

Tap, tap, tap!

She turned toward the front door, her hand frozen mid-swipe. She wasn't expecting company. Wiping her hands on a kitchen towel, she pulled open the front door.

"Tate!" Her hoarse whisper reverberated, a loop stuck on repeat, pulsing in time to the frantic beat of her heart.

He stood there, looking like he'd walked straight out of her memories—the same confident stance, the same intense blue gaze. Her hand cramped from her tight grip around the doorknob.

"I got the test results," he said, his voice quiet but sure.

Val blinked, her mind scrambling to connect the sound of his voice to the interpretation of his words.

"Test results?" Her voice came out strangled. "Why...why are you here?"

"Can we talk?" He shifted his weight, his hands resting at his sides.

The sickening memory of the last time she'd stood face-to-face rushed over her. She'd left her baby to warn him. He'd shut her out, slammed the door on her.

"I don't have anything to say to you," she said, forcing the words out.

"Please, Val." His voice softened. "Give me ten minutes."

Something in his tone tugged at her resolve. This was Tate, Libby's father. With a sigh, she stepped back and opened the door wider. "Ten minutes."

The apartment felt even smaller with him in it. He'd once fit into her life, but now his presence sent a jittery feeling under her skin.

She swiped at her phone, checking Libby's monitor. The little number glowed green—still safe. Her lips twitched into a small smile. Another good day for her little angel. Libby had been stable all day, and Sarina had handled things like a pro.

A small unfamiliar sound pulled her to present. Tate. In her house. Was staring at her. She bristled and returned to dinner preparations.

When he followed her to the kitchen, she motioned toward the cluttered dinette set. Well heck, she usually ate standing at the counter or on the sofa. Libby sat in her highchair.

She pushed the box of diapers and wipes to the side. "Sit if you want."

Tate hesitated but eventually lowered himself onto the plain ladder-back chair.

From his position, the sofa littered with a pile of clean linens and the bookshelf lined with toys and pictures were in clear view.

Tough. She returned to the sweet potato, chopping it into small chunks with more force than necessary. Single working moms didn't have the luxury of tidy homes. Shoot, her sheets hadn't been changed in two weeks.

"I came to see her," he said, his voice tentative, his gaze roving the photos.

Ignoring the vise circling her chest, Val dropped the potato chunks into a pan of water and placed it on the burner. "Why now?"

"I had to process...everything."

Process? Good for him. She'd like that luxury every day. But she didn't want to argue with him. She just wanted him to say what he needed to say and leave her in peace. Because if he pushed her today, he might not like what she had to say.

She dropped her gaze to his fingers, which worked like he was playing notes on a guitar. Funny, how some things didn't change. When he looked up, she refocused on the stove top. The gas burner clicked and then ignited.

"It was a lot to take in," he said. "But she's my daughter. I need to know her."

Val turned away to set the timer on her phone, but she couldn't pretend his audacity hadn't stunned her. She'd expected this moment, but not so soon.

"Libby and I are doing fine." She focused on each word, careful to hide her emotions. "She's happy and healthy— considering her condition. We have a good routine. I have friends who help. You don't need to worry about us."

"That's not the point," he said, his voice firm. "She's a part of me. I want to be here for her."

She jerked open the oven door, rattling the burners. Now he shows up—after he's had time to process! Isn't that special? Where was he on the nights she spent awake watching Libby's tiny chest rise and fall? Where was he when her heart gripped with the kind of fear she wouldn't wish on anyone?

Her anger shriveled like her overdone dinner. She'd gone to Glen Falls to protect him from that gut-ripping fear, to save him the heartbreak of feeling powerless against the fragility of their daughter's life.

"She's her own person," she said easing the oven closed. "She doesn't know who

you are.”

“I want to change that.”