

Chapter 25

David Ford

"Don't say things like that..." I said softly.

I turned toward the mirror to avoid his gaze. As I scrutinized my appearance in the light, I was satisfied that my initial blush had vanished from my cheeks. For once, I felt grateful for how unresponsive my body was to physical intimacy. I didn't want Aaron to pick up on the whirlwind of thoughts thrashing in my mind.

In the silence of the bathroom, I could hear my heart pounding in my chest. I stiffly straightened my skirt and adjusted my collar. His violent kisses had left my makeup smudged, so I took my powder and lipstick out of my purse to tidy it up a bit. Despite my calm, unwavering motions, I was trying desperately to calm my racing heart.

Both of our lips were left swollen, and Aaron's were left tinted red from my smeared lipstick. I grimaced. No amount of fillers could make my lips look as plump as they do now.

Aaron simply watched without saying a word. His silence reassured me that his impassioned words were nothing but drunken nonsense, yet his expression seemed... hurt. His eyes looked glassy, and his composure appeared as though it might shatter at any second. He looked more akin to an abandoned child than the hotshot CEO I'd come to know.

With a sigh, I put my things back in my bag and walked over to him.

Forget it, I told myself. This is the last time. I swear.

I plucked a tissue off the counter and carefully wiped his face. His eyes bored into me as I gently rubbed at his cheek and the corners of his mouth, but I didn't meet his gaze. I simply pretended that all I was doing was wiping my makeup off of him. That soothing him was the furthest thing from my mind.

With one last meticulous swipe, I finished cleaning him up. He seemed to sense that I was just about to pull my hand away, because before I could, he closed his eyes and tilted his head to tenderly kiss my fingertips. I felt the warmth-the strength- of his lips through the tissue.

It felt like an unspoken plea: "Don't go."

But the moment quickly passed.

"Come on," I said. "We should get back out there."

With a blink, the vulnerable glint in Aaron's eyes vanished and his eyelids lowered in focus. After a second, he looked up at me and nodded.

I stood on my tiptoes to help him reset his bow tie. If anyone came in now, I'm sure they wouldn't waste a second assuming we were lovers.

We weren't.

I knew we weren't.

He straightened himself while I reached to lock arms with him. We were ready to walk out as if nothing had happened.

Jane immediately greeted us once we returned to the main hall.

"Olive! Let me introduce you to Dr. Ford. David, this is Olive. She's a PhD student at Columbia University." Jane pulled me in for a warm hug and brought me to stand at her side. "And she's researching the bioinformatics of cancer."

David Ford. I didn't think I'd ever stand face-to-face with him

again.

He'd changed since the last time I saw him. Obviously, he was dressed differently. He'd worn a silver-gray suit to the gala, which was a drastic contrast from the casual sweaters I'd seen him wear during his past lectures. But he was also much thinner than before. His steely eyes matched the color of his suit, and I realized that I'd never noticed the color of his eyes before. His curly brown hair was tied back, and he was smiling as he slowly walked toward me. He stopped just two steps away.

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"Is this Miss Olive Woods?" He grinned. "David Ford. I've read your thesis, and I have to say I'm very impressed with your hypotheses surrounding molecular pathology."

David Ford has read my thesis.

My cheeks flushed. I was really being praised by him, the professor I admired most as a student. There weren't enough words in the dictionary to describe how I was feeling.

"Th-thank you, professor! I appreciate it. And you can just call me Olive, by the way. Believe it or not, I actually became interested in this field after I attended your lectures..." I shook his hand with every ounce of sincerity I had in me. "I'm where I am today because of you, Dr. Ford."

"David is fine," he reassured me. "And thank you. I'm happy to

hear it. Makes me wonder how many more students I can get through to if I took my lectures more seriously nowadays." He chuckled as he shook my hand. His hand was cold against my skin. Much colder than Aaron's constant heat, but softer than Vincent's calloused palms.

"Long handshake," Aaron commented flatly. His unamused tone sent a gloomy chill down my spine.

David retracted his hand instantly and turned to look at Aaron. I glanced between David's flickering eyes and Aaron's stony expression. My hand was left awkwardly outstretched as I watched the silent exchange between the two men.

The warm atmosphere suddenly disappeared. Now that I thought about it, Aaron was silent while Jane and I talked about David earlier. Maybe the two of them didn't get along well...

David's attention was solely on Aaron as he stared at him uneasily.

"Well... Long time no see, Aaron." David sounded like he was talking through clenched teeth. His eyes were full of shock and bewilderment, but most interestingly, infatuation. Back when I was a student, I'd fantasized about him looking at me that way.

Now I was seeing my old professor in a whole new light, and I was intrigued. My eyes flitted back and forth from David to Aaron.

"Sure... Anyway, the two of you said your hellos and it seems like you've already met before, so I think we're all done here, yeah?" Aaron pulled me closer to his side and took a step

away from David and Jane. "I have something to discuss with Olive, if you don't mind."

That was wildly out of character for Aaron. Something very awful must've happened between him and David for him to be so bluntly rude toward him. The vice grip of Aaron's hands signaled to me that there would be no resisting, and he pulled me further away from David.

"Not even a 'hi, Aaron? I thought we were friends," David interjected eagerly, fully invested in talking to him.

"You're delusional." Aaron whipped his head around to look at the professor over his shoulder, eyes full of bitter indifference.

"Aaron, don't do this," Jane spoke up. "David is my guest tonight. Please show him some respect."

Her eyes were fixed on her nephew as if she was trying to signal him about something. Aaron simply rolled his eyes, gave David a curt nod goodbye, and pulled me away.