

## Chapter 23

Bought by a man?

“Wow~!” Jane’s shock was overly exaggerated. She wasn’t buying it. “Aaron? When did you get so frugal?”

I did like Jane, but calling Aaron frugal? After I said he was paying one thousand dollars an hour? That sense of humor. must run in the family.

“I just wanna make her work for it,” Aaron didn’t miss a beat.

It was no use. Jane had already made up her mind that I was, indeed, Aaron’s fiancée. There was no escaping her teasing

now.

Thankfully, one of the passersby stopped to greet her. Before she left with them, Jane promised me she would introduce me to David later. Then Aaron and I were left alone.

“Is there anything Jane takes seriously?” I asked him.

“That’s her business. How would I know?” Aaron leisurely tipped his champagne glass up to the corner of his mouth without looking at me.

“It’s your responsibility to explain it to her. I don’t even understand why you’d say something like that. It won’t do either of us good!” I needed Aaron to see how reckless he was being.

“Maybe it won’t do you any good...” He smiled scornfully.

The warm lights coated his face like honey. He seemed entranced, as if his vague conversation with his aunt had left him reflecting on his past.

“Are you... drunk? It’s just champagne. I know you’re no lightweight.”

“Yeah, and you know me so well, don’t you?” He tilted his head at me.

“Look, I’m not here to argue with you...” I was starting to realize there was no way to get through to him right now. I could wait for him to sober up tomorrow morning, but after tonight, I think it’d be best for the two of us to really keep our distance. I sighed. “So let’s not discuss this right now. Let’s get back on track. What do you need me to do?”

Silence.

Aaron stared at me wordlessly. It seemed like he wanted to talk but didn’t know where to start. I spent the next minute looking into his eyes-pools of sadness and nostalgia. Something told me he was looking at me but seeing someone else. Was he thinking of a crush? An ex?

“Aaron?”

He blinked, finally back to his senses.

“Right. I guess I should be more specific!” He set down his glass. “This... party. It’s a dating game in disguise. Bachelors are being auctioned-their time is, at least-and the money is donated to the charity committee.”

“So these auction... prizes? Should I call them that? Are they voluntary?”

“Of course. And not just anyone is eligible. Every man on the auction block needs to be vetted first.”

“Vetted how?” I continued.

“For starters, they take a look at his assets and overall status,”

Aaron said. “As I’m sure you’ve noticed, the people here are New York celebrities. This is a social climb for everyone. Hiding it behind philanthropy makes it more palatable.””

“A rich man’s scheme...” I clicked my tongue and shook my

head.

“It’s more than that,” he smiled. “To make things more interesting, no one knows who they’re bidding for.”

My eyes widened. I was becoming more and more confused.

“What do you mean?”

“Have you heard of blind boxes?” Aaron asked.

I had heard of them before. Cinder loved them, actually. She even had a whole room in her house dedicated to the little dolls she bought. She liked to call them “investments,” but they were just children’s toys in my eyes.

And every time I saw her hurry to spend more on another blind box, I saw what it really meant to have money to burn.

“You’re telling me bidders are gambling for their dates?”

“Exactly.” Aaron nodded, “I mean, basic info is still provided. The ticker symbol-for the stock exchange-of the bachelor’s company is given as a clue, and everyone can decide whether or not they want to bid based on that.”

“Seriously? Do people actually bid based on that little?” I didn’t understand this at all. If this was supposed to be some sort of investment, what were buyers hoping to get out of it? The reception hall was open and everyone was already socializing. Anyone could mingle with anyone they wanted to

get acquainted with. Why spend money on a blind box?

“Of course they do.” He smiled at me. “You seem to have a hard time getting your head around that.”

“Because I am! That same money could be spent on more productive things than this high-stakes blind dating.”

“Just look at it as a pastime for the rich. These people have so much money that they don’t know what to do with it.” Aaron picked up another glass of champagne and took a sip. “When people leave their love life up to chance, they call it fate.”

“But it’s essentially a blind date.”

“That’s one way to look at it. I don’t think the average person would see it that way though.”

“What do you do at these parties then?” I was curious. “You’re also filthy rich. Is it just a pastime for you, too?”

“Eh... You don’t want to know. I will tell you though: just because I can’t choose who wins my time doesn’t mean I have no say in how we spend it.” He seemed embarrassed when he mentioned his past experience, but he quickly returned to normal.

Still, I was intrigued by his split second reaction. Aaron was the kind of guy who had no problem sleeping with a woman as long as she met his standards. Even if he wasn’t attracted to someone, he would still treat them politely. Many of the people here were potential business partners at the end of the day-even if a relationship wasn’t on the table, there were still deals to be made.

But...

“Have you ever been bought by a man?” I asked him.