

Chapter 107 No.

Saturday night brought a new torture.

The Penningtons stung by the internet backlash and the permit issues, had installed "security lighting"

At 11:00 PM, four massive LED floodlights on the roof of the Pennington house turned on. They were aimed directly at the Bradford Manor. And they were set to strobe.

Flash. Dark. Flash. Dark.

It was like a disco in hell.

Eulalie stood in her bedroom window, shielding her eyes. The light pulsed through the curtains. It was inducing a migraine within seconds. Delmar was already moaning in his room.

"That's it," Eulalie said.

She didn't call the police. Caden had tried that. She didn't call Bill. That was too messy.

She went to her study and opened her black laptop. The one with no manufacturer logo.

She booted up the "Ghost" protocol.

She scanned the local Wi-Fi networks, Pennington_Smarthome_Guest.

"Idiots," she muttered. "Default password on the router."

It took her forty-five seconds to bypass the firewall. The Penningtons had bought the most expensive fully integrated smart home system on the market. Everything was connected. Lights, sound, thermostat, locks.

"Let's see how you like it," Eulalie whispered.

She typed a command string. Execute.

Across the street, the strobe lights froze. Then, they turned a deep, blood red.

Inside the Penningtonhouse, the lights began to flicker in Morse code: G -E-T O-U-T.

Eulalie accessed the audio system. She queued up a file. Baby Shark. She set the volume to 100%. On repeat. In every room.

She accessed the thermostat. She set it to 95 degrees Fahrenheit.

Through the window, she saw movement. Figures running past the windows. Gussie waving her arms.

Downstairs, the front door of the Bradford Manor opened. Caden walked out onto the porch. He was staying in the guest house tonight—a reluctant concession Eulalie had made after the kite incident so he could be near Elara, though he was strictly forbidden from the main house after dark. He looked at the red-lit house across the street. He heard the muffled thumping of Baby Shark.

He looked up at Eulalie's window. He saw the blue glow of her screen.

A bitter laugh bubbled up in his chest. He remembered the reports. "Architect 01." The elusive genius Nexus AI had hunted for years. The one he had called a "myth."

She was right upstairs. She had been in his bed for five years. The irony tasted like ashes. He had searched the world for the perfect code, never realizing he was married to the source.

He pulled out his phone. He dialed the local precinct captain.

"Captain," Caden said. "Yeah, it's Holloway. Listen, ignore any calls from 102 Oak Street tonight. Yeah. Their alarm system is malfunctioning. I'm sending a tech over tomorrow. Don't waste a squad car."

He hung up.

He watched the chaos across the street. The Penningtons were running out the front door now, sweating, covering their ears.

Caden smiled. It was petty. It was illegal. It was magnificent.

He walked back inside and went up the stairs. He knocked on the study door.

Eulalie spun around, closing the laptop lid. "What?"

"Nice playlist," Caden said, leaning against the doorframe. "I see Architect 01 is working the night shift."

Eulalie relaxed slightly. "I'm just fixing a glitch in the neighborhood grid."

"Of course," Caden said. "But just so you know, the police are... otherwise engaged tonight. They won't be coming."

Eulalie looked at him. "You covered for me."

"I'm an accessory to a felony," Caden corrected. "Again."

"Why?"

Caden looked at her hands, resting on the machine that could destroy worlds. "Because they woke up Elara. And because... red is your color."

He turned and left. Eulalie sat there in the dark, the faint sound of Baby Shark drifting across the lawn, wondering when exactly her ex-husband had become her accomplice.

