Kurt Kaminsky slammed the truck door so hard the entire cab rattled. He paused on the edge of his driveway, staring at the modest one-story house he’d shared with his wife, Jenna, for fourteen stressful years. His jaw tensed. He considered stepping inside, hurling more insults, and making his usual show of stomping off, but something in him hesitated. Jenna’s voice echoed from inside.

“Get in here already,” she barked from the doorway. “It’s almost dinnertime, and I’m not cooking extra if you’re planning to skulk around like a stray dog.”

Kurt felt his pulse drumming. A muscle flickered in his cheek. He took two stiff steps toward her, intending to push past. A petty voice in his head urged him to say something cruel, something to remind her he was the one who paid the mortgage. Instead, he just brushed by, refusing to make eye contact as he entered the house.

Jenna followed. “Kurt, you’re tracking mud on the floor,” she hissed. “We have the same argument every time. You know better.”

He glared at her. “Don’t start. I’ve had a long day.”

“You always have a long day, then you dump your attitude on me,” she shot back, crossing her arms. “You want me to greet you with a smile? Give me a reason.”

They glared at each other in stiff silence. Jenna’s slender figure seemed brittle with annoyance. Her pinned-back hair—hastily bleached a week earlier—showed dark roots, and her eyes brimmed with condescension. Kurt’s shoulders bulged in his sweat-stained button-up shirt. He sneered. Jenna stared back, raising her chin like she was daring him to snap.

Kurt turned away first. He trudged down the hall toward the cramped kitchen where his daughter, Carrie, was already seated at the table. Thirteen, stuck in teenage limbo, Carrie wore a permanent mask of bored frustration. She peered up from her phone with hollow eyes, then rolled them dramatically.

“Dad’s home,” she muttered. “Guess we can all pretend we’re happy now.”

Kurt dropped his gaze to Carrie’s phone. “Don’t you have homework, kid?”

She shrugged. “I’ve got it under control. I’ll do it later.”

Jenna circled the table, yanking out a seat for herself. “I’m not dealing with you both rolling your eyes at each other all night. Sit down, Kurt.”

He hovered but didn’t sit. “I’ve got a headache. I’m not hungry.”

“Always an excuse,” Jenna answered flatly. She gestured at the half-burned casserole on the table, which oozed some questionable mixture of pasta and sauce. “Fine. Suit yourself. Carrie, start eating before it gets cold.”

Carrie picked at her portion. Kurt narrowed his eyes at them both, then stomped back into the living room, letting his daughter and wife stew in the silent tension he’d left behind. He didn’t give them a chance to say more as he grabbed his keys off the table by the couch.

“You’re leaving again?” Jenna called, voice laced with derision. “Why’d you bother coming home if you’re just going to slink off somewhere?”

Kurt clenched his teeth, not turning around. “I need to clear my head.” He stepped through the front door and slammed it.

In the yard, he paused, adjusting the collar of his shirt. He stared at his truck again. The interior stank of fast-food wrappers and old coffee. He considered driving nowhere for an hour just to avoid Jenna. Instead, he lit a cigarette, pacing near the porch. The patchy lawn he’d refused to water all summer crackled underfoot.

He heard footsteps behind him. Jenna had come out. She folded her arms, leaning against the doorframe. “You want a divorce, Kurt?” she asked coldly. “Because if you threaten to leave me again, you better go through with it this time.”

He flicked ash, inhaling deeply. “Why would I divorce you?” His tone dripped with sarcasm. “We’re such a picture-perfect family.”

“Don’t act like a victim. You always do. You enjoy stirring trouble,” Jenna said, her top lip curling. “You blame me for everything.”

He stepped closer, letting smoke drift in her face. “You make it easy,” he said. “I go work all day at the car lot, and I come home to your whining. That’s not a marriage; that’s a prison.”

She didn’t even blink. “Prison? Look at this dump. I asked for a better house years ago, but you never let go of a single penny. We could have upgraded, but no. You wanted to hold onto your precious money. It’s funny you’re calling it a prison, though: you’re the warden who forced us here.”

Kurt’s face flushed. He never liked the house either. He’d bought it as a younger man, back when he was certain he could fix it up and sell for profit. Instead, it had turned into a decaying symbol of his failures. “You want a fancy place? Go earn the down payment. Don’t expect me to pluck it from thin air.”

