

Val counted to ten and then waited for the front door to click closed. Tamping down her temper, she crossed her arms. “Where are her things, Tate?”

He flinched, rubbing the back of his neck like a teenager caught sneaking in past curfew. “We’ll go shopping. I wanted to do that anyway. Thought we could pick something out together—just the two of us.” His voice softened. “We’ve got to be back by four, though. Libby’s nurse is stopping by.”

“Nurse?”

Tate raised his hands in submission, a pathetic cross between a wry smile and a grimace distorting his features. “I looked into daycare, just like you asked. Got her a spot in the best one in town. But Senior...? He hired a nurse.”

Her jaw tightened, the anger bubbling up before she could stop it. “Your dad hired a nurse for my baby? Did he think I’m incapable of managing my own child?”

“No.” Tate’s voice grew earnest. “He hasn’t even met her yet, but you know how they are. My mom is so excited about her. And Senior...” He hesitated, his shoulders sagging. “Libby’s got him wrapped, and he’s only seen photos.”

Val’s anger faltered, the weight of his words sinking in. She thought of her own parents—distant, their lives so far removed from hers they hadn’t even met their granddaughter yet. A pang of sorrow cut through her frustration, followed by a pang of guilt.

“I’m glad they’ve shown an interest in their granddaughter. But that doesn’t mean I’ll let them steamroll over my decisions,” she said, her voice firm. “I won’t let Libby become part of some... Carver Show.”

Tate nodded, his expression serious. “I get it. They’re excited about being grandparents, and they don’t know how to rein it in. But they love her already. A kid can’t have too many people in their love circle, right?”

Val turned away, her throat tightening. She wanted to believe him, wanted to trust her life coparenting with Tate could work. But the idea of his family making important decisions about Libby while she became a background character in her own daughter’s life—was too much to bear.

“I’m losing everything,” she whispered, her voice breaking despite her best efforts to hold it together.

“No you haven’t,” Tate said softly, stepping closer. “We’ll figure this out. Together.”

She shook her head, the dresser edge biting into her fingers. “I won’t let go of everything we had. Libby and I— we’ve built a life, Tate. I’m not giving that up.”

“You don’t have to,” he said, his voice steady. “But you also don’t have to shoulder all of the responsibility anymore. She has two parents now. I’m here.”

Val swallowed hard, the truth of his words cutting through her anger. But that didn’t erase the pressure building in her chest, the feeling she had to fight harder, work faster, prove to herself—and to Libby—they weren’t pawns in someone else’s game.

“Forty-five minutes,” she said, her voice quieter with the slowing of her heart. “When Hannah brings her back, this... this room will be... normal.”

Tate watched her for a moment, his eyes searching hers before he nodded. “Mom and Senior want to meet her. I figured you’d both be tired from traveling but tomorrow...”

“Right now, all I want is a garbage bag—a big one.”

He straightened and she half expected him to salute. “Got it.”

Val wadded an impossible ruffle from the crib’s bottom into a ball and tossed it in the corner. Next, she yanked a soft pink sculpture of a tiara from the shelf.

Tate returned and held open a large black plastic bag.

“Rhinestones, Tate! She’s six months old.” The absurdity of the situation fueled her irritation.

Tate added the balled ruffle to the bag but remained quiet.

“They want to meet their granddaughter? Fine.” Val pushed a pink fuzzy throw rug into the bag, punching it with her fist for good measure. “I’ll explain the rules to them tomorrow.”

Tate’s glance flicked toward the ceiling, his lips pressing into a thin line. Val froze, recognizing the movement.

She’d seen his subtle tell so many times before. Like the night she’d insisted they sneak out to a dance in Poplar Bluff, Gabby adamantly against the idea while Tate stayed quiet, letting his barely-there eye roll speak for him. He had that same look now—a mix of resignation and resistance.

“Don’t,” she said, straightening. “Don’t give me that look. This isn’t optional.”

