The first thing Emily says to me when I walk into the house—no warm greeting, no slight smile, not even a fake polite hello—is, “I want a divorce.” Four blunt words, shot at me like bullets. She’s leaning against the kitchen counter, arms crossed, wearing that smug, half-smirk that always sets my teeth on edge. I pause in the doorway, keys in my hand, still dressed in my dusty work clothes, boots leaving smudges on the welcome mat.

“Excuse me?” I say, stunned. My heart rate spikes so fast I can feel my pulse hammering in my ears. For months, we’ve been arguing, bickering about bills, daily chores, Lucy’s bedtime. But never did I imagine this.

Emily huffs, flipping her hair off her shoulder like she’s in some shampoo commercial. “What, you deaf now?” she sneers. “I’m done, okay? I’m over this crap. I talked to my lawyer. It’s official.”

She says it with such casual arrogance that it makes my stomach twist. My brain scrambles to catch up. “Emily… can we talk for a second, at least?” I manage. “We have a child. You can’t just—”

She snorts, cutting me off. “A child, yeah. Lucy’s four, and she’s more mature than you sometimes. Listen, I’m not gonna sit here playing the good wife while you do whatever you want, ignoring all my needs. I have a plan, and it’s happening. No more arguments.”

Her tone is laced with contempt, as if I’m some low-level employee she’s about to fire. My mind flashes back to our wedding day, how she beamed at me in that white dress. Now it feels like she’s a completely different person. I swallow hard, forcing myself to stay calm.

“Emily… are you serious? A divorce?” I glance at the living room, where Lucy’s drawings hang on the wall. Princess castles, rainbow unicorns—she has no idea her world is about to come crashing down.

“Dead serious.” She pulls a set of papers out of a manila envelope on the counter. “Here.” She slaps them against my chest. “Read these, sign them, then get out of my way. I need the house, the car, and I’ll be filing for child support.”

I stare at her, not sure if I’m hearing right. “What are you talking about, you ‘need the house, the car’?” My voice shakes with confusion and anger. “You want me out on the street?”

She gives this mocking little laugh, the sound cold and hollow. “Not my problem. If you want to slum it in some crappy apartment, go ahead. But Lucy’s staying with me. I’ll expect child support on the first of every month—no excuses.”

I can’t believe how callous she’s acting. It’s like she’s rehearsed this scene in her head, determined to show me she’s in charge. I open the envelope, skimming through the papers: a divorce petition, a proposed custody arrangement. “Every other weekend?” I mutter, noticing how she’s reduced my time with Lucy to just two weekends a month. “Emily, that’s ridiculous. Lucy and I—”

She fixes me with a glare that sends a chill down my spine. “Lucy and you, what? You’re never around anyway. Always working late, always complaining you’re tired. You think you’re Father of the Year or something?” She leans forward, her voice dropping to a scornful hush. “I’m done catering to your schedule. Lucy’s my daughter, and if you can’t keep up, that’s on you.”

Before I can protest, she rolls her eyes and mutters, “God, you always act so shocked. Look, sign or don’t sign. The court’s gonna side with me anyway. I’ve got a good lawyer, a job, and I’m the primary caregiver.” She lifts her chin, smirking. “What do you have, besides some overinflated ego?”

I grit my teeth, trying not to snap. “We’ve been married for five years. Together for seven. I’ve provided for us. I pay the bills, the mortgage, Lucy’s daycare, groceries, everything.”

She snickers, tossing her hair again. “How sweet. You want a medal for doing what you’re supposed to do? Don’t make me laugh, okay? Just shut up and sign.”

I glance at the documents, my vision blurring with anger and disbelief. I can’t give in to her demands. “I’m not signing anything right now,” I say, my voice cracking. “I need to talk to my own lawyer first.”

Emily heaves a dramatic sigh, clapping her hands slowly in mock applause. “Wow, big man. Gonna lawyer up. Good luck affording one.” She points a manicured finger at my chest. “This is happening. I’m done with your lazy ass. And Lucy? She’s staying with me. You can get her every other weekend. Maybe.”

My ears ring with the sheer cruelty of her tone. I snap the folder shut. “Fine,” I say, stepping away before I lose my composure. “I’ll call an attorney. I’ll fight you on custody.”

She arches an eyebrow, lips curling. “Fight all you want, honey. You’ll just end up embarrassing yourself.” Then she pivots, marches down the hallway, and slams the bedroom door. It’s like she can’t stand the sight of me for another second.

