

Chapter 22: Meeting Maddy

When I walked into the gallery the next morning, Tate was already there, waiting for me. I raised an eyebrow at him as I passed by. "Mr. Young, are you here to admire the new exhibit?"

"No," he replied curtly.

I continued walking toward my office, a hint of a smile playing on my lips. "Well, then I don't believe I have any business with you."

I couldn't help but enjoy the moment, even though I knew it was petty. But he had hurt me, and I wasn't about to let him waltz back into my life—or Maddy's—without a fight.

An hour later, I stepped out of my office to find Tate still there, studying a painting in the gallery. I sighed and walked over to him. "I thought you were a workaholic. Why are you still here?"

"I told you, I want to meet her," he said quietly.

"How do I know you won't hurt her? I won't have you making her feel bad. Believe me, you're good at it," I muttered.

Tate's eyes narrowed. "I know we have a past, Piper. But if she's my daughter, I have a right to meet her. Besides, you know me. I would never be cruel to a child."

I took a deep breath. "I do know you, that's the problem." I turned away from him, my frustration mounting. "I don't know..."

"I'm not going to beg. Don't make me get lawyers involved," he said, his voice low and dangerous.

I looked up at him, my eyes blazing. "Are you kidding me? You're threatening me?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose, clearly frustrated. "No... I just—"

"You just think you can bully me into giving you what you want," I snapped, turning back toward my office.

Tate reached out and grabbed my arm, stopping me. "Piper, stop. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. But I would like to meet the girl. I would like to see if she really is mine."

I shook my head, irritated. "Her name is Maddy." I crossed my arms over my chest and let out a sigh. "Fine. Come over at six. I'll send you the address."

Tate looked down at me, his expression unreadable. "I'll be there."

At the end of the day, I picked up Maddy from daycare and we headed home, her chattering away about her day. As we walked into the apartment, I kicked off my heels and set my purse on the table by the door. Maddy raced to her room, leaving a trail of clothes and school supplies behind her.

"Madasyn Lee, come pick up your shoes, little miss!" I called after her as I hung up her backpack by the door.

She emerged from her room with a groan. "But Moooooom, I have to show Rufus my picture!"

"You can show him your picture as soon as your shoes are where they go," I replied with a wink.

I listened to her talking to her goldfish, no doubt showing him the picture she drew at school and telling him the elaborate story behind it. I straightened up the apartment, feeling oddly anxious about Tate's impending visit.

When Maddy came out of her room, I patted the cushion beside me. "Hey, hun. I need to talk to you for a second."

She sat down next to me with a little bounce, and I took her hand in mine. "We're having a friend come to visit this evening. I want you to make sure you're really nice to him, okay?"

"A friend? Is it Mr. George?" she asked, grinning. She knew George always brought ice cream.

"No, it's not Mr. George. It's a friend Mommy knew from a long time ago."

"Oh, okay," Maddy replied with a shrug before hopping off the couch.

I took a deep breath, unsure of how to prepare her for this. I jumped when the doorbell rang.

I opened the door to find Tate standing in the hallway, his golden eyes locked on mine. He handed me a bottle of wine as I let him in. It was expensive, and I couldn't help but feel a little excited to drink it.

"Nice place," he said, looking around.

"It's not the Ritz, but it's home," I replied with a shrug. "Please, come in and have a seat."

Maddy walked in slowly, stopping beside me before gripping my leg. "Maddy," I said, stroking her hair. "This is Mr. Tate."

"Hi, Maddy," he said with a smile. She gave him a shy wave. "How old are you?" he asked gently.

"I'm three!" she replied, holding up three little fingers.

"Three! Wow, you're such a big girl. Do you go to work with mommy?" he asked.

Maddy laughed. "No, silly. I go to daycare. I'm not big enough to go to work."

"Oh! How silly of me," he replied, grinning.

From that moment on, she was attached to him, chattering away about anything and everything she could think of. She showed him her bedroom, her toys, her favorite drawings, and her pet fish. Finally, they walked into the kitchen as I was finishing up dinner.

"Well, it was so nice to meet you, Maddy. Can I come to visit you again?" he asked softly.

Maddy looked up at him, confused. "You're not eating dinner?"

Tate glanced at me, clearly uncomfortable. "Well..."

I wiped my hands on a towel. "Tate, you're welcome to stay for dinner."

He gave a small smile before being dragged back out into the living room by Maddy.

I turned back to the stove and took a deep breath, hoping my anxiety would subside but knowing it probably wouldn't. He had hurt me so much, and I didn't think I'd ever be ready to let him back into my life.

Now that he knew Maddy existed, I wasn't sure I had a choice.