

Chapter 7: Clashing

The next morning, I awoke to the sound of raised voices. I sat up in bed, realizing that Tate had left the room at some point. I quickly got dressed and made my way downstairs. The commotion seemed to be coming from the sitting room, and as I walked in, I found Josie in the middle of a heated argument with Tate. The moment I entered, the entire room fell silent and all eyes turned to me.

"Good morning," I said quietly, walking toward Tate. He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and gave me a reassuring smile.

"Good morning," he replied, pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead. I tried not to enjoy it too much before he released me and turned back to his mother. "Mom, you had no right to invite her."

"I have every right! She's a family friend!" Josie argued, crossing her arms defensively.

"Mom, she stopped being a family friend when she dumped Tate for no reason at all!" Ari chimed in. "You should have told us she was coming!"

Josie huffed and stormed out of the room. Ari turned to me, looking apologetic. "I'm sorry if the commotion disturbed you, Piper."

"Oh, don't worry about me," I replied with a smile, trying to ease the tension.

"So, what's the plan for today?" I asked, hoping to change the subject.

Ari's face lit up. "We're spending the day here with cocktails and games!"

"Sounds fun," I replied hesitantly, glancing up at Tate's weary expression.

As the day went on and the family became progressively more intoxicated, the atmosphere grew increasingly tense. Thankfully, no one seemed to notice that I was sticking to soda and lime. Tate, however, was getting tipsy, and I knew I'd have to keep an eye on him.

"So, Piper," Josie slurred, turning her attention to me. "How did you manage to hook my son?"

"Mom!" Tate snapped, clearly irritated.

I placed a calming hand on his arm. "Actually, I didn't do a thing. He was the one who approached me. He had some questions about a few paintings at the gallery, and I was more than happy to help."

"I bet you were," she mumbled under her breath, her words dripping with disdain.

"Mom!" Tate shouted again, his face flushed with anger. "Piper is a good and kind woman. You can't speak to her like that. Piper, I'm so sorry..."

"Jamie is a good woman!" Josie shot back. "She has money, status, connections, class. What does Piper have? A love for art?"

I sighed quietly before taking Tate's hand. "You know, I would love to see the garden. Would you mind giving me a tour?"

Tate scowled but stood up and led me to the backyard. We walked in silence through the flowers and shrubs until he suddenly stopped.

"This is ridiculous. I'm going home," he huffed, his frustration evident.

I panicked, remembering Edna's warning. Taking a deep breath, I stepped toward him and placed a calming hand on his arm. "Tate, everyone is just drunk and on edge. Let's take a walk. Tomorrow will be better."

Tate yanked his arm away from me and stalked further into the yard. "You just don't want to lose all that money."

I rolled my eyes at him. It was true, but I couldn't let him know that. "You're just an overpriced call girl. You don't know what this life is like, what stress I have to deal with."

I scoffed, now irritated that he was once again throwing this in my face. "Yes, poor little rich boy. How hard your life is..."

"What did you say to me?" he asked, his voice dark and dangerous.

"You don't get to judge me just because you're having a bad day," I replied, my own anger flaring.

"I paid for you, I get to judge you as much as I want," he growled.

My eyes narrowed. "You're drunk and mean, and I'm not doing this with you."

I walked back to the house and up to our room, locking myself in the bathroom to wipe away angry tears. When I emerged, Tate was asleep on the bed, and I settled into the chair by the window with a book.

A few hours later, I heard him groan and sit up. I could feel his eyes on me.

"How long was I asleep?" he asked, his voice thick with sleep.

"A few hours," I replied coldly, still upset about our earlier argument.

"What did I do?" he mumbled, sensing my mood.

"Nothing I can't handle," I said without looking up from my book, turning to the next page. I knew I had to be professional, but I wasn't about to forgive him just yet.

He stood from the bed as I got up from the chair and made my way to the door. He stopped me, standing tall as he blocked my path.

"Excuse me," I said quietly.

He stared at me for a moment before finally stepping aside and letting me pass.

As everyone gathered for dinner, we were surprised by the sound of the doorbell.

"Good evening, Miss Thorne," Francis announced as he let their guest into the house.

"Jamie! So glad you made it!" Josie exclaimed, hugging Jamie tightly.

Tate tensed, and I wrapped my hand around his arm, knowing this was not going to be a fun dinner.

"You sit over by Tate," Josie instructed as we took our seats.

Jamie sat on the other side of Tate, and I could tell he was uncomfortable.

"How have you been, Jamie?" Josie asked, her tone overly friendly.

"Good," Jamie replied with a smile. "I've been helping my mother with her charitable work, so I've been busy."

"Jamie has a law degree from Yale," Josie bragged.

"Oh! That is wonderful," I replied cheerfully, giving Tate's hand a reassuring squeeze.

He remained quiet and tense throughout dinner. At the end of the meal, Jamie somehow managed to corner Tate alone. I walked into the hallway in search of the bathroom but instead found her pressing him against the wall.

"Jamie, it was so good to see you again," I said with a forced smile, taking Tate's hand. "Tate, Ari is asking for you."

He walked away, clearly uncomfortable, and I knew it was going to be a long night. I stared at Jamie for a moment before following Tate back down the hall.

As we entered our room later that night, Tate unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it onto the bed. "The nerve of that woman..."

"Which one?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"Both!" he exclaimed, his frustration evident.

I shrugged before unzipping my dress and changing into my pajamas. When I turned around, I found Tate staring at me.

"Look, I'm sorry about earlier today. Whatever I said, I shouldn't have. You've been nothing but professional. Thank you for being a buffer between me and everyone," he said quietly, his voice sincere.

I gave him a soft smile. "Thank you."

As we climbed into bed, I couldn't help but hold my breath. Lying so close to him, our limbs occasionally brushing against each other, was both electrifying and terrifying, even if I was still angry with him.

All I needed to do was keep it together for one more week...