My name’s Aaron Taylor, and I used to think I was just a regular, hard-working husband and father. For the last seventeen years, I was married to Kayla, and we had a sixteen-year-old daughter named Judy. I got up early each morning to bust my back at the local automobile factory, working as a mechanical engineer on the factory floor, making sure we hit production targets and that the machines never ground to a halt. I always thought that if I provided a stable roof over everyone’s head, kept the bills paid, and stuck around whenever our daughter needed me, I’d be golden. Turns out, none of that counts for squat when your wife decides she wants out.

It all blew up one unseasonably warm afternoon in March. I was halfway through my shift, arms coated in grease from rechecking a busted piece of equipment, when my phone buzzed in my pocket. I glanced at the screen, expecting some spam message or maybe a quick call from Judy asking for a ride. But the name flashing was Gordon, our neighbor. Gordon never called me on a weekday, especially not at work.

Something must’ve been off. I thumbed the answer button and pressed the phone to my ear. “Yeah?” I said impatiently, still fiddling with the machine’s components.

Gordon’s voice was tense. “Aaron, you gotta get home right now.”

I dropped what I was doing, a heavy dread twisting in my gut. “Why? What’s going on?”

His breathing was labored, like he’d been running. “There’s a moving van. Couple of guys are loading a bunch of furniture out of your place. Kayla’s out there, too, directing them.”

My grip tightened on the phone until my knuckles whitened. “Moving van? Are you— Are you sure they’re not burglars or something?”

“I don’t think they’re typical thieves,” he muttered. “She’s waving her arms, pointing at chairs and tables. This… doesn’t look like some random break-in.”

A hot sensation flooded my chest. My wife was hauling out furniture in broad daylight? “Where’s Judy?” I demanded. “Have you seen her?”

“No sign of your daughter. Just Kayla.”

My stomach clenched, my mind spinning with all the worst-case scenarios: maybe we’d been robbed, or maybe Kayla was— “All right, Gordon,” I bit out. “I’m leaving work now. Stay on the line with me if you see anything else. And if the cops show, let them know I’m on my way.”

I hung up and marched off, not even bothering to wipe the grease off my hands. My boots slapped the concrete floors as I headed for my boss’s office. I didn’t even knock; I just pushed the door open and said, “Sir, gotta leave right now. Emergency at home.”

He stared at me. “You better have a damn good reason to barge in here like that, Aaron.”

“There’s a moving van at my house. My neighbor says they’re taking my stuff. I have no clue what’s happening, but it’s urgent.”

My boss’s gruff expression softened slightly. “Fine. Go. Don’t waste time.”

I bolted out of there, keys jangling as I sprinted to my car. My heart felt like a piston about to blow through the engine block. I didn’t fully believe Kayla would do something insane, but Gordon never joked. If he said a van was there, then it was there.

When I peeled out of the parking lot, tires screeching, every worst scenario pounded inside my skull. Maybe Kayla was divorcing me. Maybe she’d decided to skip out with someone else. But who does that in the middle of the day without warning? I’d never had any direct sign that my marriage was crumbling—no serious fights, no official talk of separation. Sure, Kayla and I bickered sometimes, but I figured that was standard for a couple approaching two decades together.

I got to our street in record time. The second I saw that big white moving truck in the driveway, my hands clenched on the steering wheel. A sick swirl of fury and confusion churned in my gut. As soon as I parked, I jumped out and nearly sprinted over to these strangers rummaging through my life. There were two guys carrying the coffee table out of the front door, and a third, tall and lean, arms folded like he owned the place, giving them directions.

“Hey!” I shouted, stomping up to him. “Put that stuff down right now!”

He gave me a single bored glance, didn’t even flinch. “Mind your own damn business, pal,” he said under his breath, as if I was the one trespassing.

That was the spark that lit me up. I slammed my right fist into his jaw before I could even process my own movement. He staggered back, arms flailing. Then he hit the driveway asphalt with a heavy crack, letting out a grunt of pain. I wanted to calm down, but the fury took control. That was my furniture. My home. My life. Who the hell was he to waltz in and start carting my stuff away?

