

Chapter 31

Last dance

His words hung in the air, serious and solemn, and I wasn't sure what he meant.

In the soft and lilting music, under the warm glow of the chandeliers, David lowered his head and leaned in. His lips ghosted over my own and brushed past my cheek before coming to a stop next to my ear. He was close-very close- but his touch was lighter than a feather.

Any onlookers would've thought the two of us were inseparable.

My blush erupted from my neck to the tips of my ears as I deeply breathed in his scent. His deep voice tickled my ear.

"It was nice meeting you again, Olive."

The music faded to silence, and the hall darkened right on cue. At the same time, I felt David's arm around my waist tighten slightly as he turned me around. I nearly tripped in my heels and instinctively groped around in the dark for his hand as I cried his name.

Instead of answering, he pushed me, and I stumbled forward into another firm grasp. The hands that wrapped around me now were so strong that they nearly snapped me at the waist.

I was very familiar with them.

The lights immediately came back on, and the sudden brightness was jarring. While I was blinking away the stars in my vision, I felt the arms around me squeeze. I winced and glared at the man in front of me. "That hurts, you know!"

"I do know," Aaron said, indifferent. "Did you have a nice

chat?"

"I don't think I know what you're talking about, Mr. Morris," I

mocked.

"You couldn't find a partner for yourself, huh? I knew you wouldn't ask anyone."

That was the first time I'd heard Aaron speak so sharply. I wasn't used to it. Normally, he'd tease and beat around the bush when he spoke to me. I didn't like that either, but at least I was used to it by now.

This was just immature.

"Aaron," I tried again. "You don't need to be like this. Let mé explain what hap-"

"Why do you care? You like your professor, you bought your professor. Simple as that." Aaron's eyes narrowed and his mouth pursed into a line. His grip on me shifted as his shoulders tensed.

I wasn't at all interested in David that way. Yes, while I was an undergraduate, I was infatuated with him. I used to collect newspaper articles, copies of his published journals, and even short stories he wrote as a child. Back then, I thought I was in love, but now I knew it was just an illusion. I worshiped him not because I loved him, but because I wanted to be him.

But I wasn't about to explain that to Aaron. Especially not

now.

He gave me a wickedly sarcastic smile. "And here I thought you only had eyes for Vincent."

My blood boiled at his words, and I felt like I was going to suffocate in my frustration. "You don't get to tell me how I feel, and you don't get to talk down to me like you're so much better. You certainly got a lot of attention tonight."

I scoffed and added, "You just can't resist a pretty face."

Aaron was stunned for a moment, and his lip curled in a sneer before morphing back into that infuriating smirk: "Not when one is so much prettier than the other."

Prettier than the other...

My mind was brought back to the lady in the blue dress. Was he talking about her?

I wouldn't let him get to me either way. With a roll of my eyes, I leaned away from him. "If she's so much prettier, I wouldn't want to hold you back."

As the final song came to an end, we were surrounded by several cheerful couples, a harsh contrast from the icy atmosphere between Aaron and I. At the same moment some people pulled their partner in for a kiss, I pushed myself away from Aaron and walked out of the reception hall.

The courtyard out front was decorated with tidy hedges, grand topiaries, and modern sculptures.

Once I was outside, it wasn't hard to find a secluded spot to calm myself.

The north wind blew past and took my anger with it. The brisk night air raised goosebumps on my arms, and I shrank as I pulled my arms tightly around myself.

Why was I so worked up?

The chill cleared my mind enough to reflect. I'd let my

emotions get the best of me tonight, and it left me exhausted. First Vincent, then Aaron... I couldn't catch a break. Where was I going wrong? Why was I trying to compromise? Why was I putting on a fake smile for them?

Why was I apologizing?

I took a deep, shaky breath and fanned my eyes, but the tears were already running down my cheeks. Before I knew it, a broad-shouldered suit jacket was draped over my shoulders as I was held from behind in a warm embrace.

"Cheapskate," Aaron sighed. "Is that why you're so upset? I wouldn't make you pay for him, you know."

"Don't." I sniffed and rubbed away my tears before wrenching myself free from his grasp. "Don't start with that now."

"Olive... Look, I know my behavior was... Unacceptable. And I'm sorry." He took a deep breath, and it was obvious to me that he still hadn't completely calmed down. "I am."

I turned to focus on one of the abstract sculptures nearby instead. "No need to apologize. I just want to make sure you don't lie about our relationship again. Telling Jane and David we were engaged? That was childish."

My eyes flitted back to him in time to see his calm expression wave once again. He bit his lower lip and shut his eyes. I couldn't tell if his deep breaths were to quell his anger or shut me out, but I continued.

"During the auction, I messed up. Of course I didn't mean to pick David. I thought he was you. I don't know you as well

enough to find you based on photos like that." I locked eyes with him, and I was sure he understood it was an honest

mistake.

When he stayed silent, I continued. "I'll send the money to the organizers myself. You don't have to worry about paying for David. Consider it my punishment for screwing up that badly."

At that, the fire in his eyes returned with a vengeance, rekindled by my nonchalant attitude.

Was it anger I was seeing? Was it pain?

Good.

I was angry, too-I was wronged-and I was wicked enough to drag him down with me.

"Thank you for everything you did for me tonight," I added. "But let's stop this now."

I shrugged off his jacket and held it out to him. All he did was glare, making no move to reach out and take it from me. Without it, the cold wind danced across my skin. I shivered, but did my best to keep my posture steady in front of him. A few moments later, I heard footsteps rustling and coming closer to us, and my patience finally ran out.

If he doesn't want it, then fine.

With a smile, I dropped his suit jacket on the ground and moved to walk past him. Before I could though, he grabbed my arm. His fingers dug into me harshly as he pulled me back against him.

"You want to stop?" Aaron's expression devolved into one of

bitter resentment. I felt every bit of his hatred and indignation.

My nails dug into him harshly as I tried to push him away, but his grip only grew tighter. He moved to pin me hard against the wall of the sculpture, and the sudden cold across my back sent a violent shiver through my bones.

"Well, I don't accept your s*itty apology," Aaron growled. "And I won't let you go either." His blue eyes were bloodshot, and the wind made them well with tears. Even as his curly hair swayed in front of his eyes, his stare was unwavering.

"I can't keep doing this. It's wrong."

I was cold, I was angry, and I'd never hated myself more than I did right now. Why was I even here? To be a cheap date because I thought I owed him something?

"Wrong?" He let out a dry laugh, his wrath finally let loose. "G*d, you drive me f*cking crazy, Olive."