

Chapter 27: Different Surprises

"Hey!" I called out as I walked through the door that evening, dropping my purse and keys on the hall table. I looked around curiously when there was no response. I walked through to the kitchen, my senses overwhelmed by a delicious smell.

"SURPRISE!" Maddy yelled, jumping up from behind the table.

"Surprise!" Tate smiled.

I looked down to see the table nicely set and a wonderful-looking dinner laid out.

"Did you do all of this?" I asked as I hugged Maddy.

"Mr. Tate and I decided to surprise you because you work so hard," Maddy chimed before sitting down.

I looked up at Tate with a mixture of surprise and gratitude. For a moment I remembered the kind man I had fallen for years ago and tears stung the back of my eyes.

"Please, sit!" Tate ordered before sitting down himself.

All through dinner, I watched him with Maddy, their new little relationship blossoming. I had to remind myself that this wasn't real, that I still hated him for what he had done, because watching him with Maddy was slowly making my walls crumble.

After eating an amazing dinner and the semi-edible cookies they had made, we put Maddy to bed. She gave Tate a tight hug and I knew she was becoming attached to him.

"Goodnight, Mr. Tate," she said with a yawn as I led her down the hallway.

"Goodnight, sweetie," Tate smiled as he collapsed on the couch.

"I don't know how you do it," Tate spoke as I walked back into the family room a little while later.

"What do you mean?" I chuckled as I picked up a throw pillow from the floor and placed it on the couch.

"I only had her for four hours and I'm exhausted," he laughed, leaning his head back on the couch.

I laughed as I leaned back into the couch. "I've just accepted the permanent exhaustion as a part of my life."

"Thank you," Tate said gently as he turned to face me. "Thank you for letting me have today with her. It was so much fun."

I smiled, "I'm glad. Besides, you leave tomorrow. She's going to miss you."

"I'm going to miss her," he replied. He looked down nervously before meeting my eyes again. "Piper, Maddy said something earlier and it has me curious."

"Oh?" I asked, wondering what she would have said.

"She said that your father is..."

I sighed, not sure if I should tell him. And yet I found myself doing just that.

"My father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease six years ago. His care home is expensive; that's actually why I started working for the agency. It was the only way I could afford a place to care for him. That is, until I couldn't take it anymore. He has gotten a lot worse the last year or so; his health has been declining and he needs a lot of care. He's pretty much bed-ridden."

Tate's brow furrowed. "I'm so sorry. I never thought—"

"He was gone a long time ago. I go and visit him, but he doesn't know who I am," I said quietly.

"It still can't be easy," Tate said softly before looking at his watch. He took a deep breath before standing from the couch. "I should probably head out. I'll see you at dinner tomorrow?"

I smiled as I stood, walking him to the door. "Yep, see you tomorrow."

As soon as I closed the door, I leaned against it, closing my eyes as I willed myself not to let him trick me into falling for him again. I couldn't help but admit I had enjoyed tonight. He had been so sweet.

"No..." I whispered to myself, hoping to strengthen my resolve before heading to bed.

"Oh! Maddy dear! You look so cute today!" Josie chimed as we entered the house on Tuesday evening. She gave Maddy a light hug before offering me a smile. "Hello, Piper. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing well," I replied, surprised at her seemingly genuine interest. "How are you?"

"I'm just grand," she responded before looking down at Maddy and taking her hand. "Now you come with me, I have some surprises for you!"

Maddy skipped down the hall, holding Josie's hand as they walked into the sitting room where Jason and Ariana were waiting.

We all sat down, Josie and Maddy sitting together on the couch. Josie pulled two large bags from beside the couch and set them on the coffee table.

"I have some surprises for you," Josie chimed as Maddy's eyes widened at the sight of the large bags. "Go on, see what's inside."

Maddy stood from the couch and looked inside one of the bags, squealing as she pulled out a pretty purple dress with matching shoes. "Mommy! Look! It's purple!"

I smiled brightly at her joy, "I see! It's so pretty! Did you say thank you to Ms. Josie?"

"Thank you, Ms. Josie!"

"Oh honey, call me Nana," Josie smiled.

I shifted uncomfortably. Maddy didn't know yet that these people were family. I knew we needed to tell her soon, but I wanted to at least wait until Tate could be there for it.

"There's more, dear," Josie nodded and Maddy looked in the second bag and her eyes got as big as saucers as she pulled out the largest monkey I've ever seen with a big, sparkly purple bow.

"Oh my goodness," I stuttered, "Josie, you shouldn't have."

"Nonsense! Tell me, Maddy, what are you going to name your monkey?" Josie grinned.

Maddy thought quietly for a moment before her face lit up. "Bananas. Because monkeys love bananas!"

All of the adults chuckled at her answer, stopping when Tate walked in. "Sorry I'm late, a call ran long," he said as he entered.

"Mr. Tate!" Maddy hollered as she ran up to him. He lifted her in his arms and hugged her.

"Hello there, Miss Maddy," he smiled before setting her down. "I see Ms. Josie spoiled you already."

"Ms. Josie said her name is Nana," Maddy replied with sass.

Tate looked down at me and I shrugged, not quite knowing what to say. He sat beside me and leaned close to me. "I'm sorry, she can be pushy like that."

I patted his knee in acknowledgment and he sat up straight, the room stopping again as Tate's father walked in. "Hey, all! Oh, Maddy, I see Nana got you all kinds of fun things!"

Maddy smiled up at him before sitting beside Josie again.

As dinner went on we all talked lightly, oddly enjoying the evening. I would be lying if I said I was surprised.

"So, you're leaving tonight, Tate dear?" Josie asked lightly.

He replied with a smile, "Actually, the business I needed to be back for tomorrow has been pushed back. That's why my call went long earlier. They need more time to get some things together, so I don't have to leave until Friday morning."

"Oh, good!" Josie sang before turning to me, "Piper, can we have you all over again on Thursday?"

I smiled lightly, "I don't see why not—we aren't busy."

"Perfect!" Josie clapped her hands together. I was so surprised by this change. The cold, manipulative, pushy woman I had known had somehow disappeared.

"Come over as soon as you can, say around four-thirty?"

"That should be fine," we all answered, curious about what she was planning. Hopefully, it didn't involve any more giant stuffed animals.

At the end of the evening, Tate walked with Maddy out to the car, carrying her bags of gifts.

"Piper..." Tate's father spoke quietly from behind me. I turned around to see Josie and Harris standing uncomfortably.

"Yes?" I responded curiously.

"Look, we want to apologize for the way things happened years ago. We were so shocked, we didn't think you were more than that person. It was wrong of us and we are so glad you have let us get to know Maddy."

Josie stepped forward.

"I know we started off badly. But I have been waiting for a grandchild for so long. She might not have come in the way I had pictured, but she is perfect. We would like very much to keep seeing the both of you."

For a moment I had to remind myself to breathe. I stood there in utter shock, wondering where that had come from.

After finally coming back to consciousness I smiled at them softly. "Thank you for that. I appreciate it so much."

After saying our good-byes we drove home, my mind still in awe of how everything had changed in the matter of a week.