

Chapter 23: End of the Night

I couldn't help but watch him from the corner of my eye as he sat at the other end of the table. I focused on serving Maddy her dinner, gently reminding her to eat as she chattered away with Tate.

Throughout the meal, I observed the way he interacted with Maddy, his voice soft and attentive as he listened to her endless stories and random thoughts. I was grateful for his kindness towards her.

"Maddy, sweetheart, finish your dinner, then go put on your pajamas and brush your teeth," I instructed as I stood up from the table.

"Okay, Mommy," she replied, hopping down from her chair and placing her plate on the counter with a clatter.

"Thanks for dinner," Tate said, following suit with his own plate.

"You're welcome," I replied, loading the dishwasher with the dirty dishes.

"All done!" Maddy announced, bounding into the room wearing her pajamas.

"Alright, say goodnight to Mr. Tate," I said, taking her hand.

"Goodnight, Mr. Tate!" she grinned, waving enthusiastically as we made our way down the hall to her bedroom.

A few minutes later, I returned to the living room and sank into the couch with a sigh.

"She's an amazing little girl," Tate murmured from the other end of the couch.

"She is," I agreed, a proud smile tugging at my lips.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

I fidgeted with my hands, searching for the right words. "You didn't want me. I wasn't good enough for your family. After the way things ended in the Maldives, I never thought I'd see you again. And then I found out I was pregnant."

I paused, taking a deep breath. "It was a shock, but you had your family and your life. If you had wanted me, you would have stopped me. But you let them send me away. So I had my daughter, and I'm raising her to be smart, kind, and adventurous."

Tate looked down, his expression pained. "I did look for you. I searched for months."

"I was right here the whole time," I replied with a shrug, running a hand through my hair. "Anyway, now you've met her. I don't expect anything from you. I've been supporting her just fine on my own. You can go back to your life and forget about us."

Tate scooped, shaking his head. "There's no way that's going to happen."

"Well, she isn't going with you, and there's no way I'm subjecting her to your parents. I don't want her ever feeling like she's some dirty secret."

He rubbed his face, frustration evident in his movements. "I can't just forget I have a daughter, Piper. I should have known about her. I shouldn't just now be meeting her. I should have always been a part of her life."

I stared down at my hands, my voice barely audible. "I'm sorry, Tate. But when I had Maddy, I was hurt. I was angry with you. I still am. And I wasn't going to risk you taking her away from me. Your family is powerful and has all the right connections. It would be easy to just take her and leave me with nothing. She's my whole world. If you want a relationship with her, then so be it. But we're staying right here."

Tate was quiet for a moment, his eyes searching mine. "I would never take Maddy away. It would hurt her more than anything. But I want to be there, and I want to take care of her – of both of you."

"We don't need any handouts. We're doing just fine," I replied, my tone firm.

"I'm not saying you aren't. But, Piper, I could take her without a second thought. It would be easy. But I would never do that, so just let me do what I can. Let me pay for her daycare, or let me come down on the weekends," he pleaded, desperation lacing his voice. "Let me bring her to the house to meet everyone."

I shook my head, adamant. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not? What's so bad about that?" he asked, frustration creeping back into his voice.

I looked up at him, my expression incredulous. "Tate, you despise your family. Why would I send her to them? And don't act like your parents didn't send you here to just take care of your problem. You just met her. I'm not sending her into the lion's den."

He sighed, relenting. "Fine, I won't take her to my parents. But let me be a part of her life. I'm here for the next few days; let me spend some time with her."

I leaned back on the couch, considering his offer. "Fine. You can come down on the weekends to see her. But I'll always be there. And we won't be telling Maddy that you're her father, not yet anyway."

"That's fine for now," he agreed. "What are you doing over the weekend?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, maybe some shopping? Taking Maddy to the park?"

"I want to go. I'll meet you there, just tell me where and when," he said quickly, his eagerness making me uneasy.

"I'll let you know," I replied coolly, standing up from the couch. Tate followed suit, and we walked to the door.

"Goodnight, and thank you for letting me meet her," he said softly, a small smile gracing his lips.

I nodded in response. "Goodnight."