

**The Arrangement**  
S.S. Sahoo

## Lonely

## Xavier

"Angela?" I called as the elevator doors pinged open.

"In the kitchen," she replied.

I heard the sounds of metal on wood and the sizzle of oil.

*She must be cooking.*

I stepped into the living space and tossed my bag onto the chaise longue then turned to face the kitchen.

Sure enough, Angela was busy chopping vegetables at the marble-topped island.

"Hello, dear." She smiled, looking up from her work.

I walked to the other side of the counter. "Where is Lucille?"

Angela shrugged. "I gave her the rest of the night off. Her husband is in town."

"You know you don't have to cook, right?" I said, feeling like a broken record.

This wasn't the first time we'd had this conversation over the past few months. It was becoming more and more frequent for me to come home and find Angela at the stove.

It wasn't that she was a bad cook. On the contrary, I actually loved Angela's food.

It was more to do with the principle of it. There was no need for Angela to cook. I could afford to have someone else cook for us. There were more important things for my wife to occupy her time with.

"I like cooking," she said, reciting her usual reply.

I clenched my jaw, holding back my retort.

Tonight wasn't the night to get into all this. There were more critical things to discuss.

Based on the text message I'd received from Angela, she wasn't happy about how the events of last night had unfolded either.

She hadn't wanted to give me any more information over the phone, though, so I'd spent all afternoon worried about the moment I returned home.

I didn't know how to talk to her about what she'd seen last night. If I was honest, I was a little pissed off I had to.

I was a grown-ass man, and it was my shower.

My house, for that matter.

That meant I was goddamned allowed to do what I wanted, when I wanted.

If that meant jerking off, so be it.

Besides, she had been the one to walk in.

I was being patient, and I was waiting for her, but she couldn't really expect me to do *nothing* until she was ready, could she?

"You said you wanted to talk?" I prompted, watching Angela slide onions off her cutting board and into the hot pan.

"Oh, yes!" she replied excitedly.

Well, that was a different response than I was expecting. Angela's normal response to anything sex related was to flush the color of a beet.

"There's been a lot of tension between us lately," she began and pulled open the fridge. "And that tension has formed an imbalance in our relationship."

I hummed noncommittally. Imbalance was definitely one way to put it.

I'd told Angela's father months ago that I was ready to marry her...properly this time. It hadn't happened yet though.

I wasn't sure anymore if it would be anytime soon. It was clear from how Angela kept pushing me away that she wasn't ready.

Angela returned to the stove and started pouring more ingredients into the pan. A rich, exotic aroma filled the air around us.

"Last night was amazing," she continued. "I felt more alive than I have in a long time."

My mouth fell open a little. *Was she talking about catching me jacking off?*

She'd looked terrified when she'd been confronted by my cock last night, *not alive*.

I had to be missing something, right?

I cleared my throat, trying to find a way to answer without saying something. Without throwing her off whatever tangent she'd gotten herself into. "I...I'm happy to hear that."

"I want more of that," she continued, determined.

I couldn't believe it.

*Was Angela saying she wanted more?*

*Did my pure virginal bride finally want to be fucked?*

I really wasn't seeing any other interpretations here.

"Are you sure?" I hedged. "From how we left things, it didn't seem like you're ready."

She leaned against the counter, smiling from ear to ear. "It was just nerves. I've never done anything like that before. And I think I've waited long enough...I think it's time, Xavier."

Walking around to the other side of the counter, I stopped in front of her, feeling like a fucking ten-ton brick had been lifted from my chest. "You have no idea how long I've been waiting to hear you say that."

Taking her face between my hands, I kissed her, gently at first then more hungrily.

I'd been panicked all afternoon for nothing, thinking I was going to have to give *The Talk* to my wife. Now she was practically begging me to take her in the kitchen.

I felt myself growing hard and, for once, didn't try to hide it. Instead, I backed her into the counter, trapping her between the marble and me.

My fingertips dipped under the hem of her sweater, spread across her ribs.

I needed to be closer.