She raised her voice. “I do earn money. All those hours I’ve worked at the bookstore? That’s not enough for you? God, you’re pathetic. You have a used-car lot that’s barely afloat, and you treat it like you’re some hotshot businessman.”

He almost lunged, fists tightening. “Stop acting like you know my business. I make enough to keep food on the table—when I feel like it.”

She shoved his shoulder, spitting her words through clenched teeth. “You think that’s a badge of honor? You do the bare minimum, and you think I should applaud?”

He swatted her hand away. “Don’t touch me. The day you appreciate what I do is the day hell freezes over.”

“Fine,” she shot back. “I’ll never appreciate a man who shows me nothing but scorn.”

They glared again in seething silence. Finally, Kurt tossed his half-finished cigarette on the ground and crushed it beneath his shoe. “I’m done,” he growled, stepping off the porch. “For good.”

“Good riddance,” Jenna snapped, turning on her heel.

Usually, they’d have parted with more stinging words, but something about this felt final. Jenna slammed the door, leaving him outside. He cursed under his breath, pacing to his truck. Anger flared through him like a fever, and he wrestled with the idea of pounding on the door again, demanding to be let back in just so he could keep yelling. Instead, he hopped into the driver’s seat, started the engine, and lurched off the property.

Two hours later, Kurt found himself parked in the back lot of a dingy bar. A bright neon sign flickered overhead. He stared at it as if it might offer him some cosmic solution. Inside, the stench of spilled beer and cheap liquor greeted him. He planted himself on a scratched barstool.

He hardly acknowledged the bartender as she approached. He only muttered, “Whiskey, neat.”

She served him without a word. A few minutes passed in silence. Some guys in a booth behind him snickered about their day, tossing around insulting jokes. He thought he caught a mention of “Polish jokes,” which made him tense automatically. He’d heard them his whole life, not that he cared about the heritage enough to defend it, but it still grated on his nerves.

As he listened, he decided they weren’t talking about him—no one here knew him. Sighing, he took a swig of the whiskey. He wanted to nurse it, but his frustration demanded gulps. He ordered another, then pulled out his phone. He stared at the screen. Missed calls from Jenna, from his daughter, from an unknown number—probably a spammer. He scrolled to see if any text from Jenna said something conciliatory.

The last text was from Carrie: *Mom’s furious. She said you won’t come home. Is that true?* Kurt resisted the urge to smash the phone. The annoyance of being lectured by his kid was too much. If she ever recognized how toxic her mother was, she wouldn’t question why he left.

He put the phone aside and sipped more whiskey. Hours blurred. Eventually, he paid his tab and staggered out, tossing the bartender a grunt of thanks. The night air sobered him slightly.

The next morning, he woke in a cheap motel on the outskirts of town, mouth tasting of stale liquor. A throbbing headache pounded behind his eyes. His phone buzzed with new notifications. Through the cracked screen, he saw a voice message from one of his employees at the used-car lot.

He dialed in. Anna’s voice crackled. “Kurt, I just wanted to confirm how many cars we’re planning to pick up at the next auction. Also, George came by to check the transmissions on the last shipment, but I had to tell him you weren’t around. Is everything okay?”

Kurt forced himself upright. His throat burned. He coughed, cleared it. “Hey, Anna,” he rasped when he called her back. “I’ll be in soon. Don’t worry about George. I’ll handle him.”

George was an old friend, but these days Kurt only saw him as an on-call mechanic. He paid George a decent sum to keep the cars running. At some point, though, their friendship had started to sour. Kurt suspected George had been mocking him behind his back, calling him lazy or incompetent. Kurt never confronted him outright, but it simmered.

“All right, boss,” Anna said gently. “You sound rough. You sure you’re okay?”

He exhaled. “I’m fine. Just had a fight at home. I’ll come in and finalize the auction list. Then we’ll figure out the rest.”

He hung up and rubbed his face. He realized he had no plan for dealing with Jenna. Maybe he’d never go back. A grim excitement lit up inside him at the idea. It felt good to decide. He left the motel and headed to the lot.

At the lot’s small office, Anna flashed him a worried look. She was a capable manager with a no-nonsense style, mid-thirties, hair in a tight bun. “Kurt, what’s happening at home?”

He shrugged. “Probably the same thing that always happens. Jenna’s pissed. Carrie’s sulking.”

