I suppose I should start at the beginning, back when my life felt normal—maybe even perfect. My name is Aaron, and I grew up in a mid-sized town of around thirty thousand people. I was a scrawny kid, easily overlooked. But one person always noticed me: Rachel. We were six or seven when we first became friends. She had a fierce little spark in her eyes. By the time we were both sixteen, we recognized that spark as young love.

At eighteen, Rachel and I moved to a bigger city a few hours away, determined to forge our own path. Two years later, we got married in a modest backyard ceremony. Nothing fancy, just a cluster of friends, family, and a simple arch my uncle built. When we were twenty-two, we discovered Rachel was pregnant with a boy. The thought of fatherhood made me giddy. I wanted to pass on to my son all the traditions I’d once shared with my own father—camping, fishing, staying up late playing board games. My life with Rachel was the kind of happiness you can’t buy. It was the last time I remember feeling truly whole.

Then everything collapsed—literally. Five weeks before Rachel’s maternity leave was set to begin, a towering shelving unit at her workplace crashed down on her. The shelves, rusted and flimsy from years of neglect, toppled and killed both her and our unborn son instantly. Two of her colleagues were also severely injured: one was paralyzed; the other lost a leg to amputation. The company had tried saving costs by continuing to use shelving that had been officially deemed unsafe. They killed the love of my life to pad their wallets. My rage in those days was enormous; it curdled inside me like acid.

Over the subsequent years, I fought a brutal legal battle against those executives. They tried to buy me off with what I called “blood money,” but I wanted justice. Eventually, thanks to widespread media coverage and the involvement of local politicians, those responsible faced huge fines. Some of them were even jailed. Their attempt to save a few bucks ended up costing them everything. I remember reading in the papers about each of their convictions and feeling a fleeting sense of triumph. But it was hollow. No victory could bring Rachel and our child back.

I felt unmoored. My mother moved in to help me cope, or at least to remind me to eat and sleep. If she hadn’t, I might not have managed to carry on. In the middle of that chaos, a promotion opportunity arrived at my job in telecommunications. It involved significant travel around the state, but I accepted. My only condition was that I be granted an office in my hometown so I could handle local business as well. When the company agreed, I bought a second house there to avoid crashing at my parents’ place. That property would become the setting for the events that forever changed me.

Let me jump forward about four years. My life had regained a semblance of normalcy, though the hole Rachel left never truly healed. I was thirty by then, still maintaining the cycle of traveling around the state—two weeks in the city, one in my hometown, and so on. One Friday afternoon, after returning from a trip, I was at my hometown office catching up on admin work. That’s when Harry, the branch’s managing director, wandered in. Harry and I had known each other tangentially as kids, though we went to different schools. When I came back to my hometown, we became what I would have called friends at the time.

Harry was throwing a house party that night. He invited me, short notice and all. I said, “Sure, why not?” I was feeling lonely and restless. Little did I know I was walking right into the opening scene of my next tragedy.

That night, Harry introduced me to Catherine, a new hire who had just arrived from out of town. She was making the rounds, shaking hands and smiling brightly. From the moment we started chatting, I felt a bizarre echo of Rachel’s spirit. Catherine was witty, warm, and had this confidence I found magnetic. It was almost disorienting—I wasn’t looking for romance, but there it was. Or so I thought.

We dated for two years. She moved into my hometown house with me. My parents liked her; Rachel’s parents expressed relief that I could finally smile again. For a while, it looked like I’d found renewed purpose in life. Catherine worked at the same branch as Harry, so they occasionally collaborated on projects. That seemed harmless at first.

But then subtle warning bells started ringing. I’d return from a trip and find men’s clothes that weren’t mine stuffed into the wardrobe. Catherine said they belonged to her cousin who’d left them there after a last-minute overnight visit. Then neighbors told me they kept seeing a car in the back alley, near the gated area behind my house, whenever I was out of town. The description sounded suspiciously like Harry’s car. I confronted Catherine about it. She admitted Harry sometimes popped by to discuss business, but insisted nothing else happened.