I needed to be fucking inside her.

Suddenly, I felt a familiar pushing against my chest.

"Xavier," Angela murmured. I heard a hesitation in her voice.

"*Fucking what?*" I gritted out before I could stop myself. She'd just said she wanted it. Was that not a fucking green light?

Her eyes dropped to the floor. "I think we might have had a misunderstanding."

I pushed away from the counter, chest heaving. "Did you or did you not just tell me you wanted sex?"

I was too fucking wound up to be patient. Too frustrated to make my words palatable.

Angela's eyes grew wide. "No! I mean...no, Xavier..."

I waived her off. "No, no, I got it. We're never going to have sex."

"That's not true." She crossed her arms over her stomach. It was something she did when she was scared, I'd noticed. Like she was trying to make herself smaller or protect her internal organs like you do in a grizzly bear attack.

"Yeah, well, it fucking feels like it. Why do you think I was masturbating last night? I'm dying here, Angela."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"No, fuck," I growled and knotted my hands in my hair. "Stop saying you're fucking sorry."

"I...I don't know what else to say."

*God help me.*

I took a deep breath in. "You know that's not what I meant. You know I won't push you. There's nothing to be sorry about. It's just...What the hell were you talking about if it wasn't sex?"

"A job." Then straightening her shoulders a little, again, louder, she said, "I want to get a job."

"What the hell for?"

She shrugged. "So I have something to do. So I have something to take pride in. I can't just sit around all day waiting for you to come home."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. Trying to keep my voice level, I replied, "You don't need a job, Angela. You have me."

"I need more."

Her words were like a punch to the gut. "First you won't let me make love to you, won't let me pleasure you, and now I'm not a good enough provider either?"

I knew it was a low blow, but to my sex-deprived, testosterone-overloaded mind, that was what it fucking felt like.

Angela winced as my voice had grown louder. "You're twisting my words."

"I—" I was about to reply when a pungent smell made me stop. "What is that?"

"Oh not!" Angela dove past me. She grabbed the flaming pan of vegetables and tossed it into the sink. Steam rose in a cloud with a big hiss as cold tap water drenched the charred food.

I pulled my phone from my suit pocket. "I'm ordering some pizza."

**Angela**  
Would you like to have lunch with me tomorrow?

**Brad**  
That sounds delightful!

**Brad**  
Was just wondering what I was going to do with myself.

**Brad**  
Being retired isn't all it's cracked up to be!

**Angela**  
I know how you feel.

**Brad**  
Shall we meet at The Plaza?

**Angela**  
Your regular table?

**Brad**  
See you soon, my dear!

## Angela

"Angela, dear," Brad said as he pulled me into a hug the next afternoon. "It's so good to see you."

"It's good to see you too," I said and took my seat in the golden armchair across from him.

"I hope you don't mind," Brad began, settling himself again, "but I've taken the liberty of ordering our usual."

Gratitude for Brad's generosity washed over me. "Wonderful!"

"Can you believe it's been almost a year since we first met here?" he said.

I looked up at the crystal chandeliers and the palm leaves that draped over our heads. "Not at all. I didn't think I could ever get used to this."

"But you have, as I promised you would," Brad assured me, pride evident in his voice.

I had to admit he was right. The first time I had met Brad for tea I hadn't known what the Plaza was. Now, I had become a regular for tea at the Palm Court. Staff knew my name. Memorized my order.

Somehow, I still didn't feel like I belonged. Even with my Kate Spade dress and Stuart Weitzman heels, I felt like I was playing dress-up.

"At least I'm not in ripped jeans," I smiled, recalling our first meeting.

"You're stunning," Brad complimented. "So, to what do I owe the pleasure? It sounded like you were after more than a catch-up."

I squirmed in the velvet seat, trying to find the words to explain the situation. It wasn't that it was so hard, more that it felt a little backhanded.

Lately, I hadn't needed Brad to guide me as much as I had in the past. Didn't need him to tell me which fork to use or what "smart casual attire" meant. Xavier had stepped up to take his place, to fill his role as my partner.