Anna frowned. “That’s not good for the business if you’re off your game.”

Kurt scowled. “My personal life’s got nothing to do with these cars. Let’s focus.”

Anna glanced at the ground. “I respect that, boss. So, we have ten cars coming in tomorrow from that auction. George said he can do a full inspection within a week.”

Kurt stepped to the desk, flipping through the invoices. “Good. Let him have them by Monday. I’ll check in after.”

He heard the door open. George entered. A tall man with oil-stained hands, he wore a smug grin. “Kurt, heard you got into it with your old lady again,” he said too casually. “Everything cool?”

Kurt hated how George’s grin widened. “I’m not paying you to snoop,” he growled. “Focus on the transmissions.”

George shrugged, lifting both palms in mock surrender. “Easy, man. Just making conversation.”

Kurt bit back a nasty reply, feeling his jaw clench. “Is that all?”

George dipped his head. “Yeah, I’m done.” He strolled off toward the garage area. Kurt watched him go, hatred fanning inside. He suspected George enjoyed hearing about his marriage problems.

Anna cleared her throat. “You sure you want to keep him on? He’s starting to get a little . . . pushy.”

Kurt rapped his knuckles on the counter. “He’s still the best mechanic in town. We can’t just fire him because he’s nosy.”

Anna nodded, but her eyes said she disapproved.

That afternoon, Kurt drove back to the house, tension knotting his gut. He half-expected to see all his clothes tossed on the lawn. Instead, the yard looked the same, dried grass and scattered weeds. He parked, lingered behind the wheel, then finally mustered the will to go inside.

He found Jenna in the living room, watching some reality show. She didn’t turn her head. “So. You’re back.”

He set his jaw. “Needed my things. I didn’t say I was staying.”

She smirked at the TV, feigning boredom. “I don’t care if you stay or go, as long as you stop stomping around like a tantrum-throwing toddler.”

He stepped close, voice low. “I’m the reason you can even pay the cable bill.”

She let out a dismissive laugh. “That’s the old story, Kurt. You wave money in my face to make yourself look big. Meanwhile, you barely make enough to keep this dump running. You’re always one bad month away from total collapse.”

A bitter, twisting anger coiled in him. “At least I have a job.”

“Right,” she shot back. “A used-car dealer. Real respectable.” She gave a mocking snort. “Don’t blame me if your daughter doesn’t want to brag about it to her classmates.”

He stiffened. “Carrie said that?”

“She might have. You know how kids talk.”

“I guess you’ve been teaching her well, turning her against me.”

Jenna turned her head at last, eyes blazing. “You do that by yourself. She’s just tired of your temper. We both are.”

He wanted to scream at her, but footsteps in the hallway announced Carrie’s presence. The teen had a phone in hand, earphones in. She glanced up with a scowl. “Mom, Dad, chill.”

“Go to your room,” Kurt snapped. “We’re talking.”

“About what?” Carrie asked. “How I’m too ashamed to mention Dad’s used-car job?” She gave a roll of her eyes. “It’s not my fault you two can’t get your act together.”

Kurt pointed toward the hall. “In your room. Now.”

She exhaled loudly, turned, and stomped away. Jenna rose from the couch, stepping right into Kurt’s personal space. “Don’t talk to her like that. She’s not some doormat. She’s my daughter, too.”

His eyes narrowed. “Yeah. Well, I’m the one who pays the mortgage—my name, not yours. Don’t forget.”

Her voice trembled with anger. “You’re so sick in the head, threatening me every time with that damn mortgage. Newsflash: you walked out. That means you gave up your say in this household.”

He grabbed her wrist, lowering his voice dangerously. “You watch yourself, or you’ll be the one walking out. I can force you if I have to.”

She yanked free, eyes flashing. “You lay a finger on me, I’ll call the cops, and you’ll spend the night in jail. I’d love to see that.”

He nearly raised his hand to strike her but managed to rein himself in. Instead, he snarled, “You’re not worth it.”

She shot him a hateful glare, rubbed her wrist, and stormed toward the kitchen. He stood frozen, fists clenched, breathing hard. Then he spun around, marched to the bedroom, and began throwing his clothes into a duffel bag.

