

Chapter 26

Angel

"Let go, Aaron." I protested just loudly enough for him to hear me as I kept at his heels. "What's going on with you and

David?"

I watched him from the side as we wove through a crowd of people. His lips pursed into a thin line, but he said nothing. Then, after a while, he muttered under his breath.

"I hate him so much..."

I'd never seen such intense emotion expressed on Aaron's face. I've seen him smiling more often than not, with his carefree attitude stemming from his confident control of the situation. But this time, his resentment-his pain-was clear in his expression. He seemed as stiff as a sculpture with his jaw clenched so tightly.

I felt the need to change the subject and lighten the mood somewhat.

"So what're your keywords?" I asked.

"What?" He responded at least, but he was still distant. Still distracted. Maybe I should've been more specific...

"Your keywords. For the auction. I know it's mostly blind, but there have to be a few clear flags it's you they're selling, right? Earlier you mentioned your company's stock code. What's yours?"

"Oh. That." His eyes remained indifferent. "That was just an example... I don't know how the auctioneer wants to advertise me. It's up to them."

What?!

My confusion must've been written all over my face. I leaned forward and put my hands up in a hold on gesture.

"You're joking... Did you tell the auctioneer anything? No cheeky codename? No subtle hint?"

"It keeps things fair," Aaron shrugged. "Collaboration means we risk information being leaked in advance. The blind bag loses its meaning."

"The 'blind bag' never meant anything! G*d, and I can't believe it's up to the organizers to do all this research on the items without any help..."

"That's why there's always such a big turnout for this event. It's fun. It's gimmicky. And by the way, the men aren't called 'items' during the auction. We're called The Angels of Fate, thank you very much."

"Ah. How humble," I rolled my eyes and shook my head. It was pretentious without a doubt, but it was also equal parts tasteless and entertaining. "So how am I supposed to make sure I'm bidding on you? I can't just buy everyone."

"With everything you know about me, you won't have any trouble choosing," he smiled. This was the Aaron I knew.

"You're that sure," I smiled sarcastically, "I don't know you as well as you think."

"That's still more than anyone else here."

"You should still tell me your stock code. Or your student ID from elementary school."

"Relax. They already used those in past auctions anyway.

They wouldn't use them again."

"Then I hope you're ready for me to buy everyone... Think you can afford it?" I gave him a sideways look.

He patted my head and smiled slyly, "I'm only paying for my share, darling."

"That's too bad," I grinned.

His smile became more earnest. He was back to himself again.

After a few minutes, the lights in the hall dimmed and a spotlight focused on the hostess on the stage. I listened to her lighthearted jokes in between her explanation of the charity event, and I became so absorbed in her speech that it wasn't until she was finished that I noticed Aaron was no longer with me. As I looked around, I saw that many of the men in the room had also disappeared. They all must've gone backstage already.

The auction would be starting soon.

I paid close attention as the hostess cheerfully announced that the Match Made In Heaven event was about to begin:

"Our guests from previous years know that we used to bid on our Angels based on things like property, status, hobbies, and other indicators such as those. This year, we've made some changes."

The audience whispered among themselves, and in that brief moment, I felt someone sidle up next to me.

It was Jane.

She greeted me with a smile and a nod, then motioned for me to listen carefully to the hostess.

"Our surveys showed us that a man's looks-and other assets

-are more important to our guests than something as frivolous as his status or net worth."

Oohs, aaahs, and general laughter spread through the crowd like wildfire.

The hostess nodded with satisfaction at everyone's reaction and continued, "After all, finding the full package can be difficult sometimes."

The corners of my mouth twitched, and another round of gossip and laughter rippled through the audience.

It was odd. I'd expected the haughty upper class to be more... refined. This whole party was full of surprises.

"Let's get started with Angel One, the 'Bulgarian Rose. Here is the information we've gathered for tonight..."

The large screen behind her lit up with a picture: a tattoo of a rose. As for where it was, it looked like it was a few inches below his waist, on one side of his very toned a*scheeks.

My jaw dropped. The ladies in front of me had already started raising their hands to bid while I was still frozen in shock.

Whenever I think I've seen it all...

"You seem surprised." Jane smiled at me.

"I am! I don't know-I just expected high society to be more... conservative?" I struggled to find the right words. I couldn't

just tell her, "That's f*cking wild!"

"You'd be right most of the time," she started. "But the man who came up with the idea for this event in the first place was a rebellious little thing, and he's always been a bit eccentric. In its early years, this gala was only attended by the young daughters and sons of New York's wealthiest families, but as it grew, more people saw the event as a networking opportunity. A place to do business."

"I'm amazed it was able to evolve into something like this," I gestured to the extravagant reception hall. "I didn't realize traditions and expectations could be molded so easily."

Whoever founded this event must be quite the character, to say the least.

"At this level in society, people essentially live without rules. Thrill and profit are what matter. They're the nectar that attracts this swarm of hornets and butterflies alike. You'll

understand it all soon enough, love."

She gave me a meaningful look, then turned back toward the

stage.

I was lost in thought.

Has Aaron only stayed by my side for the thrill of it?