Get That Bubbly

"Oh, Angela darling, you and Zoe have outdone yourselves!"

ANGELA

I smiled at Marlena's praise, nodding my head graciously at the compliment.

"Your art made it easy to find inspiration for the gala. Zoe and I can't take all the credit."

The art guru leaned forward, a fond smile on her lips. She looked stunning in her scarlet kimono. The robe was folded intricately around her body, swooping down in elegant curtains of silk that depicted a hypnotic pattern of flowers and

spirits that swirled around one another. "You've really grown into your own woman, Angela. You used to be a shy girl that would blush at the slightest of compliments. Now look at you. Helming a gala with not just confidence, but exuberance!"

I laughed. Now *that* got me blushing.

I looked around, pride swelling in my chest.

Marlena was right. We'd outdone ourselves.

The gala was set up next to Lake Tanuki, and the world awash with color.

The art pieces were spaced perfectly throughout, forming a path that allowed the guests to move easily from one

And above it all, lording over the entire gala from a distance, stood magnificent Mt. Fuji, its beauty and strength a breathtaking backdrop to an art show celebrating the magical mysteries of nature.

"I hope this means you'll consider us for your next event as well, Ms. Marlboro." I winked at her.

She blew me a kiss before spinning on her heels toward a group of admirers.

I smiled as I watched her go.

I still remember how nervous I'd been when I'd organized Dustin's first art show, fussing over every little thing. Now I could organize such events without batting an eye.

I guess I really had grown.

I turned to find Zoe behind me.

Xavier's face flashed into my mind. I hadn't seen him in a while

I scanned the crowd, but I couldn't pick him out. The gala took up a large area, and besides that, it was getting dark.

He was an older, portly guy with a round chin. His eyes rimmed with crow's feet as he smiled.

The man adjusted his tuxedo, pulling the jacket tighter over his wide shoulders. "Marlena told me to look for the moon and the stars," he said with a chuckle. "At first, I thought she was being her

black and gold, shooting stars blazing across the sleeves and back.

Zoe and I wore sister kimonos, both lined with fur to fortify us against the chilly autumn evening.

usual cryptic self, but it turns out her instructions were quite literal!"

blown me away."

"To where?" Zoe asked.

Bernard frowned in confusion.

Bernard coughed as he composed himself, smiling a little even as his cheeks flushed a light pink. He was charming in a sweet, grandfatherly kind of way.

anniversary soon, and she wants to make a big fuss over it." "Oh, congratulations!" Zoe gushed, instantly more invested in the conversation. "Fifty years! You two must be so in love."

"Actually, I wanted to speak with you about your services," he said. "My wife and I will be celebrating our fiftieth

"Wonderful! Then I'd like to introduce you to my wife. She'll be thrilled to meet you two."

"Lead the way, Bernard!" Zoe enthused. She gave me a nudge and a wink, mouthing the word *score!* before going to

"Angela?" Zoe called.

"Coming!" I called.

XAVIER

I knew, of course, that she was a talented event planner. She'd pulled off the gala for *Vague* and Hannah Flintour, after all. I'd seen the photos of what she'd done at Hudson Yards.

the planet. She was smart, clever, and hot as all hell to boot.

imaginary wind. When I looked at the painting as a whole, though, the artwork was stock still.

I took a flute of champagne, nodding my head to the server as he disappeared into the crowd.

"What's up, Xavier?" he grinned. "Shinji?" I asked, incredulous. "Shinji *Takahashi*?"

"My God, when was the last time we saw each other? A few years ago—in Monaco?" I was instantly transported

"Hey man, don't hate on my racing gloves," he said. "Ladies love the gloves." "Yeah, whatever."

"Please," Shinji looked offended. "That shitty movie doesn't do our sport any justice. C'mon."

backward in time. I remembered hot nights and hotter women, fast cash and faster cars.

"Behind the wheel of a Pontiac Firebird," he nodded. "You still race?"

"Nah," I said. "I threw my cheesy racing gloves in a furnace."

"Well, if you change your mind, give me a call." He slipped me a business card with his name and number on it. "Street racers have cards now?" "No, dumbass, that's just for my day job."

"You mean like Tokyo Drift type shit?"

"Nah, I've left all that behind me."

I chuckled, pocketing the card.

her off to my old friend.

"Yeah," I choked out.

"Fuck that shit," I agreed.

more champagne off the platter.

My career was really taking off.

I'd found Xavier.

"Shinji, my man, you're talking my language."

"Can I get a virgin mimosa?" I asked the bartender.

She raised an eyebrow. "You mean an orange juice?"

"Hey," he raised his own champagne flute for a toast. "Fuck that shit." We clinked glasses.

We downed our glasses, and like magic, another server appeared to give us more.

