

The Arrangement | Sharp Mess by S.S. Sahoo

ANGELA

I threw my phone across the bed. It was 7 a.m., and I'd spent my first night in the penthouse. After the incident with Xavier in the kitchen, I hadn't left my bedroom again. I'd changed into pajamas, and after I had no more tears left to cry, I'd sunk into my new mattress and held my eyes shut until sleep came.

I thought that falling asleep so early last night would have let me wake up refreshed, optimistic about the day ahead, but, instead, I had woken up feeling just as alone. The mirrors around the room weren't helping, either; they just reminded me that I was the only one here.

I'd tried calling Lucas. Usually, a quick chat with him could cheer me up on any day. His jokes always had a way of reminding me not to take myself too seriously. But even he didn't want to talk this morning.

I sat up, seeing my face reflected in an oval-shaped mirror on the wall across from me. I looked as rough as I felt. I'd put my long hair in a bun before I fell asleep, and now it wasn't just messy, it had mostly fallen out of the hair tie. So I had hair sticking out in all directions, skin that needed to be moisturized, and lips that needed some lip balm, and stat.

But I knew cleaning myself up wouldn't really make me feel better, so I decided to do something about my mood first. I jumped out of bed, threw on some old leggings and a sweatshirt, tied my hair into a ponytail, laced my feet into some sneakers, and stepped out the door.

Luckily I didn't cross paths with anyone as I hurried into the elevator. I didn't think I could deal with hostility this early in the day. I pressed "L" for Lobby and marveled at how fast the elevator was, speeding down the thirty-five floors and dropping me off at the ground floor within ten seconds. I didn't think I'd ever get used to this.

I walked through the lobby, pushing my earbuds into my ears. There were a couple other residents milling about, some seated on the lavish furniture and others talking to each other by the door to the mailroom.

They all looked put-together and wealthy, as though, even in their casual morning clothes, they were still better than everyone else. I still had my eyes

on them when I was almost at the door, and I bumped right into Pete the doorman.

“Oof,” I let out, and he hurried to steady me.

“Are you all right, Mrs. Knight?” he asked, concern plastered across his face. I saw the residents turn to see what the scuffle was, and I felt heat rush to my face.

“I’m okay. I’m fine,” I said quickly, pushing the door open myself. “I’m sorry,” I said, giving him one quick glance before jogging outside. Now I really needed the air.

The cool fall breeze hit my face immediately, and it helped to take me out of my own mind. I took a right and then waited for the light to change, hopping up and down in place to keep my heart rate up. When it turned green, I sprinted across the street and headed into Central Park.

As I made my way through groups of tourists, families, and people who just wanted to see a little nature first thing in the morning, I couldn’t help but smile. Everyone was out here together, enjoying life and doing their best, and for some reason I couldn’t quite explain, I was accosted with a feeling of hope. If they could be out here trying, doing their best, then I could do it, too.

That feeling of hope was what motivated me to run faster than I had in months, using the laughing children and grunting soccer players in the grass beside me as spectators I was trying to impress.

By the time I stopped to take a breather, I had run just over five miles. Not bad, I thought, figuratively patting myself on the shoulder. I walked for a while to cool down, letting the endorphin high rush through my body, and then I crossed the street and popped into the quaint-looking coffee shop on the corner.

I didn’t see anyone working behind the counter when I first walked in, so I looked around, confused. That was when I spotted the man sitting on a small bench beside the counter, nearly hidden from where I was standing. He was reading the New York Times, and he clearly hadn’t heard anyone come into the shop.

Either that, or he just didn't care to get up and help a customer. But I was in such a good mood from my run, I didn't even mind. So I walked over to the barista and, standing right in front of him, started talking.

"Hi!" I said cheerily, and he looked up at me. He looked to be around my age, with warm eyes and an easy smile that came fast.

"That was quite a hello," he said. "You must be in a good mood."

"I guess I am. Now, anyway..." I said.

"Now?" he asked, standing up and heading behind the counter. But not before I could see the page of the newspaper he'd been reading: Page Six.

