



172 The Child

"I can't believe I was forced to attend an event like this one... The irony is laughing in my face right now," Samantha muttered under her breath, frowning as she looked around the bustling event venue of the Sunrise Hotel. 1

The annual charity event for single parents was well underway, and the large reception room was filled with parents and their children.

Brightly colored balloons and streamers decorated the room, and cheerful music played in the background. The event had been established years ago by Amelie Ashford to support single parents struggling to make ends meet.

Here, parents could apply for financial assistance from a social fund if they were unable to find work for whatever reason. It was a full-day event where families could also socialize, find friends, and receive professional help if needed—all for free. 2

Samantha was sitting on her designated seat at

the edge of the room, forced into the role of host alongside her husband, Richard.

As a pregnant woman herself, she was expected to be welcoming and supportive, a beacon of kindness and hope for the other parents. But instead, she felt a cold storm brewing inside her. Her expression was tense, her eyes darting around with a mixture of anger and irritation.

She watched the single parents receiving clothes, toys, and other necessities for their children, her thoughts darkening with each smile she saw.

'Hundreds of thousands of dollars are being spent on these... these people, and me? I can't even get a single dime without getting my husband's personal approval! Even if it's for our child! His child!' 4

Samantha clenched her teeth, forcing a tight smile as another single mother approached her to express gratitude.

"Thank you so much for this wonderful event, Mrs. Clark. It means the world to us," the woman said, her eyes brimming with tears of joy.



"You're very welcome," Samantha replied stiffly, barely managing to keep the contempt out of her voice. She nodded curtly and quickly turned her face away, her patience evidently wearing thin.

From across the room, Richard watched his wife closely, noting her every reaction.

He noticed the forced smiles, the way her eyes seemed to blaze with resentment every time someone thanked her. But somehow, he didn't feel surprised.

'She doesn't look happy at all,' he thought, a deep frown settling on his face. 'I thought being around kids would bring out that sunny side of hers once again, but I guess I was wrong after all. Should have expected that from the woman who abandoned her first child.' 3

Just then, Richard saw Samantha's face go completely white.

Her eyes widened in shock, and for a moment, he got worried that she might be sick. But then he followed her intense gaze and noticed a young man carrying a toddler in his arms.

The man was dressed simply--a black loose



sweatshirt, straight blue jeans, and old, worn sneakers. He looked rather pale himself, the whiteness of his tone underlined by the dark buzz cut that crowned his head.

But what stood out the most in his appearance was the way strange, almost menacing grin spread across his face as he approached Samantha, hugging the child against his chest.

Richard watched as Samantha moved back in her seat, her voice trembling as she whispered, "Tyler... What... What the hell are you doing here?"

Samantha couldn't believe her eyes. Her ex-boyfriend Tyler was standing right in front of her, holding her firstborn child in his arms. She stared at the sleeping toddler, her heart pounding in her chest. How could this be happening? 1

Tyler stepped closer, his grin widening. "Is this really the proper way to greet your ex-lover, Sam? And, of course, your child?"

Samantha's eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. She forced herself to compose and hissed under her breath, "Shut up, you moron!"



Get the hell out of here right now before I call security!"

"Is everything alright?" At that very moment, Richard's voice cut through the tension, and Samantha turned to see him standing beside her, his face etched with concern.

Instantly, Samantha plastered on a fake smile and nodded. "Everything is fine, darling. This man just came to thank me for the opportunity our charity has provided to him," she said sweetly, desperately hoping Richard wouldn't press further.

Enjoying the woman's distress, Tyler turned to Richard, his smile disarmingly friendly as he said,

"Yes, I am very grateful, Mr. Clark. You see, I am not really the father of this kid. A friend of mine gave birth to this little guy here and then abandoned him at my place, so I have been doing all I can to support him. This little fella has never even been held by his parents once, but with this help, it's like the two of you are the parents he never had."

Richard's expression softened once he looked at



the sleeping child in Tyler's arms. He reached out and gently took the toddler, cradling him in his own strong arms.

"What kind of woman would abandon such a lovely little guy?" he murmured, his brow furrowing slightly. "He looks so precious..." 1

Samantha's heart twisted painfully in her chest as she stared at the child as well.

She felt a sharp, stabbing sensation, like a knife twisting in her gut. She could see the resemblance—the child's features were unmistakably hers. She fought to keep her composure, but her emotions threatened to overwhelm her.

Richard glanced at Samantha, his eyes filled with a softness she hadn't seen in a long time. "Would you like to hold him too?" he asked gently. "You're going to be a mother soon, after all."

Samantha's hands trembled as she took a step closer, her eyes locked on the child in Richard's arms. She could feel the walls closing in around her, her breath growing shallow and fast. The reality of the situation crashed down on her like a wave, and she realized she couldn't do this. She

couldn't pretend anymore.

"No, I..." She tried to speak, but her voice faltered, her words choked by the lump in her throat. Desperation clawed at her, and she mumbled something about feeling sick before quickly turning and rushing out of the room.

Richard watched her go, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

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