Stranded with the Rising Sun **XAVIER**

Land of the Rising Sun, I thought bitterly. ~More like Land of the Rising Hangover.~

I squinted into the sunrise, the light shooting pain into my brain.

I turned back to the bar, staring bleary-eyed into the empty glass in front of me.

and slid it along the bar. He didn't speak a lick of English, but he didn't need to.

I raised a finger, and the owner, an old man that looked straight out of an old samurai movie, filled up another cup

Alcohol was a universal language.

I took a deep breath through my nose, the crisp, mountain air giving me some clarity of thought.

I took a big swig of beer to drown it out.

Fuck clarity.

Angela's words still echoed in my head, and no matter how much I drank, I couldn't forget what she'd said.

"If you leave, don't bother coming back."

The memory was wrapped in barbed wire, and I couldn't stop myself from reaching for it again and again.

I deserved the pain, honestly.

After I'd left, I'd wandered around in the dark village until I'd stumbled on a small roadside *izakaya*, a Japanese pub. The stools were right in front of the counter, the only barrier from the outside world were short, stained curtains.

I had to admit, it was still a big upgrade from that shithole dive in New York.

before dawn. They were probably going right back to work. I envied them.

I'd had a few miserable-looking salarymen for company for most of the night, but they scattered away like shadows

At least they knew what the hell they were doing every day.

My stomach growled at me, clearly pissed that I'd fed it nothing but Sapporo and champagne. I probably wasn't doing my liver any favors either.

I looked up at the menu, pointing to some Japanese characters at random.

smoke wafted past me into the country air.

Angela's probably at the airport by now I downed the rest of my beer, and before I could even set the glass down on the counter, I found another waiting for

The owner nodded and set to making the dish, the sear of his ancient grill filling the air. I stared into space as the

I glanced up at the elderly owner, but he was already back at the grill.

I watched him cook for a while, trying to empty my mind of anything and everything.

But right now, at this middle-of-nowhere izakaya with only a quiet, old Japanese man for company, it was the most

The lamb burned my tongue on the way down, but I didn't give a damn. I scarfed down the skewers, trying to fill up

Fuck.

I was never a fan of lamb. Too gamey for my tastes.

the empty feeling inside of me with something.

The owner turned around and placed a platter of meat skewers before me, smoke drifting lazily up into the chill,

I took another swig of beer.

delicious thing in the world.

This guy gets me.

Angela left you.

me.

morning air. I nodded my thanks before taking a bite of the mystery meat. Lamb.

Anything.

God.

Fucking.

And honestly?

She was right.

My new best friend.

Angela doesn't trust you.

I closed my eyes, letting the smell of cooking lamb swirl around me.

Angela hadn't trusted me enough to tell me she was pregnant.

hearing it straight from Angela's mouth? That fucking hurt.

I looked up to order another, but the old man was already putting more meat on the grill.

Damnit. I took another swig, but it didn't help. It was true, after all. No amount of alcohol would change what happened.

Everything she said was right.

The thought terrified me.

I bent over to pick it up.

I had an excuse. An exit.

I stared at my phone.

I dialed the number.

Xavier really wasn't coming.

seem real.

Zoe.

"Hello," I mumbled.

First class, sure. But still.

hope was the line.

You told him not to come back, Angela.

I wanted to hit myself. Was I too harsh?

It was Shinji's card.

I shook my head, taking a savage bite of lamb.

angry.

I didn't give her much of a reason to trust me.

burn on my tongue. *Maybe it isn't too late*, a small voice piped up within me. ~Give Angela a call. Maybe you can still reach the airport and catch the flight home.~

It wasn't like I didn't know I was acting like a bum. I'd been telling myself that for the past couple of months. But

The old shopkeeper turned around with my salvation, and I dug into the fresh round of skewers, almost relishing the

Don't be a bitch, Xavier. Man up. I pulled my phone out of my pocket, but something else fell to the ground as well.

What if she rejected me? The memory of Angela's glare flashed into my mind, and I cringed from it. She looked so

There's supposed to be a race in Tokyo tonight For some reason, relief flooded through me.

I didn't have to face Angela yet. But what if she forgives you? that voice piped up in my mind.

What if she doesn't? Ah, fuck it.