Within an hour, he was gone again. For weeks, Kurt flitted between the motel and the house, occasionally sleeping in his truck. He refused to finalize anything with Jenna, as if waiting for a perfect storm. Their arguments grew uglier. Each time, he dominated the conversation with threats, scolding her about finances or calling her ungrateful. She threw sarcastic barbs about his so-called “business empire” and his inability to keep them in comfort.

In quiet moments, Kurt dreaded seeing Carrie. He felt faint guilt for leaving her stuck between parents who despised each other. Yet when he saw her face, all he did was bark orders or lash out. She typically fled to her room, blasting music or texting. Eventually, she started avoiding him altogether.

Meanwhile, the used-car lot required constant attention. The new batch of vehicles arrived, and Kurt dove into negotiations, piling up hours to distract himself from the domestic war. He watched George more closely, suspecting the man of sabotage, though he found no proof. Still, George’s cocky stance got under Kurt’s skin. Anna tried to mediate, reminding Kurt that they needed a stable environment, but tension simmered.

One sweltering afternoon, Kurt returned to the office from the local burger joint and found George leaning against the counter, chatting with Anna. He had a playful grin, as if he’d said something witty. Anna’s expression looked annoyed.

Kurt strode in. “George, you want something?”

George’s grin turned lopsided. “What’s it to you?”

Kurt slammed his burger wrapper on a side table. “Anna, you good here?”

She nodded stiffly. “Yes, boss.”

He glanced at George. “Then move along. We’ve got work to do, and you’re not on staff to pester my manager.”

George stepped away with a mocking salute. “Yes, sir.”

Kurt watched him leave, biting the inside of his cheek. Anna shook her head. “He’s been pestering me for details about you and Jenna,” she murmured. “Says he’s worried about your mental state. I told him it’s none of his business.”

Kurt cursed under his breath. “George is a snake. Next time he asks personal questions, send him packing.”

Anna lowered her voice. “Just so you know, I overheard him on his phone earlier, something about meeting someone for coffee, and your wife’s name came up.”

The words sliced through Kurt like a hot knife. “Jenna’s name?”

Anna winced. “I’m sorry. I didn’t get details. Just heard him say, ‘All right, Jenna. I’ll see you soon.’ I found it strange. I didn’t realize they were friends.”

Kurt’s eyes burned. “Thanks, Anna. Let me handle it.”

He stomped into his private office, flung the door shut, and sank into a creaking swivel chair. Was it possible his wife and George were meeting behind his back, mocking him, or something worse? His pulse hammered with an unfamiliar sense of betrayal and fury. He needed proof. But first, he had to keep the lot running. He wouldn’t let George or Jenna sabotage his business.

That evening, Kurt parked outside the house he still co-owned, deciding to do some snooping. Carrie would be at her friend’s place, or maybe the public library—he didn’t care. What he cared about was whether Jenna and George were meeting right now.

He stepped onto the dark porch, noticing the living-room lamp shining through the drawn curtains. He peered through a small gap. Inside, Jenna sat on the couch, flipping channels, wearing yoga pants and a tank top. Her posture slumped, and she looked bored. No sign of George.

Kurt swallowed, uncertain. He was about to knock when a pair of headlights swept the driveway. He crept aside, watching from the shadows. A battered truck pulled up. Out stepped George, fiddling with his phone.

Kurt’s entire body buzzed with adrenaline. George was waltzing up to his front door, while Jenna rose inside and smoothed her hair. She opened the door before George even knocked, and he stepped in like he belonged there.

Kurt gritted his teeth so hard his jaw ached. He forced himself not to barge in. He crouched behind a twisted shrub, his foot pressing on dried leaves. Through the window, he watched them talk in hushed tones. Jenna crossed her arms, looking annoyed. George raised his hands in a gesture that seemed apologetic or defensive.

Eventually, they sat on the couch. George scooted closer. Jenna didn’t push him away. She rubbed her temples, speaking. Her face contorted into frustration, then she sighed. George nodded. She reached out and briefly touched George’s arm. He placed his hand on her back, rubbed gently. She didn’t protest.

Kurt felt sick. He pictured them mocking him, forging an alliance of scorn. Then George said something that made Jenna roll her eyes and shoot up from the couch. She walked away, arms folded, possibly complaining. George followed. They disappeared into the hallway that led to the bedroom. Kurt’s fists shook with rage. Could they be . . . ? He didn’t want to imagine. He wanted to smash a window, storm in, and rip George apart. Instead, some twisted sense of self-preservation made him retreat to his truck, seething.

