The Arrangement

## **Some Spooky Company**

"Did you bring the pickles?" I asked Em.

"Oh my gosh!" Zoe said.

"So," Dustin continued, "I got him to pose for me as I painted him on the beach at sunset."

memory.

I felt myself melt, my insides all gooey.

"Nowhere. I'm one of a kind!" He threw out some jazz hands, looking absolutely ridiculous in his tie-dyed pirate outfit.

"Engaged," Dustin corrected.

"Oh please," Zoe said. "Everyone here is married but me."

"You don't need a Mr. Right," Dustin said. "You just need a Mr. Right Now."

"Whatever." I took a bite of my chocolate donut, immediately following up with a crunchy pickle as I listened to them bicker.

I took a deep breath, her arms around me an anchor. "You really should tell Ken though, Angie."

Dad's face popped into my mind.

"He's totally gonna freak out."

Bad bitch isn't even the half of it.

turning.

"Ready!" she called.

The cloth fell.

in the night air as the world held its breath.

elegant drift and an embarrassing burnout.

Picture fucking perfect.

I grinned like a maniac, and my heart beat like a jackhammer.

"Fucking asshole!" I yelled through gritted teeth.

"Listen to her purr," Azusa said into my earpiece.

"Yeah," I agreed. I'd hidden the news for long enough.

I grinned, imagining the look on his face when I told him.

"Because Lady Izanami is a bad bitch."

Azusa was sitting off to the side in the observation area, a laptop on her lap. Her raven hair spilled out from

underneath her headset, her Daisy Duke cutoffs and crop top a clear traffic hazard with how many heads she was

"All systems green," she said, tapping away. "It's a simple circuit, X. Three turns and a straight drive to the finish."

"The racer next to you is an asshole, Xavier," Shinji said leaning into Azusa's microphone. "Kick his ass for me."

look like a hedgehog on cocaine. He was in a classic mustang, wearing a leather jacket straight from the 1950s.

I glanced to my right to see the aforementioned asshole staring at me as he picked his nose, his spiky hair making him

People flocked at the edges of the deserted streets, no doubt cleared by some dubious means. The streetlights flickered

I was thrown into my seat as I took off like a bullet, leaving a part of myself in the dust behind me. The part of me that held all my worries, all my insecurities. My tension melted away, replaced by an intoxicating excitement. I tapped down on the clutch, shifting gears as naturally as I breathed, adrenaline coursing through my veins.

The silence was shattered. Screaming engines and squealing tires ripped against the asphalt.

I glanced into the rearview mirror for a half-second. Azusa was right. Our bumpers were practically touching. The next turn came speeding toward me. I began to ease into my next drift when I saw the mustang take a reckless,

"That's how it's done!" Azusa whooped into my earpiece. "Don't let up, X! He's right on your tail!"

Azusa shot off a flurry of rapid-fire Japanese into my ear. I didn't need to speak the language to know that what she was saying wasn't pretty. So that's how it's going to be?

"Oh no, not the tricks!" I stepped aside, letting them past me. They carried bags filled with sweets and snacks. Zoe had

We broke out into a fit of giggles as we crawled into the pillow fort, which I'd draped with Christmas lights. We each took a corner, arranging our snacks like a kids' dream buffet. Zoe and Dustin cringed at my pickle and donut

A chorus of excited squeals shook the fort as we clambered for details.

"He stood still for that whole time?" Em asked. "He was getting antsy," Dustin laughed. "I'd never painted so fast in my life." His eyes glazed over as he relived the

"Oh, Dustin," I sighed. "How dreamy," Em agreed.

"It's a little bit of a fixer-upper, but it's a really great spot with a huge backyard. It's not too far from your dad's place in New Jersey, Angie." Em smiled. She was the picture of happiness. "I can really see Bella growing up there."

"I'm a little jealous of you all," Zoe admitted as she chewed on some gummy bears. "I'm still looking for Mr. Right."

*Mmm*, that's the stuff.

But if Xavier never came back Before I could think too much on it, Em sidled up and wrapped me up in a warm hug.

death; the dreaded lady of the underworld, who swore she'd kill a thousand people every day after her husband had abandoned her in the land of the dead. When I had asked Azusa why she named her car after such a monster, a wolfish smile spread across her face.

I'd learned that *Izanami*, the car's namesake, came from Japanese mythology. She was the goddess of creation and

**XAVIER** 

Fucking terrible taste. A model sauntered onto the road in front of us, a red strip of cloth in her hands. She raised it above her head.

Shinji stood next to her, munching away at a bag of wasabi peas.

I revved the engine and listened to it roar, feeling the car come alive around me.