"These past couple days have been a rollercoaster. But I just, I don't know, ran it out?" I surmised, half for my benefit and half for his.

"Ah, one of those weeks, huh? Well, what can I get you?"

I looked around the coffee shop, only realizing now that it was completely empty. A nearly empty coffee shop? That never happened in New York City. Then my eyes reached the coffee menu, on the chalkboard leaning against the wall on the counter. I scanned it.

"I'll have the peppermint latte," I said.

"Interesting choice," the barista responded, starting to work on the espresso. "You jog in the neighborhood?"

"Through the park, yeah," I said. "I just moved around here, actually."

"Oh, cool," he said, steaming the milk. "Whereabouts?"

"Right by the park."

"Which street?"

I'd been trying to avoid saying it, knowing how pretentious the street name would sound. Especially to a barista. But I didn't want to be rude, either.

"Central Park South," I all but whispered. He eyed me, not giving much away. I felt like I had to justify myself somehow. "My husband...he actually already lived in the building. So I'm just moving in with him."

“You just get married, or something?”

I nodded. “Just a few days ago, actually.”

“Well, congratulations,” he said, smiling at me. But then, suddenly, something clicked in the barista’s eyes, and he looked right at me again. “I know who you are,” he said, pouring the milk over the espresso. “You’re Xavier Knight’s new wife.”

I looked at the floor, overwhelmed with the urge to grab my coffee and go. But I hadn’t paid yet.

“Right?” he pressed.

“Yes,” I said.

“I knew it! I recognized you from The Times announcement. And your wedding photos are everywhere. Duh, of course it’s you.”

He handed me my cup, leaning forward onto the counter and really sizing me up. “So, why the rollercoaster of a week, then?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. How much do I owe you?”

“A real response,” he said, but then he smiled. “It’s on the house. You’re a first-time customer.”

“You don’t have to do that...”

“Seriously,” he said, putting a hand up. “It’s nice to meet you. Take the drink. I’m Dustin. Dustin Stirling.” And he held out his hand. I shook it.

“Angela...Knight.”

“Hi, Angela. Okay. So, back to you. You don’t have to tell me anything, because I’m clearly a stranger, but whatever your mood swing was about, just know that you have it pretty good. You’re married to the richest, coolest man in the city. Seriously. Every girl wants to bone him, and every guy wants to be him. Or bone him. You feel me?”

“No, I...I know,” I stuttered, not used to his no-filter way of talking. “I’m really happy. To be married. Really.”

He kept his eyes on me, and I hoped I wasn't giving anything away.

"Anyway, thank you for the latte. It's delicious. And it was nice to meet you," I said, turning for the door.

"Hey, I'm here, like, always," he said to my retreating figure. "You ever want a friend, or another ridiculously good peppermint latte, come on over."

"Okay," I said, offering one last wave before I walked back outside onto the street where no one knew my secrets. I checked my phone to see if I had any missed calls from Lucas, but all I saw was a black screen. My phone had died, probably while I was jogging. Great.

Xavier

WHERE

Xavier

???????

I was in the elevator, daydreaming about the warm shower I was about to take, when the doors opened and snapped me out of it. And there, sitting on the cream-colored armchair in the living room, was Brad.

"Ah, there she is! Come, come, darling," he said, standing to greet me.

I walked over to him and kissed him on the cheek, seeing my seething husband on the couch across from him. Xavier didn't stand.

"I didn't know you were coming, I would've been here," I said.

"Nonsense, I didn't want to disrupt your day. Anything fun planned?"

"I was just jogging." My gaze went to Xavier. He was shooting daggers at me and looking a little worse for wear.

"Do you have anything fun planned, Xavier?" I asked him, trying to show Brad that the newlyweds were civil, at least.

"I go to work on weekdays," he said, patronizing me. "I'm actually running late, Dad."

"Right, right, of course," Brad said, standing up again. "Well, I just wanted to drop in and see how the lovebirds were doing. It looks great in here, doesn't it?"

"It does," I said, and Xavier just nodded.

Brad came to kiss me on the cheek again, and then shook his son's hand.