He tried to scramble up, arms covering his face, but I lunged and grabbed him by the shirt. “You think you can steal from me in broad daylight?” I roared, slamming my fist across his cheek. Another blow to his shoulder. The man yelped, knees knocking as he tried to protect his head.

I fumbled out my phone, adrenaline pumping. In that red-hot moment, I was prepared to call the cops myself, but my fury made my fingers clumsy. I dialed 911—except in my rage I accidentally hissed “9-1-1” as “9-11,” whatever. The operator was calm: “Sir, do you need police or an ambulance?”

“Police,” I snarled. “Now. I’ve got a thief right here.”

The operator started telling me to go inside and wait safely, but I shot back, “I can handle myself.” I hung up, knuckles still clenched tight.

Then, suddenly, I heard that familiar voice. Kayla’s voice, screaming, “Aaron! What the hell are you doing?”

I whipped my head around, heart hammering in my ears, and saw my wife sprinting across the driveway. She pushed me away from the man, kneeling beside him. He had blood trickling from his nose and a nasty bruise blooming on his jaw. “Walter, oh my God!” she gasped, trembling as she touched his face. “Stay still.”

My breath caught. “Walter? Who’s Walter?” I demanded, though a sick realization tingled in my gut.

Kayla’s expression flared with anger. “He’s my boyfriend, okay? You didn’t have to attack him like some street thug!”

Those words were like a bucket of ice water poured over me. Boyfriend? I stared at her, completely blindsided. In one short breath, it felt like my entire marriage had been a sham. Seventeen years, a teenage daughter, a stable life—and she had a boyfriend named Walter.

He groaned on the pavement, cradling his ribs. “Damn it,” he coughed.

For a moment, I couldn’t speak, couldn’t even breathe. Then pure rage seized me. “You’re my wife,” I spat. “And you’re hooking up with this asshole? In my own house?”

I turned, gave that bastard a swift kick in the groin. He curled up like a pill bug, gasping in pain. Kayla shrieked, hands to her face. “Aaron, stop! You’re going to kill him!”

But my rage was all that mattered. I kicked him again, forcing another pained yelp out of him. The two movers by the truck just stood there, arms crossed, apparently finding it entertaining. Maybe this was the liveliest show they’d had all day.

An ear-splitting siren tore through the neighborhood. I heard the police cruisers screech to a halt. The next moment, two officers hopped out, guns at their sides but hands ready. One, a tall burly guy, immediately got between me and Walter. “Back up, sir,” he ordered, jabbing a hand at my chest.

I was breathing hard, fists raised, and for a second, I almost shoved him away. But sense kicked in. I stepped back, glowering at Walter’s prone form. He let out a pained moan, rolling onto his back.

“I’m the one who called,” I ground out. “They’re stealing my property.”

The cop turned to Kayla, who was still kneeling beside her wounded boyfriend. “Ma’am, can you tell me what’s going on?”

She squared her shoulders, wiping at tears of shock or maybe guilt. “Officer, this is Walter Anderson,” she said shakily. “He’s… my boyfriend. We’re moving some belongings I own out of the house. That’s it.”

My jaw twitched. I wanted to smack Walter again, but the cop’s glare kept me in line. “Belongings you own?” the cop echoed. “Ma’am, have you filed for divorce or a legal separation yet?”

Kayla went silent, eyes darting sideways.

“That’s what I thought,” the cop said. “You can’t just cart away stuff without a legal arrangement. Your husband could press theft charges.”

Kayla swallowed, glancing toward the moving truck. Clearly, she’d never considered that what she was doing was plain old theft under the law. Meanwhile, I felt a vicious little satisfaction. She thought she could stomp on me and walk away scot-free. Wrong.

The officer sighed. “So, ma’am, do you have any official agreement that states you can take furniture or property from the house?”

She shook her head. “No… but come on. I’ve been married to him for seventeen years. I have every right—”

He cut her off with a firm glare. “I’ve seen enough. You’re not allowed to just pick out what you want without any legal proceeding. If Mr. Taylor wants to press charges for attempted theft, we’ll have to handle it. Otherwise, my partner and I will stand here and make sure you only take your personal clothes. Understood?”

