

Chapter 15: Paradise?

With only two days left in the Maldives, I couldn't shake the feeling of dread that settled in my chest at the thought of returning home. I had broken every rule I set for myself and fallen for her. Piper was nothing like I expected when I hired her agency, and now I couldn't imagine my life without her.

Sitting at the table just outside the back door, I scrolled through my emails, occasionally glancing up to watch Piper as she emerged from the bedroom, her eyes still heavy with sleep. "Good morning," she mumbled, her voice soft and warm.

"Good morning," I replied, pulling her close for a lingering kiss. When I finally released her, she took a deep breath and sat down beside me. "Breakfast this morning?"

"We're meeting everyone at the restaurant in about an hour," I said, returning my attention to my emails.

She nodded, tilting her face up to the sun and closing her eyes, basking in the warmth of the morning rays. After a moment, she stood and headed back inside to get ready for the day.

As we all gathered for breakfast, Ari asked cheerfully, "So, how did everyone enjoy last night's festivities?"

"Just lovely, dear," my mother mumbled, sipping her mimosa.

"It was so fun," Piper chimed in, her eyes sparkling as she shot me a playful wink.

Ari clapped her hands together, her excitement contagious. "Now for today, I thought we could spend the day at my villa for drinks and swimming again, like on the first day. What do you say?"

"Sounds great, Ari," I agreed, taking a bite of my eggs.

"Perfect! Come over around eleven, and we'll have a lunch spread set up."

Back at our villa, Piper and I changed into our swimsuits. I couldn't help but watch as she slipped into a strappy black one-piece that sent my mind reeling with desire. I stepped forward, wrapping my arms around her waist. "Why do you do this to me?"

She laughed, her eyes dancing with mischief. "Mr. Young, behave yourself, and maybe I'll let you rub sunscreen on me later."

I grumbled in response, sitting on the bed and watching as she donned a wrap and an oversized hat. Together, we gathered our things and made our way to Ariana's villa.

Upon our arrival, Ari opened the door with a look of sheer panic. "Tate, it wasn't me. I didn't know she invited her..."

I raised an eyebrow, stepping inside. "Who invited who?"

"Tate! Look who's come to join us!" my mother called out, her voice dripping with delight.

I turned to see Jamie standing beside her, a bright smile plastered on her face. "Hi, Tate," she said sweetly.

"Jamie..." I managed, my voice strained. "You're here... in the Maldives..."

"Tate, don't just stand there. Offer our friend a drink and a chair," my mother chided.

Taking a deep breath, I forced a smile and took Piper's hand, leading her toward the pool. "Jamie, what would you like to drink?"

"A sangria, if the bar has them," she replied innocently.

I nodded, returning with two drinks in hand. I handed Jamie her sangria before bringing Piper her soda and lime.

"So, Piper," Jamie began, her voice loud and clear. "I heard you're in school for your master's, correct?"

Piper nearly choked on her drink. "Yes, in art history."

"Huh," Jamie mused, feigning thoughtfulness. "Interesting, since Columbia doesn't have any record of you."

She turned back to the pool, sipping her drink as if she hadn't just dropped a bombshell. I glanced at Piper, my face paling as I realized what was happening. But Piper didn't even blink.

"Well, considering student files are confidential, I imagine they wouldn't give you that information," Piper retorted.

"That's why having connections is so important," Jamie smirked. "And mine said there is no record of a Piper Stringer ever attending Columbia University."

My mother gasped loudly, drawing everyone's attention.

"Since you're all here," Jamie continued, her voice dripping with malice, "I'll have it known that since your family is such good friends with mine, I took it upon myself to look into it. And apparently, there is no Piper Stringer working at any galleries in New York. Piper Stringer is a high-class call girl from Boston." She turned to me, her voice barely above a whisper. "I thought you should know, Tate."

I stared at Piper, her face drained of color. I shook my head, disbelief coursing through me. "That's absolutely ridiculous, Jamie. Just because you're jealous doesn't mean you can make up these outrageous lies."

I glared at her, hoping to put an end to this madness.

"Tate, I'm so sorry, but you don't know her as well as you think you do. I have the files and the proof," Jamie insisted. "Piper Stringer is a hooker. A pricey one, but a hooker nonetheless. She has tricked all of you."

My family stared in shock, and my mother stood abruptly, her voice cold and unforgiving. "Miss Stringer, I insist you leave at once. Our family will not be associated with your kind."

Piper's eyes flashed with defiance, but it quickly faded, replaced by a deep sadness. She looked to me for help, but I couldn't find the words.

"Piper, you should just go," I whispered, hoping to smooth things over.

Her eyes filled with tears, and she nodded, gathering her things as everyone watched with disdain.

"Yes, go. And don't you dare try to squeeze a penny out of us, or you'll be hearing from our lawyers!" my mother spat, always needing the last word.