

Chapter 21: Reunion

I blinked, certain my eyes were playing tricks on me. But there he was.

“Tate...” My voice came out as a whisper, barely audible.

“You look good,” he said, a faint smile gracing his lips.

“It’s been a while—what brings you here?” I asked, praying it wasn’t for the reason I feared. I gazed into his honey-colored eyes and took a deep breath, determined not to fall for him again.

“We need to talk,” Tate said, his voice firm.

I nodded. “Well, I’m at work. It’ll have to wait until I’m done. Come back at noon when I have my lunch break.”

His brow furrowed, clearly unhappy with my response, but he turned and left without another word.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to quell the panic rising within me. “They told him...” I whispered to myself.

Just before noon, I stepped out of the office to find Tate waiting near the entrance. There was no avoiding this conversation.

“There’s a lovely little café down the street. Would you like to go there?” I asked, attempting to maintain a professional distance.

“Whatever you prefer,” he replied quietly. We walked to the café in silence, neither of us knowing what to say.

As we sat down and placed our orders, I looked up at him. His honey-colored eyes met mine, and suddenly I was transported back to the Maldives.

I quickly looked away and took a sip of water. “So, you wanted to talk.”

“Tell me it isn’t true, Piper,” he said softly.

“I’m not sure I know what you’re referring to,” I replied, feigning innocence and hoping this wasn’t about Maddy.

“Tell me I don’t have a daughter I didn’t know about,” he demanded, his voice rising slightly.

I took a deep breath. “Tate, listen...”

“So it’s true. She’s mine?” he interrupted.

“Yes,” I admitted, unable to lie any longer. I had been caught.

“How do you know? Considering what you were...” he trailed off.

I glared at him, anger flaring in my eyes. “I know because you were my last client, and I haven’t been with anyone since you.”

He shook his head. “I’m just supposed to believe that? What are you after? Money? You can’t blackmail me into child support just because you SAY she’s my daughter.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “Unbelievable. Absolutely unbelievable. I didn’t seek you out, you sought me out. I was perfectly content with my life.

“Maddy is the sweetest, brightest, most beautiful thing in my life, and I won’t have you coming in and accusing me of anything.” I stood up, anger coursing through me, and stormed out of the café without even eating.

“The nerve of that man!” I fumed to myself as I returned to the gallery. I collapsed into my chair and began shuffling through papers in frustration.

“Everything okay?” George asked, watching me warily from across the room.

“Everything is fine,” I snapped. I let out a long exhale before looking up at him with weary eyes.

“I’m sorry, George. Yes, I’m fine.” I stood up and walked out to the gallery.

I tried to clear my mind by focusing on the paintings, but my concentration was shattered when the door opened and Julia greeted someone. I turned to see Tate standing at the reception desk.

“How can I help you, Mr. Young?” I asked, my voice laced with irritation.

“We aren’t finished,” he replied coldly.

“I’m pretty sure we are. I have nothing more to say to you.” I glanced up as the door opened and a couple entered the gallery.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.” I walked past him and put on a welcoming smile for the newcomers, guiding them around the gallery.

Thankfully, Tate didn’t reappear for the rest of the day. I hoped he had given up, but I knew better.

As I left the gallery and headed to my car, I spotted him leaning against the building next door.

I rolled my eyes and fiddled with my keys. “Tate, I’m serious. I have nothing else to say to you. I don’t want anything from you, so just go away.”

“If she really is mine, I have a right to meet her,” he said softly.

I looked at him, anger and disbelief warring within me. “You really think I’m going to let you meet her after what you said earlier? I won’t have you making her feel bad for existing.”

Tate pinched the bridge of his nose, frustration evident on his face. “I’m many things, Piper. But you know I would never be cruel to a child.”

I hesitated for a moment before pulling a business card from my purse. I handed it to him and stepped back, maintaining my distance.

“That’s my cell number. I’m not sure I trust you to meet her yet. We’ll talk.”

He stared at me, his expression unreadable. “This is ridiculous.”

“That’s what I’m offering, Tate. Take it or leave it,” I replied, secretly hoping he’d leave it.

I got in my car and drove to pick up Maddy. When I arrived at the daycare, I sat in my parked car for a moment, trying to collect myself.

I ran my hands through my hair and took a deep breath before stepping out of the car and into the daycare.

“Mommy!” Maddy squealed as she ran toward me, her backpack bouncing with each step.

“Hey, sweetheart. Are you ready to go home?” I asked, bending down to hug my little girl.

“Yep!”

“Me too,” I agreed, taking her hand as we walked to the car. “How about pizza tonight? What do you say?”

“With olives?!” Maddy grinned.

“Absolutely,” I winked. We spent the evening watching movies and eating pizza, enjoying our time together.

Throughout the night, I couldn’t shake the feeling that Tate wouldn’t make this easy, and it worried me. I pushed the thoughts away and held my daughter a little closer.