*This is what I've been looking for.* The first turn rushed toward me, and I hit the brakes, flicking the steering wheel to send *Izanami* hurtling sideways into the curve. I slammed down on the throttle, the engine screaming as I maintained the delicate balance between an

I came shooting out of the first turn, spinning the steering wheel as I stabilized the car into the next straightaway.

wild turn, forcing me to bail out and go wide. The other car roared past me, and I wrestled with the steering wheel, my muscles straining to keep from crashing into the sidewalk.

pissed as I was. You'd better hope your car grows wings, prick, because I'm coming for you.

I clenched the steering wheel in a white-knuckle grip, slamming down on the gas. *Izanami* roared beneath me, just as

"Girl, fuck him," Dustin said. "Duh, she's pregnant," Zoe said. "Shut up." Dustin rolled his eyes at Zoe. "Angela, you don't need him." "Huh?" What was Dustin talking about? "You're one of the strongest women I know," Dustin went on. "You had a life before Xavier, and you can have a life after him, too. "Besides, if you didn't notice ..." Dustin spread his arms wide. "You're filthy stinkin' rich! You'll survive." I snorted. The thought never even crossed my mind. A life without Xavier... Could I be a single mom? My heart squeezed painfully in my chest, my breath coming in shallow gasps. My body rejected the idea so fiercely that it left me stunned. I thought back to my childhood. Growing up without a mom. Dad did an amazing job, but I remember always longing for my mom. The jealousy I felt when I saw my friends at school concerts and plays with both of their parents. I didn't want that for my kids.

I felt lighter than I had in weeks. I'd spent most of my time alone, worrying over Xavier. Being in such good company was refreshing. I really did have awesome friends. "Angela?" Em asked. I blinked. "Huh?" "What did you want to tell us?" "Oh." I grinned sheepishly. "I'm having twins." The three of them exploded with excitement. I had to hold up the pillow fort to keep it from collapsing on top of us. "Twins!" Em squealed. "Oh, they're going to be so *adorable*." Zoe crawled up to me, placing her ear on my stomach. "I don't think you'll hear anything yet," I laughed. "Have you thought about names?" Dustin asked. "How about little Dustin and little Stirling?" "Yeah, right." I rolled my eyes. "No, I haven't really thought about it yet. I don't even know about the genders." "What did Xavier say?" Zoe asked. The mood instantly shifted. "Oh, uh," I stammered. "He doesn't know yet. He hasn't been answering his phone over in Japan." Dustin glared at Zoe, and I saw her shrink in on herself. "Oh, sorry, Angela ..." "Hey, no problem at all!" I said a little too loudly, forcing out a laugh. "I'm sure he'll come around."

"He's a sucker for sentimental stuff, so I took him out to The Hamptons for a weekend. I led him along the beach at sunset—" Dustin shot her a glance. "And as we walked along, I led him to a canvas and easel I'd set up earlier—" "That's so romantic!" Zoe interrupted. Em and I threw our hands over her mouth. "He thought I was just painting a portrait of him. But when I showed him the painting, I'd painted myself on one knee, proposing. Then I got down on my knee and Dustin shrugged and smiled radiantly. "He said yes." "Where can I find a straight guy like you, Dustin?" Zoe wondered. "So how have you been, Em?" Dustin asked after a round of laughs. "Lucas and I finally found a house," she said. "That's awesome, Em!" I reached over and gave her a hug.

**ANGELA** "Trick or treat!" I stood at the elevator, stunned. Em, Dustin, and Zoe were all dressed up. Em wore a ridiculously oversized witch hat, and Dustin seemed to be some sort of tie-dyed pirate. Zoe, at least, was wearing normal clothes. "What are you supposed to be?" I asked Zoe. "A serial killer," she said, straight-faced. "Huh?" She was wearing casual clothes. "How's that supposed to be a serial killer?" "Because you can never tell," she sniggered. I rolled my eyes. "You guys do realize that Halloween was weeks ago, right?" "Yeah, but we never get to dress up like this anymore," Em said. "Now, let us in before you get tricked!" Dustin threatened. a big box of donuts. I followed them into the living room, which I had converted into a glorious pillow fort. "Yup." She walked closer, handing them off to me discreetly like we were doing a drug deal. I laughed, hiding my prize behind my back. "Pickles and donuts?" Dustin asked, his nose crinkling in disgust. "Yuck," Zoe agreed. "I'm a slave to my cravings," I proclaimed, Em nodding sagely at my side. "What was it for you, Em?" "Radishes," Em said, stone-faced. "Radishes and mustard." Zoe gagged. "Man, am I glad I have a dick," Dustin laughed. Zoe booed. "Go Team No-Dick!" she chanted. combination. "So," I started. "Who's going first?" We all looked at Dustin. He grinned. "Well, if you all insist," he groaned dramatically. "I proposed to Jake!"