His heart hammered as he drove off, mind swirling with violent fantasies. All illusions that his wife might still respect him collapsed. He felt used, humiliated. If he confronted them, Jenna would laugh in his face, or threaten the cops. He needed a plan. He was certain now George was more than a mechanic. He’d become Jenna’s confidant, maybe more.

Kurt spent days avoiding contact with Jenna or Carrie. He stewed, devising ways to keep his property safe. If Jenna thought she’d push him out and shack up with George, she had another thing coming. Meanwhile, he demanded progress from George at the lot, ignoring the hypocrisy. He wasn’t about to let the man slack off while sleeping with Jenna behind his back.

During those days, Kurt’s temper flared at everything. When Anna told him about a problem with a title transfer, he snapped. When a customer asked for a discount, he nearly cussed them out. Word spread that Kurt was in a foul mood, and many decided to keep their distance. George, for his part, was suspiciously polite. He rarely joked now. Whenever Kurt approached, George ended phone calls quickly. Anna speculated to Kurt that George was spooked.

One afternoon, after a stressful sale, Kurt cornered George near the garage. Oil-stained rags lay piled on a nearby workbench. The air smelled of grease.

“George,” Kurt said in a clipped voice. “We need to talk about something. Don’t lie.”

George’s eyes narrowed. “About what?”

Kurt crossed his arms. “I know you visited Jenna the other night.”

George hesitated a second too long. “She asked me to. She had a problem with the car. It’s a private matter.”

Kurt pressed forward, chest nearly bumping George’s. “Don’t feed me that crap. You go behind my back to see my wife, you call it ‘private?’ You trying to sabotage me, or my marriage?”

George threw up his arms in an exaggerated shrug. “Your marriage? You left her. She can see whoever she wants.”

The statement stabbed at Kurt’s pride. “Is that what she told you? That I walked out, so she’s free to invite any lowlife over?”

George’s face twisted. “Hey, calm down. You’re the one who can’t keep your family together, can’t keep your business stable—”

Kurt grabbed George by the shirt collar, voice shaking with rage. “Don’t you talk about my business, or my family. You understand?”

George glared, refusing to look intimidated. “Get off me.”

Kurt tightened his grip, eyes blazing. George’s knuckles clenched. One of them might have swung first if Anna hadn’t burst in, shouting, “Stop it!”

She seized Kurt’s arm, yanking it down. Kurt released George’s collar, still trembling with anger. George stepped back, jaw tense. He exhaled a shaky breath, then shoved Kurt aside, heading for the exit.

“Next time, keep your hands to yourself,” George said, turning at the door. “You’re not my boss. I’m an independent contractor.”

“Then quit,” Kurt growled, chest heaving.

George’s lip curled. “No, you need me. But if you want to end our arrangement, I’ll survive. Don’t expect me to give a damn about your problems.”

With that, George marched off. Anna, wide-eyed, looked at Kurt. “Boss, you can’t keep doing this. You’ll scare away good workers.”

Kurt barked a bitter laugh. “He’s not a good worker, he’s a traitor. If he wants to run to Jenna, let him. I’ll find someone else.”

She shook her head. “Your temper will be the end of you. Let me call a different mechanic. We can start fresh.”

He hesitated, thinking about how reliant the business was on George’s expertise. “Fine,” he said abruptly, hating the sense of vulnerability. “Look around. But I’m not paying top dollar for a new mechanic.”

Anna nodded and scurried away, looking worried.

That evening, Kurt was in the shabby motel again. An uneasy blend of satisfaction and rage burned in him. He’d confronted George, proved he wasn’t to be trifled with. But now he pictured Jenna smirking, hearing the story from George, maybe even inviting him into her bed. The humiliation stung. He downed half a bottle of whiskey alone in that cramped room, replaying scenarios of how to humiliate them in return.

Three nights later, everything detonated. Kurt was dozing in the motel bed when a frantic call from Carrie jolted him awake.

“Dad?” she said in a rush. “Mom’s throwing stuff around, screaming about the mortgage. She says you’re threatening to kick us out. George is here, and they’re both calling you a scumbag. I’m scared.”

