

The Arrangement
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Burnt Bridges

PENNY

My eyes were glued to the computer screen on my desk, nestled in between piles and piles of paperwork. Headlines flashed in big, bold letters. The sensationalist language used to generate buzz and clicks.

THE NEXT SHOCKING DEVELOPMENT IN THE XAVIER KNIGHT SAGA!

FROM CEO TO STREET RACER?!

XAVIER KNIGHT—WANTED ON THE STREETS OF TOKYO!

PARTY KNIGHT IN JAPAN!

Photos of Xavier were all over the internet. Here he was in a nightclub, clearly drunk or on drugs. There he was in front of a race car being showered in champagne. There was even a video of him doing donuts on the road, tires screeching, smoke spewing.

Guilt crashed into me like a freight train.

This is all my fault. ...

Logically, I knew that there was no way I could have known that Xavier would devolve into a street racer in Japan.

Losing his position as CEO was supposed to be the first step in having him reevaluate his life and his priorities.

It was like quitting a drug cold turkey.

He was an adult, and he was responsible for his own actions.

And yet I couldn't help but think that maybe if he'd stayed as CEO, I could have helped him.

I could have been more patient with his anger. Reacted even more kindly to his outbursts. ...

I shook my head.

You're kidding yourself, Penny.

Abuse couldn't be fought with kindness.

I of all people should've known that. ...

I popped open a bottle of Advil, chocking down two pills with a gulp of cold coffee. I'd become almost dependent on painkillers for the past few days, a pounding headache my constant companion.

At least I could count on it to show up.

We were becoming very understaffed at the office.

Knight Enterprises was slowly sinking, and the employees could smell it. So, like rats, they began to jump ship.

I caught myself and pinched the bridge of my nose.

They're people, Penny. Not rats.

I was starting to sound like Xavier.

Honestly, I couldn't blame them.

The other board members seemed to be pursuing other, more lucrative ventures. It felt like I was trying to stand up to a tidal wave.

And Henry... Henry was surfing the wave.

My phone buzzed.

Speak of the devil.

Henry

do u see this shit?

Henry

that moron just can't keep himself out of the headlines.

Henry

we fired him and our stock still fucking plunges because of his shit.

Henry

maybe we need a rebrand. change the name from Knight Enterprises.

Henry

let's hold a meeting on monday.

Henry

i'm thinking ... Platinum Estates. what do u think?

I groaned, flipping over my phone so I couldn't see the screen.

But maybe Henry was on to something.

A rebrand.

Not for the company, but for myself.

I could just run away. I could change my name and move away to a foreign country. I could make ends meet singing again. Night clubs, bars, whatever.

Life was so much simpler before the whirlwind known as Brad Knight stormed into my life and changed everything.

I entertained the thought for a few minutes.

Paris?

Berlin?

Rome?

I sighed, clearing my mind of such fantasies.

The truth was that I liked my situation. And while singing was fun ...business really was my true calling. I'd known that the second I walked into my first intro to economics course at NYU.

I just needed a little help.

I couldn't do it all on my own.

A new headline flashed onto my screen.

TOKYO ROMANCE: IS THE KNIGHT MARRIAGE IN JEOPARDY?

No...

I clicked on the article.

It featured a blurry, grainy photo of a couple outside of a popular Tokyo night club. It was indistinct, and you couldn't quite see their faces, but the man pictured in the photo held a striking resemblance to Xavier.

Their arms were wrapped around one another, and they were in the middle of a deep and passionate kiss.

I groaned, burying my face in my hands.

Xavier, you idiot.

He was supposed to be growing. Developing into his own man.

Instead, here he was, not only trashing the Knight name *again*, but throwing his marriage into the gutter.

I plopped my head down on the desk, listening to the sound of papers sliding to the floor. I'd perched Brad's photo on top of one of the piles. He was smiling, like he had just conquered a mini Mount Everest of paperwork.

Your son is a living, breathing headache.

I stared at the picture, and I could have sworn he winked at me.

I closed my eyes.

I really needed to get some sleep.

XAVIER

I leaned into the railing, staring into the Meguro River below me, the sun at my back. It was an overcast morning, and the fire of dawn was muted beneath a heavy blanket of clouds.

I'd found myself here often after the countless nights of parties and races.

Supposedly, the Meguro River was famous for the blooming sakura trees in the spring. Countless people flocked here from all over the world to take in the breathtaking sight.

But now, in the dead of winter, the trees were bare.

Lifeless.

I stared down into the dark water below me.

I wonder how far down the jump is.

I wasn't suicidal. I'd never had thoughts of giving life up completely.

My life was too precious to throw away.

