

Chapter 21

Finally, I realized how celebrity magazine reporters felt when they dug up juicy gossip. As soon as those words left his lips, I felt energized and attentive.

"You mean like you've given up on a crush? Or had a bad break up?" My tone was cautious, but in all actuality, I felt more empowered than ever. I was the reporter holding a mic in his face.

Hell, I felt like I could've slapped him if I wanted to, no holds barred.

"Eh... a bit of a forbidden love." Aaron smiled a little disappointedly.

It was the first time I saw him like that. He looked regretful-defeated, for once. In that one expression, he opened a window to his bitterness, pain, and self-deprecation.

This was big! It was something I could stay up with Cinder talking about! Aaron was in love! This lined up with him rejecting Cinder on their date. I couldn't believe it! What kind of woman could win the heart of a man like Aaron?!

If a gorgeous woman with a stellar personality like Cinder wasn't worth Aaron's time, his secret sweetheart must've been real royalty. Even then, a princess probably wouldn't be able to reel him in.

Maybe she was an alien.

But hell, being an investor like Aaron, his forbidden love could be Bitcoin. Or maybe Bitcoin was the bad breakup. The ex who'd wronged him.

I still had questions.

"So then-"

"Okay! Three minutes left. The interview's over. Time to go." Aaron dodged my interrogation and walked around the car to open the door for me.

I watched him stretch out his hand, waiting politely for mine. I placed my fingers gently on his palm, and under his silent leadership, I took his arm.

The venue was a modern-style building with smooth, minimalist architecture that gave a humble yet confident air. At the entrance, an endless stream of celebrities flooded inside while waving their invitations. I held Aaron's arm a little tighter, suddenly nervous.

"Relax," he whispered to me.

I took a deep breath when I saw the calm close-lipped smile on his face. Besides, it wasn't like I would ever see any of these people again. I found comfort in that. There was no need for pressure now.

"This is an all-out gala, Aaron. Is there anything else I should know before we go in?"

As we made our way through the crowd, it suddenly occurred to me that I didn't know a thing about Aaron's social circle. Everything I knew about his history came from Vincent, Cinder, celebrity insiders, and online news reports. If someone came up to me tonight to talk

about Aaron, they probably knew so much more than me. I wouldn't be able to keep a conversation without making things awkward.

"It's really not a big deal, but I guess I can give you some background." Aaron rolled up his sleeves as he explained. "The Morris family actually participates in these parties regularly. At least once a year."

"So it's a family obligation. Not something you just volunteer for."

"Exactly." Aaron nodded. "It's a show of generosity on my family's part, but I do care about the cause. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here."

It was hard to imagine Aaron following the whims of his family. His cutthroat decision-making led me to believe he was a self-serving machine, independent of its creator. I suppose charity is always a hobby for the rich, though, so I shouldn't be surprised.

"Wait-Your family's gonna be here?" The realization left me frightened. How would I introduce myself to his family? Hello, I'm Olive, Aaron's friend's girlfriend!

"Don't worry. It's just me that comes to these."

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Have you brought a fake date before?" I grabbed a champagne flute from a passing waiter while I looked around the banquet hall.

"No, actually. You're the first date." He answered with a smile.

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Date? That's the problem. I cringed slightly at his wording and frowned as I muttered to him. "Please pay attention to what you call me... How are you gonna introduce me to people?"

"As my fiancée?" He raised an eyebrow and grinned devilishly.

"Oh, sure. You do that," I sneered. Did he expect me to giggle like a blushing bride? He wouldn't dare.

A moment passed and I swirled the champagne in my glass. I asked, "What is it you really needed me for?"

"You'll find out later," he smiled and kept up the mystery. "Now... Welcome to my world."

He took my hand, and the crystal chandeliers rained gentle beams of light on his face. I was Alice, and he was leading me further down the rabbit hole.

The auction was after this open reception. Aaron seemed to know everyone here, and he socialized tirelessly with every person he passed. In the past half hour alone, I'd been introduced to so many people from so many different backgrounds, there were bankers, upstart entrepreneurs, investors, orphanage directors, wildlife sanctuary owners, and the heads of a dozen other charity committees.

Aaron didn't elaborate too much on my own background. He introduced me plainly as Miss Woods. Maybe this was to keep from rumors spreading through high society, and I appreciated that. I didn't need the attention.

Then came the unexpected variable.

"Aaron! Long time no see!"

She was a very noble and beautiful middle-aged woman. Her figure was clad in a simple black gown that fell to the floor. She had the body of a thirty-year-old, but the slight wrinkles on her face told me that she must've been at least forty.

"Oh. Aunt Jane. When did you get back?" Aaron was clearly surprised.

It gave me a bad feeling. Aaron said his family wouldn't come, but here was his aunt. We couldn't gloss over my identity like we had been with everyone else so far. She'd want details.

"I caught a plane here yesterday! I heard they were auctioning a certain painting this year, and I've been following that for quite some time, so I ended my business trip in Europe early." Jane punctuated her short ramble with a graceful smile, but her eyes were trained on me. Her gaze wasn't offensive, but rather interested, as if she were politely appraising me. She was an interesting woman-a beautiful one, at that -so I smiled back.

"Aaron," she winked at him. "Why don't you introduce me to this lovely lady next to you?"

I already knew what he was going to say. He'd been saying it all night so far. This is Miss Olive Woods.'

The meet-and-greet motions had become easy by now, so I put on my

signature smile and reached out to shake Jane's hand.

And the introduction came in three... two...

"This is my fiancée, Olive Woods."