I’m left standing in the living room, trembling. Lucy’s door is cracked open, her stuffed animals visible on the rug. My sweet little girl has no clue her mother and I are on the brink of a nuclear meltdown. All I can think is, Where did this come from? Sure, things have been rough, but we have a daughter. Doesn’t that mean something?

I blow out a shaky breath, slip the papers into the envelope, and place it on the coffee table. I need help. Somebody. Anybody. My mind scrambles for a plan, but the only thing I know is that I can’t let Emily walk all over me. Not when Lucy’s future is at stake.

A few days later, I’m on the phone with a lawyer named Tim, recommended by a coworker. We set up a consultation. Meanwhile, Emily is in full “queen of the castle” mode at home, ignoring me unless it’s to deliver some scathing remark. She’s packed half my stuff into boxes, stacking them in the garage as if I’ve already moved out. The tension is thick enough to choke me.

That Friday, Lucy returns from daycare, and Emily announces she’s going out with friends. “Don’t let her stay up all night,” she snaps, glaring at me from across the living room. “I’m not picking up your slack if she’s grumpy tomorrow.”

My jaw tightens. “I know how to take care of my own daughter,” I say. “I’ve been doing it for four years.”

She lets out a mockingly sweet laugh, like she’s talking to a dim-witted child. “Oh, sure. You’re such a star dad. That’s why you’re never around, right? Whatever.” She grabs her purse and heads out the door with a dismissive wave.

I slump onto the couch, rubbing my temples. Lucy plays at my feet, humming some tune from a cartoon. I want to protect her from all this chaos, but I can’t hide the fact that Emily’s basically ripping us apart.

The next morning, I meet with Tim in his cramped downtown office. He’s a wiry man in a slightly wrinkled suit, but his handshake is firm. “Divorce, child support, custody,” he says, tapping his pen on a yellow notepad. “Happens all the time.”

I swallow. “Emily’s demanding everything. The house, the car, and basically wants me to pay monthly child support even though I already pay for most expenses. She’s acting like I contribute nothing.”

Tim shrugs. “Happens a lot, unfortunately. The spouse who has primary custody usually aims to get the house, especially if the court believes that’s what’s best for the child’s stability. As for child support, you’re on the hook if you’re the father, no matter what you paid before. It’s a legal formula, not based on your personal history of covering bills.”

My gut churns. “She also wants to limit me to every other weekend with Lucy,” I say, voice tight.

Tim adjusts his glasses, scribbling notes. “Standard arrangement, I’m afraid. But we can fight for more time if you have a strong case. Judges sometimes grant 50-50 custody if you can prove you’re an equally capable parent.”

“She’s turned so hostile,” I murmur. “Acting like I’m the enemy. I never saw this coming.”

Tim folds his hands, giving me a sympathetic nod. “Divorce can bring out the worst in people. The key is to keep your emotions in check, gather your financial documents, and let me handle the legal side. Don’t get sucked into her mind games.”

I nod, though I feel nauseous. We talk specifics about the house, the mortgage, our finances. Tim outlines the next steps. “We’ll file a response to her petition. Fight for shared custody. But be prepared—it’s gonna be costly and draining.”

Stepping out of Tim’s office, I feel a pang of dread. Emily’s arrogance, the venom in her voice, the mocking taunts—this is just the start of a legal war. And Lucy’s caught in the middle.

Sure enough, over the following weeks, Emily does everything in her power to make me miserable. She mocks me for losing weight (“Can’t handle the stress, big guy?” she jeers, passing me in the hallway). She sneers at me when Lucy asks me to read her a bedtime story (“Oh, look who finally has time to tuck his kid in,” she says, arms folded).

I’ve taken to sleeping on an inflatable mattress in the makeshift office. Every day feels like a punishment. Yet, ironically, Emily hasn’t forced me out of the house completely. I think part of her enjoys lording her power over me, like she wants to watch me squirm before she finally shows me the door.

One evening, Lucy’s in bed, and Emily corners me in the kitchen. “Hey,” she says in a low voice, “when are you moving out? I’m sick of seeing your face.”

My hands clench at my sides. “I’m not moving out until the lawyers settle everything. I have every right to be here.”

She scoffs. “Right, because you’re so innocent. Listen, I’m not playing games. You’re on borrowed time. Once the court finalizes, I’m changing the locks.”

