

## Chapter 12

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Kenny's expression brightened, a smug smile spreading across his face as she stepped forward.

"I'll make it up to you, I swear," he said, his voice gaining confidence. He gestured expansively at the grand estate. "I'll move in. I'll take care of everything. The cooking, the cleaning. I'll be whatever you need me to be."

He even managed a slimy, suggestive smile. "You have all this now. You can afford to keep me. For old times' sake."

Anja crossed her arms. She let her gaze travel slowly down his dirt-stained suit to his scuffed shoes, then back up to his hopeful, greedy face. She looked at him the way one might look at something foul-smelling they'd found on the bottom of their shoe.

Then she laughed.

It wasn't a pleasant sound. It was cold and sharp, a shard of glass that sliced through his delusion.

"You're pathetic," she said, her voice dripping with contempt. "Truly, deeply pathetic."

She took a step closer, her eyes hard. "Let me remind you of what you said to me, Kenny. You said I was plain. You said I was boring. You said my family's name was worthless, and you were trading up. You paraded that little social climber you were sleeping with in front of all our friends."

Her voice dropped to a near whisper, but each word was like a slap. "You told me I was lucky you even considered me, because no one else ever would."

She pointed a single, elegant finger at his muddy shoes. "And now you crawl back here, covered in dirt, begging for scraps. What in the universe makes

you think you are worthy of an S-Class female? What gives you the right to even breathe the same air as me?"

The color drained from Kenny's face. Her words were stripping away his self-serving narrative, leaving him exposed and raw.

Standing silently to the side, Bradford watched, his expression unreadable. He was a stone statue, but inside, a volcano of rage was building. He was listening to the litany of insults, the casual cruelty this worthless insect had inflicted on his Matron. This confirmed it. This man was the source of her past pain.

The air around Bradford grew perceptibly colder as his psionic energy began to leak, fueled by his fury. But he held it in check. He clenched his fists so tightly he felt the seams of his gloves strain. He would not act. Not yet. Not while she was watching. The sight of blood might upset her. Instead, his tactical mind was already working, formulating a plan. A plan that would ensure this man suffered a fate far worse than a quick death.

Kenny, stripped of his dignity, fell back on his last resort: groveling. He dropped to his knees on the damp grass with a wet squelch.

"Please, Anja!" he cried, reaching out to grab the hem of her silk robe, to cling to her leg. "Don't do this!"

Anja recoiled with a speed that surprised him, her face a mask of pure revulsion. The thought of his hands on her made her stomach turn.

That was the final straw. She was done with this. She was done wasting her breath on him. She had power now. It was time to use it.

She turned her back on him, a gesture of ultimate dismissal.

"Bradford. We're going inside," she said, her voice cold and final.

Kenny scrambled to his feet, a desperate panic in his eyes. "No! Wait!"

Bradford turned his head slowly. He locked his eyes onto Kenny's. The gray in his irises was gone, replaced by a solid, burning crimson. He didn't say a

word. He just unleashed a fraction of his lethal psionic pressure.

It hit Kenny like a physical wall. The air was crushed out of his lungs. An invisible weight slammed him back down to the ground, pinning him to the grass. His heart hammered against his ribs, each beat a frantic, terrified drum. He couldn't move. He couldn't breathe.

Just as quickly, the pressure vanished. Bradford had already turned, his long strides easily catching up to Anja.

She walked across the stone terrace back to the French doors. As she reached them, she subvocalized a command, her thoughts linked directly to the estate's AI.

Unit 01. Intruder alert, level ten. Lock down the perimeter of the rose garden. And disable all external surveillance uploads for this sector. Full operational authority is transferred to Consort Vaughn.

Kenny lay on the ground, gasping for air, trying to get his trembling limbs to work. He looked up, his vision blurry. He saw the tall man's back as he followed Anja. And for the first time, he noticed the details of the man's uniform. The silver piping. The insignia on the collar. It was the dress uniform of a high-ranking officer in the Commonwealth Special Forces.

A new kind of fear, cold and sharp, pierced through his greed. He started to crawl, desperately trying to get back to the hedge, to the hole he'd come through.

A brilliant, ruby-red web of light suddenly sprang to life around the entire perimeter of the garden. The infrared defense grid. It hummed with contained power, cutting off any possibility of escape.

Bradford stopped at the threshold of the open doors. He turned, his body silhouetted against the warm light of the house. He looked down at the terrified, trapped man on the lawn.

And he smiled. It was the smile of a wolf looking at a cornered rabbit.