"I'm happy you're here, Angela," he said before he got to the elevator. "You're a part of the family now."

"Me too," I choked out. "Thank you." And then he was gone.

I thought I'd be in the clear to take a shower, but Xavier's voice stopped me.

"Where the hell were you?"

I braced myself for another fight. "I just went out for a jog."

He walked right up to me, glaring. "You look like shit."

What was I supposed to say to that? "I was going to go take a shower..."

"I don't think you understand the position you're in," Xavier said. "You look like *shit*. ~And if you get seen in public looking like shit, then that makes ~me~ ~look like shit."

"It..." I choked up. "It won't happen again."

"It better fucking not. At least comb your hair after you let your secret boyfriend rail you."

"*What?*" I asked. "I'd never do that."

"Sure you won't," Xavier mocked. "All you gold diggers are the same."

"I just went out for a run! That's it!"

"So you didn't meet some guy while you were out there?"

"No! I didn't..." Well, I met the barista. But that's not what Xavier was talking about.

"Whatever. I don't care. Fuck whoever you want. Just don't get caught doing it. You're a Knight now. You're expected to be perfect, got it?"

Standing there, a sweaty mess after my run, being yelled at by my so-called husband, I felt anything but perfect. But I nodded anyway.

“Good. Now I’ve got a company to run. Behave yourself while I’m gone.” He walked towards the elevator. “And you better be out of here before I get back!” He yelled. I was confused until I saw a woman I’d never seen before peeking her head out of his bedroom, her hair a disheveled mess.

That was more than I could handle. I stormed away towards the bathroom, angry tears blurring my vision. I slammed into a vase, causing it to fall and shatter on the floor.

“Ah, crap...” I muttered, staring down at the pieces. I just stared down at the broken porcelain, too numb to move. I needed to clean that up before someone got hurt. But I just couldn’t make myself move.

“I’ll clean.”

I looked behind me to find Lucille standing there with a broom and dustpan.

“No, it’s okay. I’m the one that broke it.”

She just shook her head and gently pushed me aside so she could clean. She nodded at the bathroom, stern. Lucille was looking after me in her own way. I smiled gratefully. Looks like I made an ally in the penthouse.

All it took was another horrible fight with my husband.

I sighed as I turned on the shower, waiting for the water to heat up. How much more of this could I take?

Unknown

I actually think I can help you...

Unknown

Would you be able to meet me for coffee this afternoon?

Unknown

Starbucks at 54th and 3rd.

ANGELA

I was a block away from the Starbucks where I was supposed to be meeting Betty. Mr. Kinfold was a big-time VP of an important tech company, and I

really thought I'd nailed the interview. I'd walked out of the midtown office afterwards, convinced I had the job.

Mr. Kinfold was a nice man. He had a daughter my age and was quick to tell me how impressive my GPA was. We got along well. So, when I got the rejection call a few days after the interview, I was speechless. I hadn't gotten the job. I wasn't good enough.

But now, with his assistant reaching out to me, I felt the little excitement butterflies in my stomach start to flutter. Maybe Mr. Kinfold had realized his mistake and had sent his assistant to apologize to me, to see if I was still in need of a job.

I took a deep breath to calm my nerves and pulled the door open, letting a businessman walk out before I stepped inside the busy coffee shop.

I looked around, seeing many suit-clad workers typing away on their laptops and phones, coffee in front of them. I was trying to remember what Betty looked like. Did she have red hair? Or was it dark brown and curly?

But then I heard, "Angela! Over here!"

I turned, following the voice to a small table toward the back of the store. It was cramped between two other tables, one taken by a college kid who reeked of cigarettes, and the other by a nanny with two squirming blonde toddlers. Betty, who indeed had dark brown, curly hair, was standing with a polite smile on her face. She looked nervous.

"Hi," she said, offering her hand out for a shake.

"Nice to see you again," I said, shaking it. We both sat down.

"Thanks for meeting me," she began, and I saw her scan the Starbucks like she was making sure nobody important would overhear her next words.

"I know this isn't exactly conventional, and I know that the last you heard from us, you didn't get the job..."