Xavier and I had been communicating well recently, at least until last night.

Someone turning to Brad for advice again felt like a breach in the newly formed trust Xavier and I had been building.

I wasn't sure what else to do, though. Xavier didn't seem open to any sort of idea right now that didn't wind up with both of us naked.

Did all couples have as much trouble communicating?

I couldn't imagine that true soul mates ever disagreed like we did.

When you loved someone, you were supposed to be on the same page about everything.

Xavier and I weren't even in the same book.

"Xavier and I had a fight," I told Brad.

"I'm very sorry to hear that, my dear," Brad said, always sympathetic, always calm. "These things are natural, though. What was the argument about?"

"I told him I want to get a job."

"Well, that sounds like a wonderful idea!"

The waiter arrived then and unloaded a fine china teapot and teacups, as well as a tray of delicate finger sandwiches and sweets, onto our table.

As soon as he was gone, I helped myself to a cucumber sandwich. "I thought so too. Xavier doesn't like the idea though."

Brad's eyebrows knitted together. "Well, what is it you're hoping to do?"

"My degree is in mechanical engineering," I said and took a bite of the sandwich. "But I have very little practical experience."

Brad popped a blueberry macaron into his mouth. "And you want to pursue that career?"

"I'm not sure if I am ready to dive into a full-time job," I admitted. "I just need something to keep myself busy."

Any job I took would have to be one that was fitting to the Knight name.

I knew that. I'd learned, more than once, the weight that the Knight legacy carried.

This also meant that I couldn't take any old job at a cafe or as an intern at an engineering firm. So, I was at a loss for where to start my job hunt.

Brad leaned back in his chair, tapping his finger to his chin. "Yes, I see. I think I may have a solution. Would you give me a couple days to look into a few things?"

"Of course!" If Brad had any job leads, I would wait as long as necessary, if he could help me find an acceptable job, I knew I might be able to warm Xavier up to the idea.

"There is something I was hoping you might help me with in return," Brad said, suddenly occupied with stirring his tea.

"Oh?" I replied, happily surprised. "Sure. Whatever you need."

Brad had done more for my family and me than I would have ever thought possible. I would do whatever I could to pay him back for that generosity.

"I'm not too sure how to say this, so you'll have to forgive me if I ramble, but...I'm afraid I'm facing a similar problem, Angela."

My heart sank in my chest. I reached out, across the teacups and delicacies, to lay my hand on his.

Brad smiled at me and squeezed my hand. Then, with a big breath, he pressed on. "I know it's been less than a week, but I can't go on like this. With no job to occupy my time, I have no idea what to do with myself."

I nodded in understanding. "You're lonely."

"Lonely?"

"If you had something to do, or someone to think about besides yourself, I think you would be much happier," I said.

I knew the feeling all too well.

I'd felt the same way after I married Xavier last year. Like I was the only person left in the world. Like I'd been forgotten.

It was better now that our relationship had improved, but I still felt alone some days when I was by myself in our huge penthouse.

It was why I wanted a job.

"Well, I've just retired, so I can't get a job," Brad said.

"How about a friend? Someone you could go home to? Someone you could do things with?" I suggested.

"Like a girlfriend?" Brad shook his head. "I don't think that's it. I had my great love with Amelia. You only get that once in a lifetime."

"There are different kinds of love," I insisted, happy for the distraction to have the chance to fix a problem for once rather than feel like I was causing them. "I think you could find someone who makes you happy."

Brad pursed his lips. "I'm not sure I would feel right about it."

"Just think about it, okay? I can help you out if you like."

"What are they calling that these days? Wingman?"

I laughed. "Yes, I would gladly be your wingman."

"I'll...I'll think about it." He nodded, and then a bright grin lit up his face. "You know what else might cheer me up?"

"What's that?" I asked, reaching for a piece of chocolate cake.

"Grandbabies."

I choked, not quite sure if my father-in-law was joking—or if it was a serious request.