I wanted to believe her. I convinced myself the oddities were just my paranoia. But even as I tried to let it go, a nagging doubt festered. It took me six more months to confirm those doubts. By then, I’d begun formulating a plan without fully realizing it. The seeds of my rage—dormant since Rachel’s passing—were stirring.

My revelation came at the end of a big contract negotiation in another part of the state. The talks ended earlier than anticipated, and I thought, *Great, I’ll fly home and surprise Catherine.* The flight was simple enough. Within hours, I was driving into my hometown late in the evening. *Why not pull into the alley behind the house?* I thought. If there really was a suspicious car, I wanted to see it for myself. Sure enough, I spotted a vehicle blocking the gate—a silver sedan that belonged to Harry. My heart rate kicked up as I parked a few houses down. I felt the old anger from Rachel’s death merging with a fresh brand of fury, vibrating under my skin.

Quietly, I crept behind the high hedge lining my property, tiptoeing to the back door. Through the kitchen window, I saw them. Catherine and Harry. They were on my kitchen counter, limbs entwined, going at it like animals. My own friend, my own colleague, violating my home, my relationship, *my life.* I stood there trembling. I wanted to burst in and tear him off her, to make them regret every breath they had taken that night. But a cunning, terrible voice in my head urged me to wait. To watch.

Tears brimmed in my eyes, but behind them burned hatred. *You’re going to pay for this,* I promised silently. For some reason—maybe shock, maybe survival instinct—I turned around and left without either of them seeing me. I stumbled to my car, sat in the driver’s seat, and bawled until my head ached. If Rachel’s death had left an open wound, Catherine’s betrayal sprinkled salt into it. *I’ll ruin them both,* I thought.

I decided I would plan meticulously. Vengeance was far sweeter if I took my time. Within minutes, I found myself scrolling through my phone for Catherine’s contact. I dialed it. Through the window, I could see them glance around in panic. The phone rang out. They must have seen my name on the caller ID. She let it go to voicemail. Then they resumed. My temper soared. I dialed her again. This time she picked up breathlessly.

“Hey, Aaron… it’s late. What’s going on?” she asked, trying to sound casual, but I could detect the tremor in her voice.

I cleared my throat. “I’m about ten minutes out, sweetheart. Landing in the driveway any minute.” I forced a laugh. “Wanted to warn you. Didn’t want to scare you showing up at this hour.”

She made some excuse about being half-asleep. I could almost see the thoughts scrambling in her mind: *He can’t find us like this.* She hurried off the phone with a pathetic, “Gotta go freshen up for my man,” or something equally nauseating. The call ended abruptly.

I watched, adrenaline spiking, as Harry came sprinting out the back door. He was still yanking his pants up, stumbling into his car. He peeled out of the alley with screeching tires. *Coward,* I thought. The satisfaction of spooking them was immediate but fleeting. My real plan—*the real punishment*—was only beginning.

Inside my house, Catherine greeted me with a forced grin. She tried to distract me, moaning about how tired she was. I smiled back, feigning ignorance. Later that night, when she fell asleep, I retreated to my office and started scribbling notes. My mother had always taught me to let cosmic justice unfold, but this time I decided the universe needed a helping hand.

I needed to ruin Harry first. I knew of his small-time cocaine habit—something no one else in town seemed aware of. He covered his tracks well. Except that, once, I had glimpsed a small baggie he tried to hide while I visited his place to watch a boxing match. He stuttered through an explanation, but I pretended I hadn’t noticed.

Over the next few weeks, I quietly arranged to buy small amounts of drugs from certain unsavory connections I’d made while handling telecom accounts in bigger cities. I accumulated a stash big enough to make Harry’s “side hobby” look like major dealing. Next, I staged a plan to plant them in his car and his home.

One weekend, Harry came over for a casual barbecue. Catherine was away visiting her friend from out of town—at least that’s what she said—so it was just us guys. I made sure to keep the liquor flowing. “Another beer?” I offered him repeatedly. He was hammered before midnight.