Kurt’s mind reeled. He glanced at the clock: nearly midnight. “Why are you calling me? Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

She sniffled. “I was, but I woke up when they started yelling. Mom’s flipping out because she can’t find some paper about the house. She says you’re planning to foreclose or something. I don’t even know.”

He took a slow breath, rising from the bed. “I’ll come by,” he said roughly. “Don’t open the door to George or your mom if they try to barge into your room. Just wait for me.”

He felt uneasy telling his daughter to hide in her own house, but he had no illusions about Jenna’s meltdown. She could be fierce when provoked. And if George was egging her on, it might turn ugly.

He threw on a coat and stomped out. The drive to the house felt endless. Eventually, he pulled onto the dark street. He saw lights burning in multiple windows. He killed the engine, marched to the front door, and let himself in with his key.

Inside, the place smelled of spilled booze. In the living room, Jenna stood by the coffee table, half-sobbing, half-raging, brandishing a nearly empty wine bottle. George paced near the hallway, watching her meltdown. They both turned as Kurt appeared.

“You bastard,” Jenna spat, pointing the bottle. “You come sneaking in here like you own the place?”

Kurt scowled. “I do own it. Now put that bottle down before you hurt someone.”

George stepped forward, eyes blazing. “Don’t you bark orders at her. You left. You walked away from your family.”

Kurt sneered. “Family? She’s no family of mine if she’s hooking up with you.”

Jenna’s face twisted with fury. “How dare you accuse me of that, you paranoid freak. Even if it were true, it’s your fault for abandoning me.”

Kurt’s voice rose. “Then maybe I’ll do more than just abandon you. Maybe I’ll evict you. This is my property, remember?”

She lunged, flailing with the wine bottle. “You disgusting pig. Try and throw us out, see what happens.”

Kurt grabbed her wrist before the bottle could strike his shoulder. He squeezed just enough that she dropped it. Wine sloshed across the carpet. George rushed in, shoving Kurt’s chest.

“Back off,” George snarled.

Kurt stumbled but retained his grip on Jenna’s wrist. She yelped, so he let go. She staggered back, breathing hard. George locked eyes with Kurt, fists raised as if waiting for an excuse to brawl.

“Carrie!” Kurt shouted. “Where are you?”

From the hallway, Carrie peered out. “I’m here,” she whispered, eyes full of tears. “Stop fighting, please.”

Jenna wrenched away, pointing at Kurt again. “Get out of this house. You can’t just waltz in like some dictator.”

Kurt set his jaw. “I can, and I will, until the day I change the locks or sell it off.”

George flexed his fists, stepping between them. “Don’t talk to her like that.”

Kurt barked a harsh laugh. “You’re real brave, George, playing the hero in a house I paid for.”

Before George could respond, Carrie stepped forward. “I’m sick of this,” she cried. “Mom, Dad, can’t you just . . . end it? It’s obvious you hate each other. So do something.”

Jenna glared at Carrie. “Don’t talk like that. He’s the villain here, not me.”

Kurt’s face twisted in a sneer. “You’re both worthless,” he hissed. “I should have left years ago. You’re an arrogant piece of work, Jenna, and Carrie’s turning out no better.”

Carrie’s lip quivered. “Dad—”

“Shut up,” he snapped, then regretted it for half a second before anger swallowed his remorse.

George lunged with a fist. Kurt sidestepped, driving his elbow into George’s rib. George gasped, staggering. Jenna shrieked, stumbling forward to help George. Carrie screamed for them to stop.

Kurt turned away, ignoring the commotion. He snatched the stack of mail from the coffee table, rummaging. He found what he wanted: a bank statement showing the mortgage nearly paid off. “Perfect,” he muttered. “Now I can finalize the sale and cut you out, Jenna.”

She practically spat. “You wouldn’t dare. This is my home!”

Kurt laughed bitterly. “You wanted a better place. Looks like you’ll have to find one yourself. I’m done paying.”

He turned for the door. Jenna grabbed his jacket, spinning him around with surprising strength. She locked eyes, seething. George limped behind her. Carrie stood to the side, covering her mouth.

“You can’t keep threatening me,” Jenna hissed, breath hot in his face. “You’re a monster, but you’re not invincible.”

He stared down at her. “Watch me.” Then he tore free and left them behind, the door slamming so hard the frame rattled.