“That’s not how it works,” I say through gritted teeth. “You can’t just change the locks if—”

She throws her head back, letting out a harsh laugh. “I can do what I want, and trust me, the judge won’t bat an eye. God, you think you’re so smart. You’re pathetic.”

“Emily,” I say, trying to keep calm, “this is our family’s home. Lucy’s home. Don’t you care about stability for her?”

Her stare hardens. “I care about not living with you. And Lucy’s better off watching me be strong than watching you whine about how unfair life is. Boo-hoo.”

It’s like talking to a brick wall. Her hostility is relentless, each word sharpened to cut me deeper. I swallow my anger and walk away.

As if the tension at home isn’t enough, my job is also on the line. The constant stress, the arguments, taking time off for court appointments—it all piles up. My boss, Mr. Grant, pulls me aside one day and says, “Your performance is slipping, man. What’s the story?”

“I’m in the middle of a nasty divorce,” I admit, rubbing the back of my neck. “Custody battles, the works. I’m trying to keep it together.”

He shakes his head. “I get that you’re going through it, but we have a business to run. Clients are complaining about deadlines. You gotta step it up or we’ll have to let you go.”

Inside, I’m panicking. Fifteen years on this job, and suddenly, it’s on shaky ground because of everything going on at home. I force a smile. “I understand. I’ll get back on track.”

But as weeks pass, balancing Lucy’s care, the confrontations with Emily, and my workload becomes impossible. My exhaustion shows in my sloppy proposals, missed deadlines. Finally, the axe falls: I’m called into Mr. Grant’s office one Friday. He’s not smiling.

“I’m sorry,” he says, voice clipped. “We’re terminating your position effective immediately.”

My heart drops into my stomach. “You can’t… please, I just need a little more time—”

“We’ve given you weeks,” he replies. “We need someone fully committed. Clean out your desk.”

I walk out in a daze, tears of frustration stinging my eyes. I box up my photos of Lucy, my few personal items. Colleagues stare, some giving sympathetic nods. I feel like I’ve been dragged underwater and can’t breathe.

Losing my job makes things infinitely worse. I’m barely able to pay the mortgage, the bills, let alone child support once the court issues a temporary order based on Emily’s petition. She’s triumphant when she hears I’m unemployed, twisting the knife in further.

“Oh, you lost your precious job?” she says one afternoon. “I guess you’re even more worthless now. Good luck paying child support with zero income, genius.”

My blood boils. “I’m looking for work,” I snap, fed up with her ridicule. “The economy’s rough, and I have to schedule around caring for Lucy.”

She waves a dismissive hand. “Not my problem. You better cough up the money, or I’ll make sure you regret it. You want to see Lucy at all, you better pay up.”

I can’t believe how she’s talking to me—like a mob boss threatening a delinquent. Still, she’s not bluffing. If I don’t pay, she’ll go to the authorities. And that’s exactly what happens when I finally run out of savings and can’t make a payment in time.

Emily calls me up one night, cussing me out. “Where’s my money?” she hisses. “Don’t you dare ignore me.”

“I— I’m trying,” I stammer, sweat beading on my forehead. “I just got an interview. I’ll figure something out. But I need more time.”

Her sneer is practically audible through the phone. “More time, my ass. I told you I’d make life hell if you messed with my finances. I’m done playing.”

She hangs up. Sure enough, days later, at six in the morning, there’s a furious pounding at my door. Two cops stand there, asking if I’m me, reciting my rights, arresting me for unpaid child support. My neighbors peek through blinds and windows, watching as I’m handcuffed and escorted to a squad car. I feel like a criminal, but all I did was lose my job.

My mind reels on the ride to the station. Lucy’s face keeps flashing before me. How do I explain to her that her dad was put in jail because he couldn’t afford a check? This is insane.

Because it’s a weekend, I can’t see a judge until Monday. So I spend two nights in a holding cell that smells like sweat and bleach, with strangers who are in for God knows what. The clang of metal doors opening and shutting echoes in my head. I keep my gaze low, not wanting to invite any trouble.

When Monday comes, I shuffle into a tiny courtroom in an orange jumpsuit, wrists cuffed. The judge barely looks at me as he reviews my case. “Nonpayment of child support, repeated warnings,” he intones. “I’m sentencing you to five months in the county detention center.”

I gape at him, numb with disbelief. Five months for losing my job and missing a couple of payments? My court-appointed lawyer tries to argue that I was looking for work, that it’s a hardship, but the judge is unmoved. “That’s the law,” he says, banging his gavel.