“Dude… you sure I can’t drive home?” he slurred.

“You’re in no condition, mate,” I said. “Sleep it off in the guest room.”

Late that night, I crept outside to his car, unlocked it, and tucked the drug bags into the spare tire well. I also hid a few of my personal possessions—like an old watch engraved with my initials—stupid trinkets that I would later report stolen. For extra measure, I slipped some of the stash into a small backpack I had previously seen Harry keep in his hall closet. The next morning, I told him, “You were wasted, man. Glad you stayed.” He left, none the wiser.

Meanwhile, I created an elaborate web of texts and emails to Catherine. I wanted enough evidence to show her complicity in small financial matters—like forging my signature on utility payments or transferring money from my personal accounts to hers—that, in any future legal dispute, I could cast suspicion on her morality. She rarely read the details of those emails or messages; she just believed them to be run-of-the-mill administrative notes. When you live with someone who travels a lot, trust can be a convenient blindfold.

Two weeks later, I staged a burglary at my own house. One morning, before driving to the airport for another business trip, I shattered the back door window. I rummaged around in my office, deliberately smashing a lamp and toppling a shelf. Then I grabbed specific items I had planted in Harry’s car and house, so I could later claim them missing. Satisfied, I left for the city.

A few hours after my plane landed, my phone lit up with frantic messages. My mother discovered the break-in when she dropped by. Catherine was in tears. The local police left a voicemail requesting I call. By the time I spoke to them, they’d come and taken fingerprints, pictures, the works. I acted shocked, outraged.

“Why would anyone target my place?” I asked repeatedly, trying to sound equal parts confused and furious.

I told Catherine, “Stay with my parents until I get back. I can’t bear the idea of you alone in that house after a break-in.” She agreed, quivering, likely more shaken that her affair was about to be tested than the actual burglary. Meanwhile, I hired a security company to install cameras around the property. Since the door was obviously compromised, the timing was perfect. The new cameras and alarm system would play an essential role in my final trap.

Once the company finished installing everything, the representative showed me and Catherine how to disable recordings if, say, “private activities” took place. She blushed, playing the part of a modest girlfriend. I offered a sly grin, as though that was my only interest—protecting her modesty. In reality, I was learning precisely how to get email alerts whenever the cameras were switched off.

But I didn’t just want to humiliate Catherine. I also wanted to ensure that if she tried to come after me—legally or otherwise—she’d have no claim to my home or my finances. I spoke with a cunning lawyer in the city, who confirmed that Catherine and I weren’t considered de facto by the usual definitions of cohabitation. I was footing all the bills, and we’d only lived together under my name. He helped me draft documents ensuring she couldn’t leech off Rachel’s estate or any assets I possessed. The paperwork was ironclad.

Around that time, my company offered me a major promotion if I relocated back to the city. The timing couldn’t have been more ideal. I accepted with zero hesitation.

In the office, I made sure to tell Harry, “Hey, can you arrange a week’s paid vacation for Catherine? I’m planning a big surprise.” He beamed, patting me on the back.

“That’s amazing. So you’re going to propose?” he asked excitedly.

“Something like that,” I said. He gave me a congratulatory hug. I faked a wide grin, thinking, *Enjoy your excitement while you can, traitor.*

I told Catherine I was sending her on a tropical spa retreat, all expenses paid, with two friends of her choice. She squealed with delight. “But why?” she asked. “This is out of the blue.”

I shrugged. “You deserve it. I’ve been so busy. I want you relaxed before our next step together.” She jumped into my arms. I forced myself not to recoil.

I assured her I’d be stuck working in the city for the upcoming week and wouldn’t even see her off. The following week, I said, “Don’t expect me home. I’ll be preparing a huge deal for a major client.” In truth, I was finalizing my relocation and waiting for the perfect moment to spring the rest of my trap.

