

Chapter 17

There was no doubt in my tone, only conviction. From the moment I laid eyes on him earlier today, I'd already walked into his trap. He'd known from the beginning that I'd be abandoned today. He appeared at every opportunity and played the part of a bystander while pulling the strings behind the scenes.

"Maybe..." He smiled. "I was about ninety percent sure this is how things would end up."

I narrowed my eyes. "So you're on Emily's side"

"I didn't do anything." Aaron shrugged "Vincent asked me to help with restaurant reservations, and I did. I also threw in the styling appointment. You look great in that dress, by the way"

I sneered at his calm expression as I slightly swayed. I was starting to lose my balance standing on one foot

Aaron felt me tremble and placed a hand under my foot to support me.

"Why was Emily so hellbent on having Vincent today?"

"I just told Emily that I gave Vincent a bottle of red wine. As a present for your third anniversary... and as an apology for what happened at the bar." Aaron rubbed my ankle with his fingers innocently. "I don't know what she said to actually get Vincent to leave, though."

I kicked his hand away and he stood.

"You knew he'd leave me tonight." I growled. "Does it make you happy

to see me like this? To see me fail?"

"I told you, I had nothing to do with it. They made their own choices. Emily wanted to ruin your third anniversary. Vincent wanted to leave

you."

"And you wanted to come to laugh at me?"

"I wanted you. I wanted to be by your side as much as possible. I wanted to make tonight special for you. That's why I'm here." His words were steady and his eyes were filled with determination.

There was no wavering in Aaron's expression-no guilt-only

confidence. It was as if I were his stolen treasure, but I still didn't

understand. He already had everything that Vincent didn't: his looks, his family background, his company.

Was he doing this out of jealousy? Or did he simply want to spite his best friend?

Maybe this whole time I was using Aaron, he was using me, too. Only I didn't know what his true intentions were.

"You must think really highly of yourself... What is it you think you're doing? Saving me? Being my hero? Or is this your way of getting at Vincent?" My lip quivered and based on the tension in my face, I knew I must have been glaring daggers at him.

"Getting at Vincent? No. Of course not. He's not worth all that." Aaron said stubbornly. His eyes twinkled but still shone with arrogance.

"Some 'brother' you are."

I didn't spare him the sarcasm. Vincent was desperate to stay on good terms with Aaron to protect his own interests.

Aaron was a powerful friend to have. He must've gotten a kick out of Vincent's flattery, and even more so the excitement of sleeping with his girlfriend.

"Okay, yeah. We're not the best of friends. But that's not why I'm doing all this." He frowned and waved a hand around to emphasize his

point."

"Then why are you doing it?" I raised my chin and motioned for him to

continue.

"Because you don't deserve it, Olive. Why punish yourself for their choices? For his stupidity? It's not worth it." He looked at me with a

sigh.

Punish... myself?

Those words were the hammer that shattered the fortress I'd built up around myself.

I kept wondering why Vincent betrayed me. What had I done to make him choose Emily over me?

I thought back to the time when Vincent had been hospitalized from overworking-the stress had given him severe stomach problems. Back

then, I went to the hospital to take care of him every day, even when I was still busy with my experiments for school.

Then I thought back to when Vincent's father had passed away. I took a plane with him to get back to his family home on the West Coast to attend the funeral. Hell, I'd even spent time arranging that funeral. I'd spent the past two nights working in the lab, but I stayed awake to support him the entire time. I was always there for him to lean on when

he cried.

But in my stubbornness, I was sure that struggling through those hardships only made our relationship stronger.

More than once, he'd hugged me and said, "I love you, Olive. Only you. You're all I have."

Now, every one of the sacrifices I made for him felt like lashes when I think back to them.

"If it's not my fault... Why am I the only one hurting?" I whimpered as tears welled up in my eyes.

"That's what your revenge is for, isn't it? Don't blame yourself," Aaron said softly. His hand wiped the tears from my eyes.

"Would you blame me?" I cried with heaving breaths. "After... After all, you-"

After all, he'd done nothing wrong. Not to me. All he wanted was to help me. I was the one who stubbornly insisted on hurting Vincent the

same way he hurt me.

Whenever I was with Aaron, I genuinely enjoyed his compliments and his praises. He validated me and helped boost my confidence-he proved Vincent wrong for choosing someone else over me. But Aaron was also a victim here.

I bowed my head and sobbed softly into my hands

"I'm sorry. This is my mess. I never should've pulled you into it..."

He took me by the shoulders and rubbed my back. Slowly, he leaned me forward until I was completely enveloped in his arms. "Shh... It's alright. You're okay."

My shoulders shook violently as my cries grew more painful, but he continued whispering to me.

I don't know if it was his scent that made me feel safe or if it was his warm embrace, but after some time, I felt at peace. The tears stopped.

I pushed him away, embarrassed, and wiped the lingering tears from the corners of my eyes. My nose was runny, and my voice sounded strange. "I feel like you forgave me more than I apologized."

Aaron laughed. He touched my cheek gently, and he'd gone back to that flirty tone I was used to. "If you're really sorry, why don't you come to that charity thing I told you about? We still have time."

"Do you think I'm still in the mood for a romantic party?" I gave him an

awkward look.

"You just have to get back in the mood. You look beautiful, Olive. And that dress really is breathtaking. Why waste it?"