

Chapter 20: Home Again

I was sitting at the desk in my apartment, skimming through some last-minute emails before heading out to the gym. I didn't bother to look up when the phone rang or when Jamie walked in.

"Tate, it's Ariana. She says it's urgent," Jamie said, placing my cellphone on the desk.

I picked it up and pressed it to my ear. "What's going on, Ari?"

"Tater Tot... are you sitting?" she asked.

I leaned back in my chair, my curiosity piqued. "Yes?"

"Tate. I don't know how to say this... so I'm just going to get it all out," she said.

"Ari, what's going on? Is everything okay? Are Mom and Dad..."

"No, no, they're fine. We're all fine. But Tate, we had a bit of a surprise today, and I think you need to come home." Ariana's voice was hesitant, and I could tell she was struggling.

"Ariana, what is going on?" I hurried, getting frustrated with her dodgy replies.

"Tate..." she paused for a moment, and I could hear her let out a sigh. "We saw Piper."

My eyes widened at her name. I hadn't said her name out loud in years. I hadn't told anyone, but I had searched for her after I returned to New York. I couldn't find her.

"That's nice, but that's all in the past. Why would I come home?"

"Well, you see... she has a daughter," Ariana said softly.

"Good for her. Everyone deserves happiness," I replied, hoping to hide the fact I was a little jealous she had found someone else.

"No, you're not understanding. My wedding was four years ago. Piper's daughter is three," she whispered.

I sat forward. "That's impossible. We only did it a few times."

"It only takes once, Tate," Ari replied sarcastically.

"Yes, but we always used protection," I threw back, "Besides, you know who she was. It's probably someone else's."

"She has your eyes, Tate," Ariana spoke solemnly, as if she had already accepted that this girl was mine.

"I don't... I just... I—" I stammered, unsure of what to think.

"Mom and Dad know. You need to come home and figure this out," she said softly.

I ran my hand through my hair in frustration. "It's not like it's hard to find me. Why wouldn't she tell me if I had a child?" I mumbled.

"Have you forgotten how you left things? There's no way she was ever going to speak to you again, Tate," Ariana shot back. I knew she was right.

"I'll be there by tonight," I replied shortly before hanging up the phone. I called the charter and got a last-minute flight scheduled.

"Jamie!" I hollered as I walked into the bedroom. I grabbed a bag from the closet and threw it on the bed.

"Yeah?" she hollered back as she entered the room. She looked around as I quickly packed my things. "Where are you going?"

"Something has come up. I have to go to Boston for a few days," I replied as I threw clothes into my bag.

"Oh! Do you need me to come with you?" she smiled.

"No, it's all business, and it'll only be a couple of days. I just wanted to tell you," I replied shortly.

Jamie crossed her arms. "It's always business with you."

I grabbed my bag from the bed and walked out of the room, placing a kiss on her cheek as I passed. "See you in a few days," I hollered as I walked out the door.

As I stepped into my hotel room in Boston, I let out a sigh before throwing my bag on the bed. I sat on the couch and rested my face in my hands.

"This all has to be a misunderstanding. There's no way I have a child, let alone a three-year-old."

Sleep didn't come easily, and I ended up tossing and turning all night. My mind was a jumble of anxiety and confusion. I couldn't get it through my head that I might have a daughter. It was impossible.

"Oh! Tate!" my mother cried as I walked through the front door in the morning. "I just can't believe all of this! Why wouldn't you tell us!"

"I didn't know, Mother," I replied. "Besides, the child probably isn't even mine."

She gave me a sideways look. "Tate, I'm your mother, and I'm telling you that girl looks just like you when you were that age."

I rolled my eyes. How would she even know? She barely raised me. I spent most of my childhood in the hands of nannies.

"We'll see," I said quietly before walking into my father's office.

"Take a seat, son," my father spoke sternly.

"Look, Father, I had no idea. And I'm not even sure she's mine," I threw out as I sat across from his large mahogany desk.

My father shook his head. "Get to the bottom of this. Quickly. I don't want anyone finding out before we figure out what we're even going to do about it."

He pushed a white business card toward me on the desk. I picked it up and read the print. "That's the gallery she works for. Her name is Piper Manning now. Go find her and get it sorted."

"Yes, sir," I replied, suddenly feeling thirteen again getting reprimanded for doing something stupid at school.

I went back to my hotel and changed into some slacks and a dress shirt, something acceptable to wear to a gallery.

I thought about Piper and now I knew why I couldn't find her. I didn't have the right name. As I stood outside the gallery staring up at the sign, I took a deep breath.

I hadn't seen Piper in four years. I honestly didn't think I would ever see her again, let alone be finding her to have this conversation.

I walked in and was greeted by a bright smile from the receptionist. "Hello, sir. Welcome to Featherton Gallery. How can I help you?"

"I'm here to see Piper Manning," I said firmly.

"Yes, give me a moment," she replied before picking up the phone.

"Ms. Manning, there is a client here to see you," she said softly. She looked up at me with a smile, "She'll be right with you."

"Thank you," I replied before turning toward the closest painting hanging on the wall. I looked up at it for a moment before hearing heels tap on the tile floor.

I turned to see the face I had once longed for.

"Piper," I said softly.

She looked up at me with a mixture of shock and fear. "Tate..."