

Chapter 19: Shock

I couldn't have been more relieved that the weekend had finally arrived. It had been nearly a month since my encounter with Josie Young at the gallery, and I was grateful that I hadn't heard anything from her since then.

After a lazy morning of sleeping in and watching cartoons with Maddy, we decided to get dressed and head to the quaint café down the street for a special breakfast treat.

"Can I have pancakes?" Maddy asked in a singsong voice as she colored on her children's menu.

"Of course. Do you want blueberries or chocolate chips in them?" I asked, glancing at my own menu.

"Blueberries," she replied with a grin, then added, "And whipped cream."

"Blueberries and whipped cream it is."

I couldn't help but smile as I listened to Maddy's animated story about a ladybug for the next twenty minutes. We took our time eating, savoring the morning and the fact that we had no obligations for the day.

After finishing our breakfast, we left the café, Maddy's small hand in mine as we strolled leisurely down the sidewalk back to our apartment. She skipped beside me, her blonde curls bouncing with each step.

"Piper?"

I froze at the sound of the familiar voice. "No, no, no, no, no..." I whispered to myself. I turned around with a forced smile. "Ariana?!"

"Oh my gosh!" Ariana squealed as she approached us. "I never thought I'd see you here. What are you doing in Boston?"

"I... I live here," I replied hesitantly. "How are you two?" I asked, glancing at Ariana and Jason.

"Oh, we're just great," she chimed in.

Ariana's eyes softened. "I'm sorry about how things happened in the Maldives. We were just so shocked..."

"I understand..." I replied quietly, although I was lying; I would never understand how people could be so cruel.

"It was still horrible," she continued. "If I had known where you'd gone, I would have reached out, but I didn't know how to find you."

"Anyway, where are you heading? We're meeting our mother for brunch. I'd love it if you could join us!"

Suddenly, my hand was tugged, and I looked down, realizing I had almost forgotten Maddy was with me. "That would be lovely, but I'm actually on my way to run some errands."

"Can we go home now, Mommy?" Maddy asked shyly.

As if she hadn't even noticed her, Ariana looked down at the little girl holding my hand. "Oh, hello there. Is this your daughter?" she asked curiously.

"Yes..." I replied hesitantly. I could lie and say she was my niece or something, but I wouldn't do that to Maddy. I would never want her to think I didn't want her or was ashamed of her.

"What is your name, sweetheart?" Ariana asked with a bright smile as she bent down to speak to Maddy.

"I'm Madasyn Lee Manning! I'm three!" she declared proudly, holding up three little fingers.

"Three! You're practically a grown-up!" Ariana exclaimed sweetly. She straightened up and looked at me with a curious expression.

"She's three? We must not have seen you for..." Ariana trailed off as her mind began connecting the dots.

"You know, it was lovely to see you two again! Say hello to the family for me," I said quickly, trying to guide Maddy past them and down the sidewalk.

"Piper!"

I looked up to see Josie Young and her husband.

"Crap..." I whispered under my breath.

"So lovely to see you again..." Josie said sweetly, attempting to hide her disdain. "You really should come by the house and see the painting. It looks splendid."

I knew she was just making polite conversation for the sake of appearances. "Oh, thank you. It's so nice to see you..." I replied, hoping the conversation would end there.

"And who is this?" Mr. Young asked, smiling down at Maddy.

Maddy beamed up at him, "I'm—"

"We're really running late," I interrupted, "I would love to stay and chat, but..."

"Mother! Can you believe it? After FOUR years, seeing Piper and her THREE-YEAR-OLD daughter?" Ariana interjected as she and Jason joined us.

"Yes, so nice," Josie replied. After a moment, realization dawned on her face, and she looked down at Maddy. "You know, Maddy dear, my son has bright golden eyes just like you."

"Really? I only know one person with eyes like mine. My grandpa! He's really nice—" Maddy began excitedly, launching into a detailed description of everyone she knew and the color of their eyes as I stood there, frozen.

I could feel my entire body tensing up. I lived on the opposite side of Boston. They never came here. It wasn't suited to their tastes; that's why I had chosen this area. How was this happening?

"Really? Golden-brown eyes, huh? Can't say I remember," I replied, tugging on my daughter's hand. "Again, lovely to see you. Bye!"

We hurried down the sidewalk. I refused to look back at them, but I knew that this was the end of our quiet little life.

Hopefully, they wouldn't say anything. They wouldn't dare bring shame to their family name by revealing the existence of a child they had just discovered. They wouldn't tell Tate. Would they?