But I felt like a jump in the river might help clear my head. A cold shock to help me out of whatever quicksand I'd been stuck in for the past couple of months.

It had been a couple of days since Azusa kissed me.

I'd pushed her away, of course, but not quickly enough.

For a moment I'd lost myself in the kiss, the feeling of her lips on mine electric—and for that, I'd probably never forgive myself.

I knew that Shinji and Azusa were looking for me, but I didn't want to see them. I needed some time alone—really alone—to get my thoughts in order.

The winter wind blasted me. Frigid fingers wormed their way into the gaps of my winter coat. I pulled the jacket tighter against me, shielding myself from as much cold as I could.

I imagined Angela here with me, having her smug and safe against my chest. The thought warmed me, and for a second, I really believed she was here. Then I snapped back to reality, and I was alone again.

I missed her.

Holy shit, did I miss her.

I sighed, her last words to me floating in the wind.

"Don't bother coming back."

I never could.

Right?

I pulled out my phone. It had been switched off since I'd called Shinji after my fight with Angela. I went to turn it on, but I paused.

I was actually terrified of the thing.

When I turned on my phone, would it be flooded with texts and voicemails?

Or would I have messages at all?

Not a single text.

Not a single missed call.

Angela had probably already made a new life for herself. She deserved it. She'd already wasted so much of her time stuck with a breathing dumpster fire like me. Our kid deserved better, too. ...

I doubled over, clutching at my chest. It felt like my heart was getting the life squeezed out of it. I shoved my phone into my pocket and looked back at the river.

"You gonna jump?"

I turned to find Azusa walking up to me, bundled in a fur coat. She leaned next to me on the railing.

"You here to stop me?" I asked.

"Nah," she said. "Do a flip."

I chuckled darkly.

"Shinji and I have been looking for you, you know," she said.

"Yeah." The silence stretched on between us, the only sounds the rushing water and whistling breeze. "Listen, about the other night—"

"I don't need to hear it," Azusa cut me off.

I stopped, looking at her curiously.

"I don't know what's going on in your life outside of Japan, but it really isn't any of my business. We were both drunk and caught up in the moment. Let's leave it at that."

I blinked.

"Honestly, Azusa, I'm surprised. I thought you'd be more. ..."

"Of a psycho? Unreasonably attached?" she grinned. "I mean, come on. You're hot, but not *that* hot."

I laughed again, but this time, it was genuine.

"Thanks," I said, really meaning it. Maybe I shouldn't have been taking myself so seriously. Azusa clearly wasn't.

"So, we're cool?" she asked, holding out her fist.

"Yeah." I bumped it with my own. "We're cool."

She pushed off of the railing, walking down the street.

"Shinji and I will be in that restaurant over there," she said, nodding toward a nearby grill house. "Come join us if you decide not to jump."

"And miss out on barbecue?" I pulled myself away from the river, following her down the road. "Feels like I haven't eaten in days."

"You're going back to New York?" Shinji spat around a mouthful of meat.

I put another piece of teriyaki beef on the grill, relishing the hiss of cooking meat. Smoke wafted around our small booth, and Azusa leaned forward excitedly, practically drooling.

"Yeah. I've partied here with you guys long enough, I think."

"Oh, come on," Shinji whined. "Give it a few more days! There's a *huge* race coming up soon. It's like ... What do you Americans watch?" He thought to himself for a moment. "It's like the Super Dish of underground racing!"

"Super Bowl," Azusa corrected, flipping the meat over on the grill.

"Yeah, that," Shinji grinned, his smile infectious. "One more race, Xavier! Then you can go home and be a family man."

"Wait," Azusa looked up at me. "You have a wife?"

"A total bombshell," Shinji confirmed.

Azusa muttered something under her breath in Japanese, turning her attention back to the food.

Shinji snorted.

"So, this is why you two have been looking for me?" I asked.

"No!" Shinji said, indignant. "We were seriously worried about you, man."

"But also, yes," Azusa added.

I snatched the cooking meat from the grill, stuffing it in my mouth. It burned the shit out of my tongue, but seeing Azusa's face was worth it.

"Hey!" she complained.

"Unbelievable," I said, enjoying the taste despite my scalding mouth.

"One final ride," Shinji urged. "You can get this wild streak all out of your system. When you get back to New York, you'll be refreshed and satisfied, having conquered the Tokyo underground racing scene."

Shinji held up his mug of beer, wiggling his eyebrows at me.

"What do you say?"

I looked over at Azusa.

"It can't hurt," she said, raising a glass of her own.

I looked between the two of them. They were both absolute wild cards, but they were here for me in one of the darkest moments of my life. What was one final race?

"Alright," I said, raising my glass.

"I'm in."