myself in the mirror. "This is happening. I'm getting married."

She stepped closer to me and squeezed my hand. "You are, Angie. You are."

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Em had gone to take her seat in the front pew—while she was my maid of honor, Brad had insisted only Xavier and I were to stand on the raised platform. The bridal team had left, too, so it was just me, alone, in the too-big suite. In the dress that I shouldn't be wearing, with my hair all done up, and my face contoured and highlighted.

This was it.

I took a deep breath and another gulp of champagne, and then I opened the door and stepped outside. The second I did, I heard my name called from down the hallway. I turned to find Danny, looking all dapper in a tux. I knew that he didn't own a tux, and it was probably rented or borrowed from a friend, and that made me smile. *That* felt normal.

"Hi, Danny," I said as he bear-hugged me.

"You look stunning," he said. "This is fucking crazy."

"I *know*."

"I was hoping to catch you before...you know, your big moment," he said, and he couldn't quite look me in the eye. "Lucas is holding our seats in there, but... Look, sis, I know we've given you a hard time about this. But you gotta know, Angie, we're proud of ya. Dad is too."

"You think so?"

"He's proud of everything you do, you know that. You're the smart one," he said. And I knew he meant it, which weighed on my heart even more. "But if that son of a bitch ever does anything to hurt ya, you know we got a crowbar the size of Kentucky in our shed."

I couldn't help the tears welling in my eyes. "I know, Dan," I said, trying to look at the ceiling so the tears wouldn't drop and ruin Sky's hard work. I wasn't feeling very smart. "Thank you."

He squeezed my shoulder in that brotherly way. "I'll see you in there." And then he was walking back down the hall.

I took a gulp of air. Now it was all on me.

"Hey," he shouted, almost at the door.

"Yeah?"

"Don't trip," he said. And then he walked inside the room where my future would be decided. And, step by step, little by little, I did too.

XAVIER



The nerve of that girl. I couldn't believe she was going through with the wedding after what I'd said to her. That sealed the deal. She was definitely in it for the money. No self-respecting, normal, nice girl would ever marry the man who told her he *fucking hated her*. At the wedding photo shoot, no less.

I'd basically spelled it out for her on Thanksgiving that our life would be a living hell.

I looked out at the room in front of me. Dad had planned everything down to a T. The biggest ballroom at our hotel in Tribeca, white lilies covering every surface. Five hundred people there to watch the spectacle, to see his only son turn into a man.

If this didn't prove how much I wanted the goddamned job at the company, then nothing would.

And then *her* face filled my head. The other her. The one who had made me think I was capable of love and then smashed my heart right in front of me, laughing all the while.

Just as I was starting to get worked up about my past, the violinist started playing. Fuck. It was time.

I saw my dad in the front pew looking as pleased as ever. I had to admit, it was nice to see him like that, smiling and having fun. He and Mom had been so in love their whole marriage, right up until she passed. He'd become more stoic after, more reclusive. But there, in the pews, he was laughing and hugging everyone.

The grand doors opened, and my eyes shifted to the back of the room. The people in the pews rose to their feet. I thought of my parents' marriage, and how beautiful it was. This wasn't going to be that.

No.

This girl better be ready for the worst goddamned marriage of her life.

I was in the bathroom, sitting on the cold floor.

I slipped my phone back into my purse.

I was still wearing my gown, still locked into my heels, but I just couldn't be on the dance floor for one second longer.

I was tired of having to fake smile and air kiss at every person Brad introduced me to, and I was even more tired of having to accept the congratulations of people I didn't know.

I knew I had already told Em too much, but I didn't care.

My feet hurt, my lips were chapped, and my heart felt drained. I was just...tired.

There was a knock on the stall, and then I heard Em call out to me. "Angie?"

Without standing up, I reached to slide the lock open and let her in. She saw me on the floor, cheeks wet, mascara probably down my face.

"Angie, what on earth? What do you have to tell me?"

"It's just...too much," I said.

"What was that text? Why did you marry him?"

This was my moment. My moment to admit the truth, to ask Em for help. Our eyes were locked, and I wanted so badly to let it out. But my mouth was frozen. I couldn't say anything. She looked down, like she was hurt by my silence.

"Do you want me to get Xavier?"

"No!" I all but shouted at her. The moment had passed. "No, he wouldn't understand. I just...it's all so foreign to me."

She sat down across from me, barely able to squeeze her legs beside mine. The act alone made me smile.

"I get it. I get you. Yeah, this stuff is crazy. It's overwhelming, and weird, and terrifying. But the important thing isn't the caviar bar or the Christina Louboutin shoes—"

"Christian Louboutin. I think."

“Whatever. You know what I mean. The important thing is that you love Xavier, and he loves you. And there’s a lot of love here tonight, celebrating you guys.” She leaned in closer to me and grabbed my hand. “I know your dad would’ve loved to be here, Angie. He would’ve lost it, seeing you all done up in that dress.”

“He probably would’ve been doing a keg stand by now.”

