

## The Arrangement | Drowning in Heaven by S.S. Sahoo

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.”