I got word that a spate of burglaries had recently plagued our town. Nobody connected them to me because, in everyone’s eyes, I was a victim too. The local rumor mill churned with theories about out-of-town thieves. I used that paranoia to stoke Catherine’s fear. She started double-checking locks, leaving lights on at random times. Meanwhile, I set up a separate break-in to happen at my parents’ house. This time, I hired a small-time crook I’d once encountered through a client’s shady connections. He was a gaunt man named Marcus—reliable only in that he’d do anything for quick cash.

I gave Marcus half his payment upfront and said, “On Wednesday night, break into the lower-level storage of my parents’ place. Take a few worthless antiques. Leave by the basement. Make it look sloppy.” He agreed, no questions asked. The aim was to escalate the climate of fear so Catherine would trust me completely. The morning after that burglary, I fussed and raged:

“This is madness! First my house, then my parents’! We need to get you out of here for a while. That spa retreat can’t come soon enough.” She nodded, eyes wide with anxiety.

When Marcus completed the job, I paid him the rest. The burglary was small—only a few cracked porcelain figurines and cheap silverware. My parents pretended shock, though I’d warned them. They disapproved of my methods but had done enough damage control for me in the past. They’d seen me survive Rachel’s tragedy; perhaps they wanted to see me find some twisted closure. That’s what I told myself, anyway.

Finally, the day came for Catherine to leave for her spa getaway. She and her two girlfriends hopped in a car bound for the airport. She kissed me goodbye hurriedly, whispering, “I love you so much,” as if her conscience was pricking her. I gave her a gentle smile, opening the car door like a perfect partner. Then she was gone.

I spent the rest of that day making final calls. First, I telephoned the local police—anonymously, from a burner phone.

“Hello, Officer? I live near Maple Avenue. We’ve had suspicious activity near the back alley by the old Greenwood house. Looks like a man distributing drugs from his car. Tall, curly hair, silver sedan license plate…” I read out Harry’s plate number. “He’s there all the time, especially late at night. I’m worried about criminal activity in our neighborhood.”

The dispatcher thanked me. I hung up and laughed. I already knew from prior emails gleaned off the office server that Harry was set to do a late-night meeting with clients at a bar. He’d probably stop by my house afterward to see if Catherine was around, not realizing she was gone.

Sure enough, at around eleven that night, I checked the security camera feeds from my phone. There was Harry’s car, creeping into the alley behind my place. I recognized his silhouette as he got out, probably intending to call Catherine. The shutters on the camera flicked off—an immediate alert on my phone. *He’s using the system override Catherine showed him.* The arrogance made me grin. He was certain they could keep their affair hidden. Instead, they’d be burying themselves.

I hopped into my car and drove two blocks, enough to watch from a distance while the police responded to my tip. When the squad car turned the corner, lights flashing, I saw Harry try to drive off. The officers blocked the alley exit. Harry stepped out, raising his hands, obviously confused. They told him to pop the trunk. I stifled a laugh. I’d left enough contraband hidden there to hang him for good. Once they discovered the drugs—and the random items I’d reported stolen from my house—a swift arrest followed.

“Are you out of your minds?” Harry’s voice boomed through the quiet street. “This is a setup! I have no idea how that stuff got there!”

One officer yanked him around by the wrists, slamming him onto the hood of the squad car. Harry let out a pained groan. Another officer said, “Read him his rights.”

“You don’t understand!” Harry wheezed. “I’ve never touched that watch in my life!” He jerked his head back, pointing with his chin to the open trunk. “The initials… they’re my friend’s… This is—”

“Shut your mouth,” the officer barked. “You can talk downtown.”

I saw the policeman apply pressure to Harry’s neck, forcing him sideways. It was harsh, borderline excessive, but I felt no pity. *That’s for sleeping with Catherine.* They cuffed him, forced him into the back seat, and slammed the door. When the squad car pulled away, the alley was silent again. Harry’s car remained behind, trunk ajar, a testament to his downfall.