Next thing I know, I’m at county, wearing another jumpsuit, this time in a crowded dormitory with fifty other men. The smell of unwashed bodies, stale food, and disinfectant assaults my nose. I bunk with a guy who nods at me but doesn’t bother making conversation. The background noise never ends: shouting, coughing, random footsteps. My anxiety is at a permanent high.

I keep my head down, do what I’m told, try not to make waves. But at night, when everything quiets, my thoughts tear at me. Emily’s smug face creeps in, mocking me for failing to pay. Lucy’s sweet smile haunts me, not knowing why Daddy disappeared. I feel a toxic mix of sorrow and rage. How did my life spiral so fast?

Three weeks in, I get a letter. I recognize the return address: Brandon, an old buddy who used to come to our barbecues. We drifted apart a couple of years ago. My hands shake as I open it. The noise in the block is loud—some guys are arguing, others playing cards—but I tune it out.

Brandon’s words hit me like a sledgehammer: He’s sorry he kept quiet, but he can’t take it anymore. Emily’s been cheating on me for years. She’s been seeing another guy, Cole, since before Lucy was born. And—he suggests—I get a paternity test, because there’s a good chance Lucy might not be mine.

I can hardly breathe. My heart slams against my chest. I reread the sentences: “Emily has been with Cole forever. She bragged about how she had you paying for everything. I think you need a DNA test. Sorry, man.”

My head spins, images of Emily’s smug grin, those nights she claimed she was “running late at the store,” the secretive phone calls, the weird tension with certain male coworkers. Now it all makes sense. If Lucy isn’t even mine, then I’ve been paying child support, going to jail, losing my job… for a child Emily tricked me into raising?

Anger seethes through me. I crumple the letter in my fist, pressing it against my forehead. My bunkmate glances over, but I ignore him. All I can think is, The minute I’m out, I’m getting that test, and I’m making her pay.

Sleep is impossible that night. I’m caught between heartbreak and fury. Lucy is the light of my life. But if she’s not my biological daughter… what does that even mean? The emotions churn in a swirl of confusion.

My release day finally arrives. It feels like forever since I’ve breathed fresh air. The guard hands me my clothes, the ones I wore the morning I was arrested. They don’t fit quite the same; I’ve lost weight. My reflection in the dingy mirror shows new lines on my face. When they buzz me out the front doors, the sunlight feels blinding.

I have no job, no savings, no house to call my own. But I have a plan: see a real lawyer, get a paternity test, and then make Emily face the truth. I hail a cab with the few dollars I have left. My parents offered to pick me up, but I wanted to do this alone, free of pitying eyes.

I meet a lawyer named Daniel, a friend of a friend. He has a small, cluttered office, but a reputation for being tough in court. I explain everything: the divorce, the child support fiasco, jail, and Brandon’s letter about Emily’s affair and Lucy’s uncertain paternity.

Daniel listens with a grim expression. When I finish, he says, “This is serious. If Lucy isn’t yours, then Emily committed fraud. You have grounds to sue for damages, possibly to recoup child support. You can also request a court-ordered paternity test immediately.”

I nod, my throat tight. “Let’s do it. I need to know the truth. This can’t go on.”

Daniel taps his pen on the desk. “Brace yourself. It might be messy. Emily won’t go down quietly. She might stall or challenge the test. But we’ll push for a judge’s order.”

When the day comes for the paternity test, I find myself in a clinical office building, the walls painted a dull beige. Emily arrives with Lucy, looking haughty as ever. She’s wearing designer sunglasses perched on her head, lips curved in a sneer.

As soon as Lucy sees me, her face lights up. “Daddy!” she cries, rushing into my arms. Emotion claws at my chest. I hug her tight, inhaling that strawberry scent from her shampoo. Emily stands behind her, arms crossed, giving me a look that says, Don’t you dare try anything.

The nurse calls us in. Lucy is oblivious, giggling when the nurse swabs her cheek. I hold Lucy’s hand, trying not to crumble inside. Then the nurse swabs me. Emily refuses to meet my eyes.

Afterward, in the hallway, Emily corners me. “What, you think you’re clever?” she hisses under her breath. “Dragging us here for a stupid test? You’re wasting your time.”

I clench my jaw. “If Lucy’s mine, then I have every right to be in her life. If she isn’t, then I deserve to know. It’s that simple.”

Her lip curls. “You’re such a pathetic loser. Even if the test says what you want, you can’t afford the child support anyway. And if the test doesn’t go your way… well, guess you made a fool of yourself for nothing.”