He sighed, turning back to the closet and pulling out a giant teddy bear that nearly swallowed him whole. “I heard you. But I’m not promising they’ll like it.” He tossed the bear onto the pile by the garbage bag, its fluffy arms sprawled in surrender.

“They don’t have to like it. They have to follow it,” Val said, her tone clipped. “And speaking of rules, call your dad and tell him to email me the nurse’s résumé.”

Tate froze, glancing at her over his shoulder. “I’m sure he checked her out. You should see the requirement list he goes through before he considers a new associate at the firm.”

“This isn’t an associate, Tate. This person will be responsible for Libby.” She crossed her arms, narrowing her gaze on him until he twitched. “I’m not handing her over to someone I haven’t vetted.”

“Got it,” he said with a curt nod, turning back to the closet.

Val let out a slow breath, her frustration ebbing. She hated playing the bad guy, but Libby’s care wasn’t something she could compromise on—not with anyone. Sunlight reflected from a crystal bedside lamp, and for a fleeting moment, her fingers itched to smash it against the stone fireplace.

“What happened to my stuff?” she asked, her words coming out in staccato pants. “The things I packed for her?”

Tate paused, pulling a stack of folded blankets from the top shelf. “Church donation.”

“Donation?” she repeated, the word tasting bitter on her tongue.

He set the blankets on the dresser, his expression cautious. “Mom said there wasn’t enough room—”

“So she gave away the things I selected. The things my friends purchased.”

Val bit back the angry retort rising to her lips. The thought of strangers sifting through Libby’s belongings made her chest ache.

She gestured toward the pile of baby goods they’d just removed. “You’ll be making another trip to the church. Exchange this,” she swept her hand forward, her voice cold, “for any of my remaining things. Expect to buy anything you can’t retrieve.”

“Not a problem,” Tate said, his tone neutral but his shoulders stiffening.

Of course, it wasn't a problem. Heaven help him if he even hinted of a problem.

"If you want me to stay here..."

Tate lifted his palms. "I got it. Church. Exchange. Shop till I drop. I promise I will restore Libby's nursery exactly as before."

Ragged pants crackled around her and it took a moment for her to realize they were hers. The fight was over. Tate understood. She forced her clenched fists to relax and waited until her breathing returned to normal.

"I'll make sure your parents understand that too." She softened her voice but couldn't summon a pleasant expression. "I'm not trying to keep them from Libby, but she's not their project. She's my...our daughter."

Tate's gaze met hers, and for a moment, the tension in his face shifted. "I know," he said, his voice low but steady. "I'll make sure they understand."

Val nodded, the vice around her torso loosened—a fraction. She bent down to tie up the garbage bag, the scent of lavender from the baby blankets reminding her of quieter days, simpler times.

"Call your dad." She met Tate's gaze. "And make sure he knows this isn't negotiable. It's better coming from you. I don't want to fight with your parents."

"I will," he said, his tone firmer now. "They'll get it. Promise."

The resolve in his voice convinced her of his commitment. For the first time since stepping into the overdone nursery, they were on the same page. She pressed her hand against her heart, trying to quiet its rapid beat.

"I'm not sure if this is possible?" she whispered. "I don't want to fight about every detail."

"We won't," Tate said.

To avoid looking at him, she surveyed the now-bare room, ending on the chandelier the last vestige of the Carver family's overreach.

"I hope so," she said. "Because this—" she gestured to the stripped room "—is just the beginning."

Tate grabbed the bear, his features showing an emotion she couldn't read. "Understood. But Val?" He hesitated. "You don't have to fight me, too."

A suitable response died on her tongue. She turned away, unable to meet his look

of...longing? Her vision blurred and her chest ached with the weight of everything she couldn't say.

While he walked out with the first armload, Val's gaze lingered on the empty crib. Like her situation, the nursery was far from perfect—she'd made progress. But only with Tate. His parents were an entirely different matter.