Kayla’s face twisted, then she snarled, “That’s bullcrap. My husband should be the one leaving. He’s always been a controlling jerk. I deserve this house.”

My chest tightened with red-hot anger. “House belongs to my mother,” I snapped. “Kayla, you have zero claim here.”

Her voice shot up an octave. “Screw you, Aaron! I raised Judy here, cleaned every corner of these rooms, gave you the best years of my life. This is my home, too.”

The officer finally lost patience. “Ma’am, that’s enough,” he barked. “It’s not your house if the deed belongs to someone else. If you can’t comply with the law, I’ll have no choice but to file charges. Do you understand?”

Kayla glared at him, eyes brimming with frustrated tears. Then she whipped around to the movers. “Fine. Bring everything back in.”

They threw up their hands in surrender, stepping off the truck to return the furniture. I could practically feel the tension radiating off them, but they seemed amused to see this marriage meltdown.

The cop turned to me. “You want to press charges? Or do you just want them gone?”

“Just get her out of here,” I said coldly. “I don’t care where she goes, as long as she never comes back.”

Kayla shot me a look that might have been heartbreak or betrayal. But I’d gone numb. She marched inside to gather her clothes, and I stood there, arms crossed, keeping an eye on Walter, who was slowly trying to get to his feet. His lip was split open, face speckled with blood. A bruise was forming under one eye. I almost felt a flicker of pity, but then I remembered how he’d stood there earlier, directing men to take my property. My pity vanished.

About ten minutes later, Kayla reappeared at the door, dragging two suitcases. She stomped toward the driveway. I lifted a hand. “Wait. Open them.”

She spun, eyes burning. “Seriously, Aaron? You think I’m a damn thief?”

I shrugged, unrepentant. “Clearly.”

A couple of the movers guffawed. The officer just sighed. “Ma’am, go ahead. Unzip them.”

She unzipped the first one, shoved it open. A bunch of her clothes, some shoes. Then I saw my laptop poking out from under a sweater. I yanked it out. “What’s this doing in your bag?”

She pursed her lips, eyes darting away. “It’s— I needed it. I have files on there.”

“Sure you do.” I ripped out the charging cable too and tossed it aside. “You want a laptop? Have your boyfriend buy you one. Because you’re not getting mine.”

Walter was leaning against the moving van, face tight with pain, but I heard him mutter under his breath, “Jesus, Kayla, let’s just go.”

She glared at me one last time. Then she stalked off, hauling her suitcases. The cop signaled for his partner to ensure nothing else got taken. I watched them leave, my mind whirling with anger, betrayal, and a nasty satisfaction that Kayla had failed to loot my home. Walter hobbled after her, arms clutched around his bruised ribs, still in obvious pain.

After the trucks rolled away, the police left, and the street settled into a stiff silence. I stepped inside and realized the living room was a mess. Tables had been dragged across the floor. I saw scuff marks, half-moved chairs, and a few scattered boxes. The entire place smelled like sweat and tension. That’s when the full reality finally sank in: My wife was gone. She had a boyfriend. She’d tried to steal half the furniture. And I was left behind with an empty house, a battered ego, and a bellyful of rage.

I started to tidy up what I could, but my hands trembled with so much anger that I just gave up. I plopped down on the couch, elbows on my knees, head in my hands. How long had she been cheating? How many times had she lied to my face? I clenched my fists, thinking that no matter what, at least Judy was still my daughter. She’d be on my side, right?

But an hour later, I heard the front door open. I looked up to see Judy stepping in, schoolbag slung over her shoulder. She froze, eyes taking in the scene: half-moved furniture, footprints, boxes. “Dad, what the hell happened?”

I sighed, rubbed my temples. “Sit down,” I said in a tight voice.

She did, dropping her bag near her feet. I stared at her, searching her face for any sign that she was in shock or upset or anything. After a moment, I said, “Your mother just left. She took off with that new boyfriend of hers.”

For a long pause, Judy just stared. Then, to my surprise, she shrugged. “Oh. You mean Walter?”

My heart skipped. “You know him?”

She toyed with the strap of her bag. “Mom introduced us a while ago. She said he was, like, her true love from way back when. They dated or something when they were teenagers, but he left the country, so they never worked out. Guess he’s back now.”