Here we go, I thought. This is the moment I'll remember forever.

"But I just...I wanted to let you know why. Why you didn't get the job."

“Oh...” I trailed off, my disappointment palpable. This wasn’t a job offer. It was a detailed analysis of where I’d gone wrong.

“Mr. Kinfold liked you. You were his top choice, actually.”

“I was?”

“I was already writing your contract up when he got it.”

Got what?

I’m sure I looked every bit as confused as I was. And her eyes darting nervously around weren’t helping. She leaned forward, her elbows on the table and her face just a few inches from mine.

“You were working at Gelsa Inc. before, right? In Jersey?”

I nodded.

“Mr. Kinfold...he received a document from Gelsa. From Mr. Lemor, specifically.” I cringed at the name, and then I felt my whole body shut down. Mr. Lemor was my old boss. He was the reason I’d moved to New York City.

“Mr. Lemor wrote a letter to us...it was a warning.”

“A warning about me?” I asked, incredulous.

“No. More like a warning for us. Gelsa is a multinational corporation with power over many of our clients. It has the ability to interrupt our business on a massive level. And Lemor... He made sure it was clear that if we hired you, he’d make things hard for us.”

“But that’s...that’s illegal,” I choked out.

She sighed. “Illegal, immoral, it’s all of those things. Lemor’s known in the industry. He’s the guy who fights every battle like it’s World War III, you know? Mr. Kinfold’s a good man, but he didn’t want to risk it.”

“Not when there are so many entry-level mechanical engineers. I get it,” I said, even though I was flooded with self-pity.

“I wasn’t even supposed to know, but I read the letter right when we got it. I read most of Mr. Kinfold’s mail, but this... I’d never seen anything like this. I

could get in real trouble if anyone finds out I told you, but I thought you deserved to know," she said, reaching across the table and patting my hand. The physical contact surprised me, but it felt genuine.

"I don't know what happened between you and Lemor, but he's clearly keeping tabs on you. And he has pull over most companies. So just...be careful," she said. "Powerful men don't think twice about screwing over young women, you know?" She gathered her coffee and her purse and stood.

"Thank you. For telling me," I said, and she nodded before walking away.

Her words kept playing in my mind. Powerful men don't think twice about screwing over young women.

She was right. And I knew it firsthand. Mr. Lemor was the man who I had dreaded seeing most for eleven months. He wasn't just my boss. He was the man who had sexually harassed and stalked me. And he was also, apparently, the man who wouldn't let me forget what saying no could do to my career.

XAVIER

Today was not my day. And after the commotion of the wedding, having my new wife move into my penthouse, and having last week's property deal go through at a higher price than I'd thought, I really needed it to be my day.

It had started fine enough. I got my morning gym session in without anyone trying to talk to me. Nothing annoyed me like gym interruptions, where a girl in a tight tank top or a bro in a muscle shirt would recognize me and try to start a conversation. I don't go to the gym to converse. I don't go there to meet girls, and I sure as shit don't go there to meet dudes.

Going to the gym in the morning had become my outlet, ever since everything happened with...her...at the beginning of the year. Pumping iron made me forget about the fact that my heart had been smashed. It got my stress and aggression out. That is, until I left the gym and it all returned. But while I was there, it made me feel competent and in control. Like a man.

So, the gym this morning was fine. That wasn't the problem. The problem came later, after lunchtime, when I got a call about one of our properties in Paris. Delayed development, the contractor said. Some problem with getting city passes, and it all sounded like bullshit to me.

And Dad, of course. He wasn't too thrilled to hear the news. Because anything that goes wrong while I'm in the office is a reflection of my work.

"You're not on your A-game, Xavier," he'd said.

"This was out of my control."

"Nothing's out of our control. You've had a distracting couple weeks. I understand—"

"I'm not goddamn distracted."

"Watch your tone."

And that was how it went. A boat could sink in the fucking Arctic, and if I were sitting in my office, he'd find a reason to make it my fault.