ANGELA

Was something wrong? I pushed my way through the crowd, quickly making my way toward the racket. I wouldn't let anything ruin this

But what the HELL was he doing?!

"Oh, Marlena, you're too kind." "Hardly," she insisted. She swept her arms around at the gala, the long sleeves of her kimono draping down to her waist. "Look at what you've accomplished! With Zoe's help, of course."

The sunset lit the sky ablaze, the lake a reflection of the molten reds and oranges and purples of the sinking sun. The trees around us danced in the wind, autumn's creeping touch turning vibrant greens into rust-colored dresses. Guests mixed with servers and performers underneath big, see-through party tents, Japanese lanterns flickering above like stars. experience to another.

"And you've turned into a savvy businesswoman as well," Marlena chimed. She turned me around, playfully pushing me away. "Now, get away from me before I faint from your excellence!" I laughed, playing along.

"Enjoy your gala, Marlena. This is your moment. I'll go make the rounds." I walked around the gala, greeting guests as I went. Marlena's words stuck in my mind.

shoulder. "How's everything going?" I asked her. "All good so far," she said. Her eyes were bright and alert, but she didn't look worried in the slightest. "We're starting to run low on champagne, but I sent a runner. The guests really seem to be enjoying themselves."

I was examining a painting of what looked to be a haunting spirit devouring a lily when someone tapped me on the

Suddenly, a man cleared his throat behind us. "Excuse me, but are you Angela and Zoe?" "Yup," Zoe said. "How'd you guess?"

Hers was a brilliant white accented in silver, a stylized moon of black silk stitched into the silk fabric. Mine was a deep "You've found us," I said with a smile. "How are you finding the event, Mr. ...?"

"Oh, pardon me." He bowed with a small flourish. "My name is Bernard Loreley. The event you two organized has

"You were blown away ...to where?" Zoe repeated with a smirk. Bernard tripped over himself, trying to come up with a response. "She's just teasing you, Bernard," I sighed as Zoe giggled next to me. "How can we help you?"

Bernard laughed, his crow's feet deepening. "Yes, I suppose so. Anyway, I hope I'm not imposing?" "Oh, not at all!" Zoe said. "Right, Angela?"

I threw a quick glance around the gala, hoping to see Xavier.

"Of course not," I said, trying to shake my distraction.

follow Bernard into the crowd.

I gave the party one final scan.

Xavier could take care of himself.

How couldn't I?

It was all over the news.

And here I was, along for the ride.

Her trophy husband.

side.

Flawless.

"Freaky," I muttered.

"Tell me about it."

I did a double-take.

I knew that face ...

I shook my head, snapping out of it. What was I so worried for?

I took another swig of champagne, looking around at the gala in full swing around me. Angela really was amazing.

But being in the middle of it was an entirely different experience. The atmosphere was perfect; every little detail from the placement of the paintings on display, to the scent of wildflowers in the air—was impeccable. Pride and shame warred in my chest.

My wife was a renowned event planner. High-profile names clamored for her services, and the job took her all over

I finished the rest of my drink in one go. Before I could look for another, a smartly dressed server was already at my

I meandered through the show, trying to wrap my head around the paintings. I looked at a massive one, about twice the size of my bedroom door. It looked to be of a tranquil meadow, but instead of grass, there were just hundreds of skinny green ghosts.

Whenever I focused on a certain ghost, the rest of the painting seemed to move slightly, like it was swaying in an

I turned to a man standing next to me. He wore a plain black kimono. His long, black hair was tied up into a topknot.

"In the flesh," he nodded. "How've you been, you beautiful bastard?" I laughed as we clasped hands.

five hundred thou in American dollars. Thought you might be interested ..." He left the invitation hanging, wiggling his eyebrows like a moron. I laughed.

"Thanks, Shinji, but I'm married now. Racing's not worth the risk." I looked around me for Angela. I wanted to show

"That's a shame, though," Shinji said. "There's a big race happening in Tokyo tomorrow. Pot's fifty million yen. About

His words felt like a punch in the gut. The wind got knocked out of my lungs. Even Shinji knew.

"By the way, I heard you got kicked out of your company," Shinji said. "Is it true?"

"Hey, if you won't race with me tomorrow, at least drink with me." Shinji relieved the server of the entire platter. "Let's get fucked up. For old time's sake." My old friend's grin was contagious, and that stupid way he wiggled his eyebrows always made me crack up. I grabbed

"Yup." I smiled. The bartender nodded, sliding a glass over the bar.

year. Zoe pounced on the opportunity, and early talks were already underway.

I was sipping at my orange juice when I heard a commotion at the center of the gala.

When I got nearer, I froze, the glass of orange juice slipping through my fingers.

Bernard and his wife were lovely. They hoped to host their anniversary party at their villa in Cape Town early next

perfect night.