I sat there, mind reeling. “You… never thought to tell me?”

She shrugged again, annoyingly casual. “Mom said it was her business. Told me not to get you involved. Plus, I wanted her to be happy. You guys were never that lovey-dovey, anyway.”

The dismissal in her tone stung deeper than any punch I’d thrown at Walter. For years, I’d attended her recitals, her softball games, taken her on Sunday outings, and apparently it was all meaningless. My chest pounded. “And you think that justifies your mother sneaking around, lying, and trying to rob me blind?”

Judy’s expression tightened. “She wasn’t robbing you. She was just taking stuff she deserved. Honestly, Dad, you’ve always controlled everything. Mom told me how you hold the house over her head since it’s your mother’s property, how you keep your finances separate, how you criticize her spending—”

I barked a laugh. “Oh, did she also tell you how I pay all the bills on time? Or how I spent thousands on your extracurriculars while I wore the same goddamn work boots for three years?”

She pressed her lips together. “Still. Mom deserves to be with who she loves.”

I stared, the rage throbbing in my veins. This was my own kid telling me I was basically worthless to her mother. I forced a smile, something sharp and bitter. “Fine,” I said. “If she’s so in love, she can have him. You can have them both.”

Judy’s eyes narrowed. “What does that even mean?”

I stood abruptly, heading to the liquor cabinet. “It means,” I said, pulling out a bottle of whiskey, “that nobody in this goddamn family gave a damn about me. So I don’t see any reason to keep playing ‘loving husband or doting father.’” I poured a measure and downed it in a harsh gulp. “From now on, I’m doing things my way.”

She watched me warily. “What are you gonna do?”

I slammed the glass down, the whiskey scorching my throat. “Exactly what any wise man would do after being screwed over. I’m going to protect my assets, cut out the dead weight, and watch as you all sink or swim on your own.”

She stared, a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. “That’s— That’s cold, Dad.”

“Is it?” I snapped. “You didn’t mind being cold toward me when you basically told me Mom was right to ditch me.”

Judy stood, arms folding protectively across her chest. “Look, I’m just telling you how I see it. Mom found someone she loves. She says you two were never in love. That you just stuck around for convenience.” She shrugged again. “She wants real happiness. Who am I to stop that?”

I glared, the heat rising in me again. “Fine,” I ground out, turning away. “Then go with her. Be Walter’s perfect stepdaughter. I don’t give a crap. I’m done playing nice.”

She watched me for another moment, uncertain. Then she stormed off to her room. I heard the door slam. I stood there, breathing heavily, feeling an odd mixture of fury and heartbreak. The entire world as I knew it had just crumbled in a single afternoon.

That night, I barely slept. By the next morning, I’d hatched a plan. I left early to see my divorce lawyer, a sharp bastard named Ron Jeremy—an odd name, but the man was lethal in court. He grinned when I told him the situation. “She tried to take your furniture without filing for divorce? She’s screwing some side guy? This’ll be child’s play,” he said with a sleazy smile.

I leaned forward. “I want the process expedited. Cutthroat. I don’t want to pay her a dime more than the law demands. If she thinks she deserves better, let her new boyfriend buy it for her.”

He nodded and jotted some notes. “What about custody?”

My mouth twisted. “Give her full custody of Judy. The kid’s basically chosen her side anyway.”

Ron’s eyebrows rose. “Are you sure? Judges usually like at least partial custody—”

“No,” I snapped. “She wants her mom. Let her have her. I’ll pay child support until Judy turns eighteen, but that’s it. No father-daughter bonding bullcrap. She’s made it clear she doesn’t appreciate me.” My fists clenched on top of his polished desk. “If Kayla or that asshole Walter can’t handle her, that’s their problem.”

Ron shrugged, scribbling away. “All right. But be aware, it can get messy. Judges don’t always like it when dads walk away from custody.”

I gave a low laugh. “I’m past caring about what a judge likes. Let’s get it done.”

He nodded, then tapped a pen on the stack of forms. “This might go fast, or it might get dragged out. Depends on Kayla’s reaction.”

“It’ll go fast,” I said coldly. “Because Kayla won’t have a leg to stand on.”