I inhale slowly, reminding myself not to cause a scene. Lucy tugs on my arm, looking confused. Emily snatches Lucy’s hand and mutters, “Come on, baby, let’s go,” as if I’m some stranger. I stand there watching them leave, my heart heavy.

Two agonizing weeks crawl by as I wait for the test results. I sleep on a friend’s couch, scanning job listings by day, tossing and turning by night. My phone rings nonstop with unknown callers—bill collectors, maybe. I ignore them. My only focus is that letter confirming Lucy’s paternity.

When it comes, I sit on my friend’s back step and carefully open the envelope. The clinical language stares back at me: 0.0% probability of paternity. Lucy isn’t mine. The world blurs. I reread it, praying there’s a mistake, but the science doesn’t lie.

I slump against the step, tears threatening to fall. I think of Lucy’s big eyes, her giggle, how she’d say “Daddy” with such pure happiness. She’s not my blood. Emily played me for a fool. Brandon was right.

Once the initial shock wears off, a dark anger rises in me. Emily knew. She used me for years, made me pay every bill, locked me out of Lucy’s life, then threw me in jail when I couldn’t keep up. And Lucy… she’s the real victim here, an innocent child stuck in a web of lies.

I grab my phone, call Daniel. My voice trembles. “She’s not mine. I want to go after Emily for fraud, emotional distress, everything. She can’t get away with this.”

He’s calm but resolute. “I understand. We’ll file immediately. You’re entitled to reimbursement, and we can push for criminal charges depending on the state laws. Let’s meet tomorrow.”

I hang up, exhaling a shaky breath. This is war. Emily humiliated me, cost me my job, my freedom. Now I’ll see that justice is served.

Court day arrives, and my stomach churns with nerves. I’m at the plaintiff’s table with Daniel, who flips through a folder of evidence: the paternity test, copies of child support checks, statements from Brandon about Emily’s long affair. Emily sits across from us, her lawyer at her side. She looks anxious, but still defiant, her chin tilted up, eyes cold.

The judge, an older woman with sharp features, calls us to order. Daniel presents our case methodically, explaining how Emily defrauded me into believing I was Lucy’s father, how I supported her financially for years, even going to jail for missed payments.

Emily’s lawyer tries to defend her, saying she was unsure about Lucy’s paternity, that she “acted in good faith.” Emily puts on a fake remorseful face, but it doesn’t match the sneer flickering at the corners of her mouth. She glances at me with contempt, like I’m an insect she wants to crush.

Then Daniel calls Brandon as a witness. He testifies about how Emily bragged to him at a party, letting slip she was sleeping with Cole while passing Lucy off as mine for financial gain. Emily tries to interject, hissing, “He’s lying! He’s always had it out for me!” But the judge warns her to remain silent.

When the paternity test is entered into evidence, Emily’s facade cracks. She shifts uncomfortably, shooting me a venomous glare. I can almost see the gears turning in her head, looking for a way to slither out of this.

Finally, the judge speaks, gaze pinned on Emily. “Based on the documentation and testimony, it appears you knowingly deceived Mr. Davis regarding paternity. You demanded child support from him under false pretenses, resulting in his incarceration for nonpayment. This is fraud.”

Emily pales, her bravado faltering. I feel my heart pounding with a mix of relief and righteous anger. The judge continues, “You will be responsible for reimbursing all child support paid. Additionally, given the severity of your deception, the court will refer this matter for criminal charges. I see clear grounds for fraud.”

Her lawyer tries to protest. “Your Honor, this is an extreme measure—”

The judge cuts him off. “It is an extreme betrayal. Mr. Davis lost his job, his freedom, and his reputation. The child in question, Lucy, is also a victim of Ms. Davis’s actions. We must ensure justice.”

Emily’s face goes slack, then twists in rage. She points at me, practically spitting, “This is all your fault! You couldn’t just accept that Lucy needed support. You’re a worthless—”

The judge slams her gavel. “Ms. Davis, control yourself. Another outburst, and I’ll hold you in contempt.”

The bailiff steps forward as Emily rants under her breath, “This is bullshit,” glaring daggers at me. My pulse races, but inside, I feel a surge of vindication. Finally, she’s exposed.

The judge then addresses custody of Lucy. Given that Emily is facing criminal charges, Cole is Lucy’s biological father, and apparently has never stepped up, the judge grants me temporary custody based on the argument that I’ve been Lucy’s primary paternal figure. I’m stunned and conflicted. Lucy isn’t biologically mine, but she knows me as Daddy.