“Angela, I don’t think anyone here knows what a keg is.” She had a point. But then I saw her hesitate. “You do love him, right?”

“Who, Xavier?”

“Yes,” she said, her impatience now clear. “Xavier. The man you just married.”

“Yes,” I said softly, eyes on the ground. “I do.”

“Then let’s get back out there.” Her voice was light and breezy as she helped me up. I couldn’t help but wonder if she believed me. And even if she did, what would my best friend think about the girl who married the wealthy playboy two weeks after meeting him?

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“One more,” Xavier said from behind me as I was fetching myself a glass of water from the bar.

“What?”

“One more dance we gotta do,” he said again, and this time I could smell the alcohol on his breath. He looked over at a middle-aged couple dressed to the nines. “They wanted to see us dance.”

“They want to watch us dance?”

“I don’t ask questions. They’re clients, they want us to dance, we’re gonna dance.”

“Okay,” I said as he grabbed my hand and half pulled, half guided me over to the couple.

“Angela, dear, you look just scrumptious,” the heavily Botoxed woman said.

“Thanks,” I got out before she continued.

“We just can’t wait to see you and Xavier do a little ballroom—you know what they say. You can see the love in the dance,” she said, and I inwardly sighed.

If they wanted to see love, they should look somewhere else. But instead of complaining, I followed Xavier to the dance floor and let him spin me around the room, praising myself for switching from champagne to water when I had. Otherwise, I wasn’t so certain the grilled salmon would still be inside me.

When we finished, I waited for Xavier to say “thanks,” or “good work,” or anything remotely nice. After all, I had just done him a favor. But instead he tossed a thumbs-up over to the clients, shot me a blank stare, and then took off in the other direction.

“There you are, Angela,” I heard from behind me, and turned to find Brad. He looked happy as can be, and I was glad that he was enjoying himself. Really, I was.

“I’m here,” I said, smiling at him. “You did a wonderful job with everything. Really, it’s all incredible.”

“I’m glad you think so.” And then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a hotel room key. “This is to the honeymoon suite, my dear. I already gave Xavier his. Go, enjoy yourselves. Young love, there’s nothing better,” he said, and it felt like that last part was more for himself than for me. He turned on his heel and, clapping his hands together, walked away from me before I could thank him.

Wanting nothing more to do with the party and not knowing where Xavier had gone, I headed for the elevators and, once inside, hit the top floor. All these fancy suites, the gourmet food, and the top-shelf liquor—none of it was making me any more comfortable with my choice.

Think of Dad, I reminded myself. He needs you.

When I got to the top floor, I had to walk for what felt like a mile before I reached the door to the suite.

I slid the room key into the slit and watched the light turn green. Then, I pushed the door open and stepped inside, exhaling for the first time since I’d

started up the aisle. I closed the door behind me and turned on the light, kicking my shoes off and hearing my feet shout, “THANK YOU!”

I was starting to remember that I’d need someone to let me out of this corset when I heard a male voice coming from one of the rooms. Probably Xavier, I decided. So I took off toward the room, hoping that, if I asked nicely, he’d help me. Not in a sexual way—absolutely not.

I felt uncomfortable just thinking about that. But I wanted to sleep in something other than a tightly laced-up corset and didn’t think the stylist with the tightly coiled bun would appreciate me climbing into bed in Mr. Wang’s masterpiece. So, once I got to the room, I opened the door without thinking, and—

I gasped. There, before me, a few feet away, on top of the cushiony king-size bed with the all-white, 1000 thread count sheets, was my husband.

And kneeled over, with her face in the sheets and her butt in the air, moaning as the movements came faster and faster, was a tanned, dark-haired woman.

But not just any tanned, dark-haired woman.

It was Sky. The makeup artist.

Xavier turned to see who had opened the door. He didn’t stop moving, or even slow down. He just smiled. And she kept moaning.

“Hey, Angela, do you mind shutting the door on your way out?”

**Angela**

Are u there?

I frowned, wondering if Em was busy. She usually responded to my texts before I could even put my phone down.

Shrugging it off, I busied myself with unpacking my bags. I needed to make my room feel a little more like a home and not some lifeless showroom at IKEA. That helped for a while, but I only had so many things to unpack. Eventually, I found myself wandering the penthouse, staring down at the surreal view of New York below me.

*If only I had someone to share the view with...*

I tried to force away the lonely thoughts, but I couldn't manage it. How ungrateful could I be? I was standing in my own penthouse suite in the most exclusive street in the city, and I felt absolutely miserable.

I sighed and glanced at my phone. There was no response yet from Em. I tried calling instead, and I felt instant relief when she picked up.

"Hello?"

"EM!"

"Hey, Angie." She sounded distracted.

"Where are you? Is everything okay?"

"I'm just at the shop. What do you need?" *What do I need?*

"Oh, nothing. I just...just miss you. And the apartment."

"You just got there. And your new pad sounds kinda great." So she did get the texts.

"Oh, it is. I mean, it's beautiful. Indescribably amazing."

"Mm," she said, and this time I was certain she sounded distant.