I left the office and headed straight to the bank. Emptied the joint account. I left exactly two dollars to prove a point—she’d contributed nothing more than that, as far as I was concerned. Then I marched over to HR at the factory, took her off my insurance and pension beneficiary list. With each signature, I felt a twisted sense of triumph. A cold, brutal satisfaction coursed through me. She wanted to leave me? Fine. Leave with nothing.

Two days later, Kayla was served with divorce papers at her office. By the time she called me, her voice was shaking with rage. “Aaron, how dare you?” she shrilled as soon as I answered.

I leaned back in my desk chair at work. “Dare what? Dare to protect what’s mine?”

“You emptied the account, you took my name off your insurance—” She was practically hyperventilating.

“Your name,” I replied slowly, “didn’t belong on anything of mine.”

“You’re out of your mind if you think I won’t get half of everything in court,” she spat. “That’s how marriage law works, genius.”

I smirked at the phone. “We make almost exactly the same salary, Kayla. I don’t get alimony from you, you don’t get alimony from me. Your attempt at stealing the furniture is on record with the police. You want half my retirement? Then I get half yours. Did you think about that?”

She went silent, probably replaying all those documents. Then came the furious, “This isn’t fair. I was your wife. You owe me.”

I snorted. “Walter can pay what I supposedly owe you.”

Her breath turned ragged. “Aaron, you bastard—”

But I’d had enough. I hung up, grinning. She was going to realize soon that I held every card.

The day in court was electric. Kayla arrived with her lawyer, Lana Rhodes, who tried to put on the usual show: “My client deserves half of every asset, your honor. She’s been the spouse for seventeen years.”

Ron, calm as ever, stepped up. “Your honor, the spouse in question tried to take half the furniture without permission. She refused to let my client have half of her 401k or savings. So if we’re splitting everything, it goes both ways.”

The judge stared down at Kayla with a sour expression. “Ma’am, do you have any reason to believe you should receive alimony?”

Lana babbled something about Kayla’s contributions, her role as a mother, but Ron shut her down by pointing out Kayla’s job, her salary, and the police report from the day she tried to empty the house with no divorce filing.

Then came the custody discussion. Lana said, “We want the child to remain with Mrs. Taylor.”

Ron responded, “Actually, my client is prepared to cede full custody. He only wants to pay standard child support. Nothing more.”

That part stunned Kayla. Even from across the courtroom, I could see her eyes widen. Judy was there, too, perched anxiously. She looked at me with tears brimming. “Dad, you… you’re just letting me go?”

I refused to turn my head. Part of me felt a pang of guilt, but I’d committed to this path. “Yes,” I said, voice stiff. “That’s what you and your mom wanted, right?”

Judy gasped, tears rolling down her cheeks. “Dad, I—I—”

The judge asked if she wanted to speak. She stepped forward, voice trembling, and tried to say she didn’t realize how serious this would be, that she was sorry. That she’d only wanted her mom to be happy, not to lose her dad completely. Then Ron gave her a harsh line of questioning, basically forcing her to admit she’d never cared about my feelings. She ended up sobbing, “I’m sorry, Dad… please… don’t leave me.”

But I’d made my choice. The judge, exasperated by all the drama, ended up granting the divorce almost immediately. He gave Kayla no spousal support, because we both earned similar salaries. He told me I had to pay child support for Judy until she turned eighteen. That was it. Banged the gavel, done.

Outside the courtroom, Judy was practically hysterical. Kayla refused to even look at me, her face white with anger and confusion. Walter was nowhere to be seen; apparently he hadn’t bothered showing up to support her. That gave me a grim thrill.

I walked out without a word. Judy called after me, but I kept going. The heartbreak in her voice sent a stab through my gut, but I reminded myself: She’d made her bed. Now she could lie in it.

Weeks went by. My mother, Brenda Taylor, ended up taking Judy in when Kayla decided she couldn’t handle a teenager full time. Kayla was too occupied running around with Walter or working or who knows what. I’d see Judy now and then, but I kept my distance, staying cold. She’d cry, “Dad, please, can I come live with you again?” but I refused. I wanted her to get a taste of what it felt like to be pushed aside. Harsh? Yes. But sometimes you gotta burn bridges to stand on solid ground.

