

Chapter 11: Day One

After what felt like an eternity, our plane finally touched down at our destination. I stepped out onto solid ground, inhaling deeply and savoring the feeling of being on land again.

"Piper!" Tate called out, leaning against the car that would take us to the resort. I grinned and walked over, planting a quick kiss on his cheek before sliding into the back seat. Tate joined me, and we were off.

As we pulled up to the resort, I couldn't help but stare in awe. I'd never seen anything like it. Our accommodations were in one of those overwater villas, the kind you see in glossy travel magazines. The turquoise water and white sand beaches seemed almost too perfect to be real.

"This one's ours," Tate murmured, glancing at the room number before opening the door. I gasped as I took in our surroundings. The villa was stunning, with a kitchenette, living room, bedroom, and bathroom, all decorated in crisp whites that caught the sunlight streaming in through the windows.

I wandered through the space, discovering our private patio complete with a pool, hammocks, a slide leading straight into the ocean, and even an outdoor shower. "Tate, this place is incredible," I breathed, still in disbelief.

He leaned against the doorframe, a smile playing on his lips. "My sister really outdid herself with this one."

I spun around, excitement bubbling up inside me. "So, what's first on the agenda?"

"Lunch," he replied with a wink. "It's about that time." We changed out of our travel-weary clothes and into something more fitting for our tropical surroundings. I opted for a white cotton dress that hit mid-thigh and a pair of strappy sandals.

Hand in hand, we made our way down the boardwalk to the resort's restaurant. I tried not to stare too openly at Tate, who looked effortlessly handsome in a light blue polo and shorts that hugged him in all the right places.

"Hey!" Ariana called out from a large table, waving us over. We exchanged greetings with the group before settling in to peruse the menu. The dishes all sounded incredible, and I couldn't wait to dig in.

As everyone took turns ordering, I glanced around, trying to take in every detail of our surroundings. My attention snapped back to the table when I heard Tate place his order. "I'll have the mahi-mahi," he said, handing his menu to the server.

I smiled up at the server. "I'll have the tuna poke bowl, please."

As the server left, I noticed Josie watching me. "So, Piper, we still don't know much about you. What does your family do again?"

I suppressed a groan and forced a smile. "My mother, as you know, passed away. My father is a professor."

"And what school was that?"

"Columbia," I replied.

"So is that how you got in?" she asked, giving me a sideways glance.

"It is, actually. I also got into NYU, but I wanted to be close to my father," I answered sweetly, hoping the interrogation would end soon.

"How sweet," Ariana interjected, effectively changing the subject. "I've planned an excursion for each day we're here. Only two of them are all-day adventures, the rest are just in the morning or evening. I thought we could all use some time to relax!"

I shot her a grateful smile for steering the conversation away from me.

"So, what's on the agenda for today?" Jason asked, winking at Ariana.

She nudged him playfully before addressing the group. "Actually, we have a reservation tonight at one of the best restaurants in the area. Four stars!"

I couldn't help but gawk at her for a moment before Tate gently elbowed me. "Don't act so surprised," he whispered.

I shook my head, trying to clear it, and pressed a kiss to his cheek. When our food arrived, I was more than ready to dig in. I glanced over at Tate's plate and noticed his mahi-mahi was smothered in a lemon-caper sauce.

I quickly flagged down the server. "Excuse me, I think Mr. Young made a mistake with his order." I grabbed a spare menu from the table and scanned it briefly. "He'll have the shark steak instead, please."

The server whisked Tate's plate away, promising his new meal would be out shortly.

"Why on earth would you assume you could change his meal?" Josie scoffed, glaring at me.

"The dish he ordered had capers in it. I know he hates them," I replied with a polite shrug, giving her a saccharine smile.

She glared at me before returning her attention to her food. When Tate's new dish arrived, he looked at it with a smile before taking a bite. "How did you know I'd like this?" he whispered.

"It was a good guess," I replied, smirking.

After lunch, we returned to our villa to change into swimsuits. Ariana had invited everyone over to her villa for an afternoon of swimming and lounging by the pool. I debated which swimsuit to wear before settling on a yellow high-waisted bikini. I added a wrap and a wide-brimmed hat, and we headed over to join the others.

"Hey, guys!" Jason greeted us, ushering us through the villa to the pool area. Everyone was already there, sipping fruity drinks and enjoying the sunshine.

I settled into a lounge chair, soaking up the warmth and relishing the chance to relax. It had been far too long since I'd felt this carefree. Not since before my dad got sick.

"Piper," Josie said, her voice cutting through my reverie.

I turned to face her. "Yes?"

"When we get back, you should have your father come down for a few days. We'd love to meet him."

I coughed, choking slightly on my drink. "Thank you for the invitation, but I don't think that will be possible."

"Well, when school lets out and he has more free time," she persisted.

"We'll see," I replied quietly, looking out at the ocean before shedding my wrap and heading for the pool. I splashed Tate playfully before making my way to the ladder that led to the slide.

We spent the afternoon swimming, sunbathing, and enjoying each other's company, moving between the pool, the ocean, and our lounge chairs.

"Piper," Ariana said softly from the chair beside me.

"Hmm?" I turned to her, a content smile on my face.

"I'm really glad you're here," she said, her eyes sincere. "Tate has a hard time with my parents. The expectations and all that come with being the oldest and the male heir to the family name. I don't think I've seen him have this much fun in a long time."

"I'm glad," I replied, touched by her words.

"I can tell he really likes you," she continued. "You two fit well together. I'm so happy he found someone as strong, smart, and witty as you."

I smiled, though it felt strained, knowing that our relationship was built on a lie. "Thank you—"

"And don't worry about my mother," she interrupted. "She doesn't like anyone."

"She seems to like Jamie," I pointed out with a shrug.

"She only likes Jamie because her family has the right name and status," Ariana said, rolling her eyes dramatically. "Either way, there's no way that girl is getting her claws back into Tate. He doesn't forgive easily."

I offered her a soft smile before turning my gaze back to the pool, where Tate was floating lazily. I took a deep breath, watching the way his muscles flexed as he moved through the water. He looked far too good out there, and I took a long sip of my drink, trying to clear my mind of him.

"This is just a job," I reminded myself. "Just a job."