"But it's nothing like what sharing the tiny little apartment with you was, Em. I miss how cozy it was. How much fun we had."

"Angela, you've been there five minutes. You'll get used to it. Like everything else," she said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that...look, I'm happy you're happy, okay?" She kept saying that—when we were getting ready in the bridal suite, when she kissed me goodbye at the wedding, and again now. I was starting to wonder if it was a disapproval disguised as a nicety.

"Thanks," was all I could muster.

"Look, I gotta go, okay? It's getting busy here." I knew that couldn't have been true. It was 6 p.m. on a Monday.

“Can I be honest with you?” I asked.

“Always,” she said, and this time she sounded softer.

“I don’t know if I fit in here, Em. It’s such a weird world they live in. Everybody’s...cold. And there are these rules. Nobody tells you them. They just expect that you know—”

“Angie. Listen to me. You chose this life, okay? You decided to marry him. I can’t keep holding your hand and telling you what you wanna hear. This is the path you chose, and you’ll get used to it—the cloud bed, the fancy shoes, all of it. Now I really gotta go.” And she hung up.

Em had never hung up on me before, or been as sharp with her words. Sure, we’d had fights before, but never about major life decisions. And we’d always been able to talk it out before.

I re-dialed her number. It went to voicemail. She clearly didn’t want to be talking to me.

I sat down on one of the plush designer chairs, suddenly feeling incredibly tired. Em was right. I chose this life for myself. I couldn’t just sit around and mope.

Before I could drown myself in self pity, I forced myself to get up and explore the kitchen. There was an entire walk-in pantry for food ingredients, and I suspected that it was better stocked than most restaurants. After deciphering how to use all of the state-of-the-art kitchen appliances, I decided to bake.

There was nothing that could make a new place feel more like home than the smell of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies.

Focusing on the task helped improve my mood, and by the time I was pulling the cookies out of the oven I was humming happily to myself, eager to share them. I’ve always been proud of my baking skills, and watching my friends and family take that first bite was even better than eating the cookies myself.

“Lucille?” I called. Maybe she’ll accept a cookie as a peace offering. Or maybe...maybe even Xavier would like them. The thought of offering him some cookies felt a little like trying to feed a lion with my bare hands. Maybe it would be best to eat all of these before he got home...

The sound of the elevator opening pulled me out of my thoughts, and my heart did a little flip. Maybe it's not him.

"I don't know how many times I have to tell you. Seat warmers on, heat off," a loud male voice thundered from the foyer. Well, there goes that hope. Husband was home.

"Of course. Sorry, sir."

"And what the hell is that smell?"

My heart dropped to the floor. *Here we go...*

Xavier stormed towards the kitchen area, typing furiously at his phone before he locked those icy blue eyes on me. He was followed by a man dressed in all black, had a shaved head, and held aviator sunglasses in his hands. He looked effortlessly cool and incredibly intimidating at once.

"Marco, this is my wife." The way he said wife, you'd have thought he'd said "mosquito that won't leave me alone." He stalked towards me and I had to resist the urge to step backwards. "What have we here?"

I looked down to the tray of cookies in my arms. "Just felt like baking something. Would you like one?" I asked hopefully.

My husband towered over me as he reached for a cookie and examined it. Hope made my heart beat faster. Hopefully he liked them.

"They look delicious, honey. I didn't know you baked."

"Just sometimes," I said. "It makes me happy."

"That's wonderful." He smiled at me, and the warmth in his eyes made butterflies flutter in my stomach. Xavier really was handsome. When he wasn't spitting venom in my face, he could easily make prince charming look like your average joe. Was this really the same hateful man I'd come to know?  
"Too bad you're so clumsy."

"I'm sorry?" I asked, confused.

Quicker than I could react, Xavier swiped down at my baking tray, causing it to slam to the floor along with my cookies. I stared down at them dumbly, unable



to understand what just happened. I watched my husband very slowly and deliberately squish one of them with his shoe.

“Oh, no. Now I’ve got to clean up my shoes. You really do need to work on that clumsiness of yours, dearest.” I looked up at him and all of that warmth was gone, replaced with a dark, sadistic smile. “Lucille! Please come in here and clean up after my wife. She must be tired from moving in.”

I stepped back, stunned. What just happened? I looked at Marco, then at Lucille who was walking towards us with a broom. They both wouldn’t meet my gaze. I felt a finger underneath my chin, and Xavier tilted my face up so he could stare down at me.

“Don’t you ever fucking bake in my house again. Got it?”

I blinked rapidly, finally overcoming my shock. Tears began to blur my vision.

“*Got it?*” Xavier asked again.

I didn’t trust myself to speak. I just nodded as a tear slipped down my cheek.

“Good.” He side stepped me and started walking towards his room. “Oh, Angela?”

I flinched, and after a moment I turned to look at him. That warm, welcoming smile was back. But I could see it now for what it really was. A trap. A cruel trick, designed to hurt me as much as possible.

“Welcome home. I’m so glad you finally moved in.”