Then, one day, Judy burst into my house, tears streaming, and informed me that Walter had beaten Kayla so badly she’d ended up in the hospital. He was in jail now, charged with assault. I actually gave a bitter laugh at the news. “Didn’t expect that, but I’m not surprised,” I said. “I lived with your mother for seventeen years. She can drive anyone up the wall.”

Judy stared at me, shocked that I’d react so callously. I shrugged. “Sorry, kid, but I don’t have any sympathy to spare.”

For a while, that was the end of it. Kayla slowly recovered, but I didn’t go visit her. I heard bits and pieces from Judy. She told me Kayla ended up leaving the hospital in rough shape, physically and emotionally. Walter’s bail hearing kept him locked up, or so rumor said. I wanted to feel bad for Kayla, but mostly I felt a grim satisfaction that her dream romance had turned into a nightmare.

Months passed. I rebuilt my life with an almost ruthless focus. I started dating someone from work named Sharon—a no-nonsense woman who enjoyed my sharper edges. We went out for drinks, had a good time, kept things casual. Meanwhile, Kayla drifted in and out of Judy’s life, apologizing for the damage, trying to salvage some normalcy. Judy was stuck at my mother’s house, resentful at both parents, but she didn’t push too hard to move in with Kayla. Everyone had a tense, broken dynamic.

Then, early one morning, a pounding on my front door broke the silence. It was barely 7 a.m. I stumbled out of bed, still half asleep, hair a mess. I yanked the door open, already ready to curse whoever was messing with me so early.

There stood Judy and Kayla on my porch. Judy had tears in her eyes. Kayla looked pale, exhausted, her hair unkempt. She avoided my gaze at first. Judy blurted, “Dad, we need to talk.”

I frowned. “Seriously, it’s barely daylight. What’s your problem now?”

Kayla’s voice was shaky. “Let’s just say we’re in trouble.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, leaning against the doorframe. “Trouble? With what? You got another boyfriend who wants to kill you?”

She swallowed. “Walter’s in jail, but… I’m pregnant.”

That froze me. “What?” I hissed. My eyes flicked to Judy. She nodded miserably, as if confirming her mother’s statement. “Pregnant. How the hell do you know it’s Walter’s?”

Kayla wiped her damp eyes. “I don’t know. That’s the problem. It might be yours, too, because you and I—well, remember a few months before all this, we had that… that one stupid night. But I also slept with Walter around the same time. So I don’t know who the father is.”

My head spun. We’d had an awkward drunk night, near the tail end of our relationship, but I hadn’t thought it was even possible. I felt anger coil in my gut. “You come here at seven in the morning to spring this on me?”

Judy reached out to grab my arm. “Dad, please, Mom’s in real danger. Walter’s not stable, and if he finds out she’s pregnant, it could get worse. She’s terrified.”

Kayla’s face twisted with regret. “I—I know I hurt you,” she said softly. “But… I don’t have anywhere else to go. My parents are done with me after the fiasco. I got behind on my rent, and with hospital bills, I’m drowning. I don’t even know if Walter’s fathered this child, but God forbid, if he is the dad, I don’t want him near me or the baby when he gets out.”

I tried to keep my voice level, but rage and disbelief warred inside me. “Not my problem. Should’ve thought about that before you hopped into bed with him.”

Judy clung to my arm more insistently, tears overflowing. “Dad, please. He’s crazy. He threatened her. She’s pregnant and alone, and I’m stuck living at Grandma Brenda’s. I just want to be somewhere safe.” Her voice cracked. “I miss living with you. I know I messed up, but I’m begging you. Please let us move in.”

I eyed her trembling fingers clutching my sleeve. She looked so desperate, so afraid. Kayla’s eyes were rimmed red, either from tears or stress, I couldn’t tell. A faint pang tugged at my chest. There was a time I loved Kayla. And no matter what, Judy was my daughter. But I also remembered how quickly Judy had turned her back on me, how Kayla had humiliated me with Walter. This felt like the ultimate karma for them. They’d burned their bridges, and now the tide had risen to drown them. Was it truly my duty to fish them out?