Over the next few weeks, Kurt threw himself into forging a plan. He contacted a lawyer—someone recommended by an acquaintance—and initiated steps to put the house on the market. He separated his assets from Jenna’s name. Meanwhile, he spent as little time as possible in town, driving out to auctions, meeting other dealers, and forging new business connections. He felt unstoppable, fueled by vengeance. He pictured Jenna and George scrambling for money, while he quietly orchestrated a sale that would net him a tidy sum. He didn’t care where Carrie ended up.

From Anna, he heard whispers that George had lost other side gigs because of his attitude, so his finances were shaky. Jenna, forced to rely on her small bookstore income, was living under constant stress. They were stuck. That knowledge gratified Kurt. His own reflection in the mirror looked more triumphant each morning. Sure, his personal life was a mess, but at least he was winning the war.

He told Anna to handle daily tasks. He sold off the entire used-car business to a shell corporation he formed, ensuring Jenna couldn’t claim half. He didn’t care if it was ethical or not. Everything would remain under his control, just hidden. The plan progressed smoothly. Anna handled the name change so employees believed new management had taken over. Kurt would still appear sometimes, but legally he was only an “advisor.” He reveled in his cunning. Jenna could never prove any wrongdoing, he figured.

Then came the final blow: He told his lawyer to send Jenna formal notice of the house listing. She had a month to vacate. The day after she received it, she called him in a rage. He let it go to voicemail. Her screams were nearly incoherent, but he caught the gist: “You vile scumbag, you’re leaving me and Carrie with nothing!” He smirked, deleting it.

Three days later, at dusk, he returned to his new apartment. It was a modest one-bedroom, cheaply furnished, but it was his. No Jenna, no Carrie, no memories. He jiggled his key in the lock, stepped inside, and froze. Soft footsteps behind him. He whirled, fists up.

Jenna stood there on the threshold, eyes wild and furious. She wore a simple black coat, her hair undone and messy, face flushed. The hallway light cast stark shadows across her features. She looked on the verge of meltdown.

“How did you find me?” he demanded, voice sharp. “I didn’t give you my address.”

She stepped forward. “I’m not an idiot. I asked around. George gave me enough leads. Why the hell did you ghost me, you coward?”

Kurt scowled. “Because I’m done with your arrogance, done with your bull. Now get lost.”

She tried to push past him, but he wedged an arm against the doorframe. She glowered. “I need money, Kurt.”

He let out a harsh bark of laughter. “Why would I give you money? You’ve got your best buddy George. Let him pay your bills.”

She shoved him in the chest, voice shaking with desperation. “He’s broke, you bastard. This is your fault, selling the business, leaving me with no home. I need enough to find a place for Carrie and me.”

He batted her arm aside. “Carrie? You didn’t care about her when you were letting George cozy up in my house.”

Her face twisted. “Stop blaming me for your decisions. You always want total control. You love holding money over my head.”

He advanced, forcing her to step backward into the hall. “If that’s what you think, then it’s your problem, not mine.”

She gritted her teeth. “Hand over some cash, or I swear I’ll—”

“What, you’ll do what?” he taunted, leaning forward aggressively. “Cry about it? Call the cops? You’ve got no leg to stand on. I own the house, and you’re on your own. I’m not giving you a dime.”

She erupted in furious tears and swung her hand at his face. He blocked it, seized her wrist, then shoved her backward. She stumbled against the corridor wall, almost losing her balance. Her eyes flashed with hate, and she tried to lunge again, but he pushed her away more violently, a quick forward thrust that sent her reeling onto the floor.

“Stay down,” he barked, voice raw. “I’m not here to wrestle with you, and I’m not your ATM.”

She panted, anger turning to something unhinged. She looked ready to lunge a third time, but the force in his eyes made her hesitate. Finally, she leaned against the wall, shoulders shaking, tears glistening on her cheeks.

“You’ll regret this,” she spat, voice trembling with fury.

He sneered. “No. I won’t. Now get the hell out.”

She rose, lips quivering. For a moment, she looked ready to strike him with every ounce of rage in her body. Instead, she spun around and staggered down the hall, footsteps echoing. He watched her vanish into the stairwell, fists still clenched.

He stepped back inside, slamming the door. His heart pounded, adrenaline surging. He felt unstoppable. Let her threaten whatever she wanted. He was done. There was no going back.