I left a few minutes later, adrenaline buzzing through my veins. Harry was finished—professionally, socially, and soon legally. *One down, one to go.*

Two days after Harry’s arrest, I heard whispers around town of his predicament. Everyone was stunned. “Harry, a drug dealer? That can’t be,” they said. But the evidence was overwhelming. I added to the rumor mill, shaking my head in dismay, pretending I was heartbroken for my friend. The truth was I felt unstoppable. That night, as a final flourish, I staged one more “break-in” at my own place, primarily to remove Catherine’s belongings.

I called the same removalist friend—James—who had no idea of my deeper plan. I just told him I needed to move out quickly for my new job in the city.

“Sure,” James said. “We’ll pack everything on Friday.”

“That’s perfect,” I replied. “Just be aware, Catherine’s stuff goes into a storage unit. Mine goes to my new city place.”

James gave me a curious look. “You sure everything’s okay?”

“Just keep it discreet,” I told him. He shrugged, used to unusual requests.

Friday came. I’d already packed a lot of Catherine’s clothes, documents, and personal items into boxes labeled with her name. James and his crew carted them to the storage facility. I locked up and paid for three months in advance. Catherine’s entire life—at least the physical portion of it—was stashed away in a unit she didn’t even know existed. Meanwhile, my furniture and valuables were driven to my new apartment in the city. The hometown house was cleaned from top to bottom by a hired crew the same evening, leaving it bare. *When Catherine returns, she’ll find an empty shell.*

The final piece was to ensure she couldn’t contact me in any meaningful way. I blocked her number, blocked her on every social media platform, and instructed my parents never to let her in. They agreed, albeit with heavy hearts. My mother tried once more: “Aaron, this is too cruel.”

I responded coldly, “She spat on Rachel’s memory. Don’t talk to me about cruelty.”

My mother fell silent. She understood she couldn’t dissuade me.

That Sunday, Catherine flew back a day early—someone must have tipped her off that something was happening in town. She took a taxi straight from the airport to our house. My motion-activated cameras recorded her arrival. She stepped out of the taxi, wearing sunglasses, her hair mussed from travel. She dragged her suitcase up the porch steps, unlocked the door, and stepped inside.

The next few minutes of footage were gold. Catherine stood in the hallway, stunned to see the entire house gutted of furniture. She opened closets, found only empty hangers. She sprinted into the bedroom—nothing. Into the kitchen—bare cupboards. With trembling hands, she pulled out her phone, presumably to call me. She pressed it to her ear, then stared at the screen. Blocked.

That’s when the panic set in. “Aaron?!” she yelled into the empty house. Her voice echoed. “Where are you?” She called again, frantic. The phone beeped and disconnected. She let out a shriek, throwing it on the floor. That only made her more furious. She picked it up, rummaged around her purse, and dialed someone else’s number—my mother, perhaps.

“Please, I need to speak to Aaron!” she cried. “What do you mean you can’t talk right now?” Her voice twisted into desperation. “Tell me where he is, for God’s sake!”

I had told my parents to shut the door on her, so that’s presumably what they did. Catherine tried them again. No luck. She tried Becky, one of Rachel’s closest friends, who had instructions to hand over only the manila folder with proof of her affair and official documents from my lawyer. Becky would remain tight-lipped beyond that.

The footage showed Catherine pacing around the empty living room, cursing, sobbing. In a final act of denial, she grabbed her keys and ran out of the house, presumably heading to my parents’ place. She’d get no satisfaction there. I watched her tearful meltdown, relishing it with an icy sense of triumph.

Later that evening, Becky texted me: *She came. I gave her the folder. She lost it.*

In that folder was the damning evidence of Catherine’s infidelity: timestamps from the security cameras, phone records, pictures of Harry sneaking in. Alongside it was a formal letter from my attorney, stating Catherine was to have no contact with me and that her belongings were stored under her name at a local facility. Also, it reiterated that she had no claim to my assets.

Becky told me Catherine tore the folder apart in a rage, then collapsed into sobs. Becky, ever protective of me and Rachel’s memory, simply watched without pity. Catherine eventually fled Becky’s house, screaming profanities.