They both waited, silent, hopeful. The early morning light glinted off Kayla’s tear-streaked cheeks. Judy was practically trembling, eyes flicking between my face and the front door behind me.

Finally, I cleared my throat. “What do you expect me to say? ‘Sure, come on in. Let’s be one big happy family again’? After you lied, cheated, and nearly destroyed me?”

Kayla swallowed. “I know there’s no excuse for what I did. But I swear, I never planned for it to go this way. Walter wasn’t supposed to be violent. I thought—” She shook her head. “I thought I was leaving for something better.”

A rush of disgust flared in me. “You’re pregnant, and you don’t even know by whom. That’s the kind of train wreck you turned yourself into.”

Her face crumpled. Judy sniffled, tears rolling down her cheeks. “Dad, you can hate us, but you can’t let Mom keep suffering. If she’s carrying your child, that’s your baby. And even if it’s not, I’m your daughter. We need you.”

I stared at her, my heart pounding painfully. Then I inhaled through my nose, forced calm, and gripped the edge of the door. “I need to think,” I said, my voice cold.

Judy blinked, confused. “W-what do you mean? Can’t you just—”

I shook my head firmly. “I’m not making a snap decision. Not after everything you two have done. You expect me to open my door and just forgive and forget? No. I’m gonna figure out what I want. Maybe that means letting you in. Maybe it doesn’t.”

Her face fell. Kayla’s shoulders slumped. She took a shaky breath. “We don’t have anywhere else to go, Aaron.”

“Then get a motel,” I spat back. “Borrow from your lover’s friends. Ask your mom and dad again. Not my problem right now. I told you, I need time to think.”

Judy’s voice cracked with desperation. “Dad… please. I’m sorry. I’m begging you. If you don’t help, I don’t know what’ll happen to us.” She clutched my arm again, sobbing so hard her words came out garbled. “I’ll do anything you want. I’ll apologize, I’ll—just don’t turn us away.”

I looked down at her trembling hands. For half a heartbeat, everything in me screamed to pull her in, hug her, protect her from the nightmare. She was still my child. But then I remembered standing outside that courtroom, hearing her talk about how I never deserved Kayla’s love, how she was happy that Kayla had found Walter. I remembered her telling me I was never the real love of Kayla’s life, just the safe fallback. That memory crushed any softness inside me.

So I pulled my arm free from Judy’s grip. She staggered, tears shining in her eyes. Kayla stood behind her, helpless.

I forced my tone to stay calm, like a drawn razor. “I’m done playing the bleeding heart. You both wanted me out of your lives. Well, guess what? That’s exactly what you got. Don’t come knocking at my door acting like you deserve my sympathy all of a sudden.”

A split-second hush fell. Judy opened her mouth, but no words came. Kayla looked away, shame in her eyes.

I tightened my fingers on the door. “I said I need time to think. So go. Now.”

Judy let out a strangled sob. “Dad… I’m so, so sorry,” she whispered again.

I stared at her, my jaw locked. Then, without another word, I shoved the door shut. The deadbolt clacked, echoing in the silent house. My heart pounded so violently that I could feel it in my throat. On the other side of that door, I heard Judy’s muffled crying and Kayla’s soft attempts to comfort her. Then, finally, the sound of footsteps descending the porch.

I leaned against the doorframe, eyes squeezing shut. Did I regret it? Sure. But they’d regretted nothing when they stepped all over me. Maybe I was the villain. Maybe I was just a bitter, petty man who refused to help his own wife and daughter. Right then, I didn’t give a damn. I’d been made a fool of once. Let them figure out their own survival.

Outside, I heard a car engine turn over. Maybe a taxi? Maybe Kayla borrowed some friend’s ride. Either way, they were gone a few moments later. I just stared at the wood grain of my door, breathing in and out, trying not to punch a hole through the wall from all the conflicting emotions. If Kayla was pregnant with my child, what next? Would I do the same thing all over again—offer help, only to get spat on? Or would I double down on my own monstrous side and let them all crash and burn?

I didn’t have the answer. All I knew was I’d slammed the door in their faces, leaving them with nowhere else to turn. And for now, that was good enough for me.