"Final call for Gate 7, Haneda to JFK. Please have your boarding pass and passport ready." The announcement from

I didn't get any sleep last night after our fight. I'd packed my bags in a haze, moving on autopilot. Our argument didn't

ANGELA

With a groan, I got up from my seat in the VIP lounge and made my way toward the gate. My feet dragged from my heavy heart.

the PA system buzzed in my ears, adding to my pounding headache.

Xavier? I checked the caller.

It was more like a vivid nightmare than something that had actually happened.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I gasped, my heart soaring with hope.

I came crashing back down to earth. Lonely, miserable, stupid earth.

"Angela? The plane is boarding now, where are you?"

"Oh." There was a pause. "Okay, see you in a bit."

him home. But why couldn't I just tell him?

Too bad I was never much for fishing.

"Was Xavier being a jerk?" she asked.

flexed, pushing up her nonexistent biceps.

I tried to laugh, but my heart wasn't in it.

rest and get your feet under you, okay?"

"Thanks, Zoe."

"But—"

"Okay."

bath.

"Yeah," I said. "Kind of."

No. I had to stand my ground. I was right, he was wrong.

"I'm on my way," I said in a lifeless voice. "I'll see you soon."

I could tell from Zoe's tone that she knew something was wrong. We'd flown to Japan on Xavier's private jet, after all. She'd have to be pretty dense not to wonder why we were suddenly taking a commercial flight home.

If I left the jet here in Tokyo, maybe he'd take it back to New York himself. My subtle way of letting him know I wanted

It felt like I was fishing, but instead of fish, I was trying to hook in my husband. The jet was my lure, and my unspoken

I boarded the plane and collapsed into my seat like a pile of bricks. Zoe sat next to me with a concerned expression.

Zoe blinked back in surprise, and I instantly felt guilty. None of this was her fault. She didn't deserve my bitchiness.

I opened my mouth, my first instinct to defend him, but then I paused. I'd been trying to help him through his troubles

patiently for weeks and weeks now. The least he could do was try and understand what I was going through.

I didn't feel any sort of release at the words. There was no righteous moment of conviction.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "Do I look okay?" I snapped.

"Sorry, Zoe," I sighed, sinking deeper into my seat. "I'm kind of a mess right now."

"Really?" she asked sarcastically. "I totally never would have noticed."

I rolled my eyes, but she'd managed to coax a small smile from me.

Just a deep, heavy sadness. Zoe reached over to squeeze my hand.

"I'm sure he'll come around," she said, winking at me. "And if he doesn't, I'll kick some sense into him for you!" She

"Nope, no buts." Zoe settled into her seat, adjusting the luxurious pillow behind her head. "Your job now is to get some

The elevator doors dinged open, the dark penthouse looming before me. Usually, coming home was a huge relief after

"I'll wrap up the rest of the paperwork when we get home. You should take some time for yourself."

Zoe nodded, lowering her sleep mask. Following her lead, I slipped on mine as well, and eventually fell into a light sleep.

But right now the penthouse didn't feel like home.

It was just a place. An empty place.

I forced myself inside before the elevator doors closed on me, dropping off my bags in the living room. My feet automatically took me to our bedroom, but I paused with my hand on the doorknob. I turned around and went into the other bedroom instead. The room I slept in before Xavier and I were a real couple.

a long day of traveling. I'd drop my bags to the floor, kick up my feet, and sigh with content.

I rested my hands over my stomach and was startled to find that there was a little bump growing there. I laughed, but it came out more like a sob.

Tears welled up in my eyes, but I blinked them away. I bolted up from bed and headed into the bathroom for a bubble

But not quite.

I collapsed onto the covers, a bone-deep exhaustion overwhelming me. I stared at the ceiling, a hole in my chest. I wished that Zoe hadn't taken the rest of the paperwork. It was a kind gesture, but it left me with nothing to do. I had nothing to do but wallow in my thoughts.

When the water was nice and sudsy, I sank in, letting the scented water cleanse my skin.

"It might just be you and me now," I whispered to my baby.

"Everything will be okay," I repeated.

"It'll be okay." Suddenly, I felt a protective urge inside me, trying to drown out the crushing loneliness in my heart. It almost succeeded.