Emily is ordered to serve three years for fraud. The bailiff leads her away, handcuffs jingling. She’s trembling with fury, spitting curses as she passes me. “You’ll regret this!” she yells, eyes flashing. “Mark my words, you’ll regret it!”

I stand there, watching the mother of the child I raised get taken away. My heart feels heavy. I should be relieved, but a wave of sadness washes over me. Lucy’s life will never be the same.

After the hearing, Daniel puts a hand on my shoulder. “You did it. Justice was served.” I nod, numb. We step out into the bright sunlight. Cameras aren’t flashing or anything—this isn’t a high-profile case—but it feels dramatic enough for me. My entire world has flipped.

Lucy’s been staying with my parents while all this unfolded. I head over to pick her up. She’s in the backyard, blowing bubbles. The moment she sees me, her face lights up. “Daddy!” she squeals, running into my arms.

Tears prick my eyes. Even though I now know she isn’t biologically mine, it doesn’t change how I feel. I hold her close. “Hey, kiddo,” I say softly. “How are you?”

She looks up at me with that innocent smile. “Grandma said we can make cookies! Will you help?”

I force a grin. “Sure thing.”

Inside, my mother watches us from the kitchen window. She knows the results of the test. She knows about Emily’s sentencing. But she also sees how Lucy still clings to me. Later that night, after Lucy’s asleep, Mom pulls me aside. “What’s your plan?” she asks gently.

I press a hand to my forehead. “I’m not sure,” I admit. “Legally, I have custody for now. Cole doesn’t want to be involved, apparently. I can’t just abandon Lucy. She’s four, and I’m the only dad she’s ever known.”

Mom nods, eyes glistening. “You love her, that’s clear. Biology isn’t everything.”

I sigh, the weight of it pressing on me. “I’m going to do my best. But… how do I explain this to her one day? That Emily lied, that I’m not her father by blood…?”

Mom rubs my shoulder. “One step at a time. For now, just be the dad you’ve always been. The future will sort itself out.”

So I move forward. I focus on Lucy’s daily routine: preschool drop-offs, story time, chicken nuggets for dinner. My parents help with bills until I can find steady employment. Emily’s in prison, and though a small part of me feels satisfaction that she’s finally held accountable, another part aches for Lucy. She’s lost her mom in the ugliest way.

Legally, I’m the caretaker. Lucy’s real father, Cole, is court-ordered to pay minimal child support, but he doesn’t seem interested in raising her. I get an occasional check, a fraction of what I once paid Emily, ironically enough. But Lucy is my priority, so I do my best with what I have.

Weeks become months. I land a new job at a smaller firm, thanks to an old colleague who vouches for me. It’s not the same salary, but it’s a start. Lucy adapts surprisingly well. She misses her mom sometimes, asking when she’s coming home. I do my best to explain that Mommy can’t be with us right now. She’s too young to grasp the truth.

One evening, as I’m tucking her into bed, she looks up and whispers, “Daddy, do you love me?”

Her question punches me in the chest. “More than anything in the world, Lucy,” I say, stroking her hair.

She nods, satisfied, and drifts off to sleep. Tears slip down my cheeks because I realize, in that moment, none of the DNA drama matters to me. She’s my girl. I’m her dad. I’d walk through fire for her.

Months later, I’m summoned to a follow-up hearing about Lucy’s custody. Emily’s locked up, but she filed some motion claiming she wants Lucy back once she’s released, insisting she was wrongly convicted. My lawyer believes it’s a Hail Mary attempt to shift blame. Still, I’m on edge.

Court day arrives, and Emily appears via video conference from prison. She looks disheveled, but there’s still a trace of that old arrogance in her sneer. When the judge asks her to speak, she launches into a tirade, claiming I set her up, that Brandon lied, that the test was tampered with.

Daniel calmly presents evidence that has already been validated. The judge isn’t swayed by Emily’s theatrics. She affirms my custody, stating Emily won’t have any parental rights until she completes her sentence and shows proof of rehabilitation. Emily stares at me through the screen, her eyes filled with hatred. “You’re gonna pay for this,” she spits.

I don’t respond. The bailiff cuts the connection. I walk out, my heart pounding, but also relieved. Lucy is safe from her mother’s manipulation for now. I feel no triumph—just a weary acceptance that this is how life is going to be.