So, the gala I was trying to avoid, the one scheduled a few weeks from now at one of our other hotels in Paris, now I'll have to go to it. So that I could check up on the contractor in person and spend some time 'showing face' around the city.

'Showing face' was how my dad liked to describe intimidating people.

"When they don't see you, they can't fear you," is what he always says. Not that Brad Knight is the most intimidating guy in the world. Hell, you wouldn't cross the street if you saw him walking toward you at night. But he's a man with endless artillery and the sense to employ those who know how to use it. So, yeah, I learned from the best, I'd say.

But the last time I'd been in Paris, I was there with the one who fucked me up. The one who took my heart and dropped it off the fucking Eiffel Tower like it was a piece of chewed gum. And we were there shopping for her wedding dress—the one she nearly wore down the aisle, on her way to me.

I had Marco pick me up from the office early so I could try to calm myself down. I was trying to brainstorm if there was any way I could get out of Paris, out of going to the gala and showing face, when the car huffed to a stop. We were nearly home, just crawling up 6th Avenue, but the car stopped moving.

"What the fuck was that?" I yelled at Marco.

“Not sure, boss,” he responded, and then he put the car in park and climbed out.

He went around front and popped the hood.

I saw steam through the windshield. Fuck this, I thought. I’m not dying in a car explosion in midtown. I climbed out, noticing the cars and pedestrians around me watching.

I put my sunglasses on and walked away from the car, from Marco, without another word.

ANGELA

I’d left the Starbucks in a daze. If Lemor hadn’t sent that letter, I would’ve been working for Mr. Kinfold. I wouldn’t have needed to accept the arrangement from Brad Knight, and I wouldn’t be the punching bag of Xavier Knight. Everything would be normal with my best friend, and my family would be proud of me.

I was walking up 6th, almost at 57th, when I spotted the same charcoal Bentley that Xavier drove. Well—not drove, but got driven in. Marco the driver drove it. I squinted my eyes, reading the license plate.

What do ya know, I thought. That was Xavier’s car. And it was crammed between cars, stuck in gridlocked traffic.

Suddenly, the car let out a sound and halted, coming to a full stop. After a few seconds, Marco stepped out of the driver’s seat and went around to the hood, pulling it up. I saw smoke cloud around him.

Probably an overheated engine. I wondered if Marco was smart enough to keep coolant in the trunk. I was about a half-block from the car when I saw Xavier jump out of the back seat and slam the door shut, putting his shades on and walking up the sidewalk without a word to Marco.

I thought I’d seen him at his worst, but the man kept proving me wrong.

When I got to the car, I saw Marco pushing and pressing things under the hood.

“Hey,” I said. “You need some help?” It took him a second to recognize me, but then he did.

“What do you know about cars?”

I bent down and pointed to the coolant hose, the thing that was so degraded you could practically see holes in the steel. “The hose needs to be replaced,” I said. “But, for the meantime, a coolant flush will do. You got any in the back?”

He looked at me like I was speaking Latin.

“Probably a blue bottle,” I said, but this time slower. “It’ll say, ‘coolant.’”

He looked at me, probably trying to figure out if I was making fun of him or not. When I offered a smile, he gave me a nod and went to the trunk, returning a few moments later with coolant.

“Awesome, thanks,” I said, and I got to work.

When Marco and I got back to the building fifteen minutes later, I’d learned a little bit about him. He grew up outside of Boston and did two tours in the Navy before getting hired by Brad Knight’s security team, and now his job was to look after Xavier. And drive him around. Not exactly a promotion, if you ask me.

Marco came around to open the back door of the car for me, and when he did, I asked him, “Hey, Marco? Do you mind keeping this between us?”

“What do ya mean?”

“That I helped with the car. I don’t want Xavier to...uh, to find out.”

“Why?”

“It just...feels a little out of place, I guess.”

“Oh. Okay, sure,” he said, his confusion apparent.

“Goodnight,” I said, heading right through the doors. I didn’t know if I could trust Marco to keep it between us, and I could already feel the nerves hitting

me. I knew, if Xavier found out, he'd find some reason to chastise me. And I couldn't take any more hostility today. That much I was sure of.