Over the next few days, my phone was flooded with unknown numbers calling. I ignored them. I received frantic voicemails from Catherine—clearly from borrowed phones—ranging from desperate apologies to venomous rants:

“How could you do this to me, you manipulative bastard?” she screamed in one. “I should have known you were too damaged from Rachel’s death. You’re pathetic!”

In the next, her tone softened. “Aaron, please… talk to me. I was lonely. You were always away. I never wanted to hurt you like this. We can fix this, please.”

I listened to them all in the dark of my city apartment. By the last one, my anger boiled again. *Fix this?* She’d reduced me to a shell. She had taken my trust and spat on it. No, there was no fixing. I had done what I set out to do.

Harry, meanwhile, was fired from his managing director position. Charges for drug possession and suspicion of dealing were pending. The rumor mill in town painted him as a secret kingpin. His pleas of innocence fell on deaf ears. Nobody had reason to believe him, especially after the stolen items found in his possession matched my burglary report.

I moved on quickly. The promotion provided me with a challenging workload, which was exactly what I needed. My new apartment overlooked the city skyline. Sometimes, late at night, I’d recall the face of my first wife Rachel and wonder if she’d be horrified by what I’d become. I felt her disapproval like a distant echo. Then I’d recall the sight of Catherine and Harry entwined in my kitchen, and all sympathy evaporated. *No one betrays me and walks away unscathed.*

A few weeks after the blow-up, I heard Catherine left town. She got transferred by her employer to an administrative role in a different state—less pay, less influence. Her so-called “major socialite” status was demolished. People in our hometown gossiped that she’d orchestrated Harry’s downfall, or that they were co-conspirators who turned on each other. The truth was more insidious—my design from the start. She was the catalyst for my final transformation from a decent man to a calculating villain. But no one but me (and Becky) truly knew the full story.

I stand on my new apartment balcony, glaring at a patch of city lights in the distance. It’s well past midnight, a warm breeze rustling the curtains behind me. In my mind, the events reel by in a surreal montage: the day I lost Rachel… the day I met Catherine… the day I discovered her betrayal… the day I watched Harry get pinned against the hood of a squad car and cuffed… the day Catherine came home to an empty house.

She tried to reach out to me again using social media accounts she must have created specifically to bypass my blocks. I dismissed them. My lawyer assured me we were in the clear. Catherine had no grounds to sue for anything. Our relationship was never legally binding. *She can’t touch me.*

One final event I’ll mention: A few days before she left town, Catherine barged into my parents’ home while they were on their porch. My mother was in her rocking chair, crocheting. My father was reading the paper. Catherine marched up the steps, face streaked with dried tears.

“Where is he?” she demanded, voice trembling. “I know he’s here.”

My mother looked up coolly. “He’s not here.”

“You’re lying!” Catherine spat. “He can’t just disappear. You raised him, for God’s sake!”

My father set the paper aside. “You need to leave,” he said. “You’re trespassing.”

“You think I’m the villain?” Her voice cracked. “Aaron’s the one who set Harry up. He’s the one who disappeared my things. He’s the one who—”

“Stop,” my mother cut in, glaring. “We know everything. Now get off our property.”

“Tell me how to reach him!” Catherine’s eyes flicked wildly between them.

“He doesn’t want to see you,” my father said. “And we’re not about to help you ruin him further.”

Catherine’s shoulders slumped. She turned to storm off but then whirled back. “Ruin him further? I never tried to ruin him! I just— I got lonely! And he was never home!”

“That’s enough,” my mother said, standing up. She pointed toward the driveway. “Go.”

I saw the security footage later—my mother had a small doorbell cam installed. Catherine collapsed into sobs, staggering off the porch. My father had to restrain my mother from going after her in pity. They knew I’d be furious if they showed Catherine any kindness. That was the last time Catherine set foot on my parents’ property. I watched it all from my phone, numb to her tears.