“It was Saturday afternoon, and we had company.”

Those words echo through my head whenever I remember how everything started spiraling. Funny how an ordinary day—so mundane and friendly on the surface—can unravel into a nightmare. My wife Debbie and I had been living in Houston for a few years. We were both around thirty, recently out of grad school, and crawling our way out of student loans. She worked in some specialized marketing role that required frequent travel to various U.S. cities, while I balanced my job as an architect with sporadic site visits. Our close friends, Jenny and Trev, often visited on weekends or for dinner after we caught a movie. We were four peas in a pod—at least at first glance.

Saturday was no different. Deb was scheduled to fly out the next Tuesday, and Trev had just left our house to catch a flight to the West Coast. Jenny would stay behind in Houston, generally doing the same as me—working, paying bills, trying to have a life. That particular day, after Trev’s taxi sped off, Jenny and Debbie ended up chatting in our kitchen while I busied myself in the garage.

I was clearing out my workbench, mostly to keep my hands moving and my mind at ease. It was a comfortable little zone of sawdust, random screws in trays, and half-finished wooden odds and ends. As I organized everything, I decided to check the home security system. We’d installed it after a few robberies in our neighborhood. Cameras and microphones in every room, all uploading to a server in the attic that was backed up to my cloud account. It might seem paranoid, but we had a lot of expensive equipment—laptops, tablets, electronics that made us easy targets if someone ever broke in. The system had come in handy once when a neighbor’s cat triggered the motion sensor at 3 a.m. So checking it had turned into part of my daily routine.

I pulled out my phone and opened the app, scanning through a few minutes’ worth of stored footage. It was working fine—no intrusions, no weird noises. Relaxed, I put the phone down and dusted off some oily rags. That was when I heard laughter echoing from inside. Piqued by curiosity, I went to the doorway that connected the garage to the kitchen. I didn’t walk in right away, though. I froze as I heard Jenny pressing Debbie about business trips.

“How was your last trip?” Jenny asked. “You were gone for quite a while.”

My wife’s tone turned light and playful. “Oh, same old stuff. Meetings over dinner, drinks at the hotel bar, a few hours of sleep. Then rushing off to more meetings in the morning.”

“Right,” Jenny said softly. “But, Deb, is it true what they say about people who avoid their spouses on these trips? Like…they just escape from family life?”

A nervous chuckle escaped Debbie’s lips. “Jenny, I wouldn’t worry so much about Trev. He always comes back to you, right?”

“I guess.” Jenny paused, like she was debating how to phrase her next question. “But sometimes I wonder what he does when he’s alone out there…if he’s really alone.”

That silence from Debbie was telling. I could sense her thinking. “Don’t stress over it,” she finally said.

“But—”

“Really, Trev’s devoted to you. He comes home each time and gets back to normal life. Don’t pay attention to what happens when he’s not home.”

“What do you mean, Deb?”

My wife sighed. “I mean exactly what I said. What happens outside the house means nothing.”

I nearly stopped breathing. The words came out so calmly, so firmly. There was no condemnation, no sense of shame—just a weird acceptance. My gut twisted in confusion and a bit of dread. Did I mishear her? I took a half step into the kitchen, and Jenny must’ve seen my shadow because her voice dropped. I decided then and there not to barge in. I snuck back into the garage, trembling slightly at the discovery that Debbie, my wife, had basically declared that extramarital activities were inconsequential as long as they remained discreet.

Eventually, Jenny took her purse and left, though she wasn’t smiling. Debbie barely said goodbye to her. I hovered in the garage until I heard Jenny’s car pull away. That evening was a silent dance. I pretended to doze off on the living room sofa. Debbie attempted to rouse me at one point, but I played dead. She gave up and went to bed alone. I stared at the ceiling for hours, replaying her words in my mind.

The next morning, we didn’t talk. Occasionally, she gave me a glance that asked “What’s wrong?” but for some reason she never pushed for an answer. I pretended to be busy with my computer in the living room, scouring the internet for addresses of private investigators in all the major cities Deb frequented. Phoenix, San Diego, Seattle, Omaha. I wrote succinct instructions for each detective agency, noting her typical flight times, favorite hotels, and the approximate days she visited. Then I typed in my credit card info, paid for their retainers, and scheduled an initial call. She made coffee and asked half-heartedly if I wanted breakfast. I brushed her off, claiming I had no appetite. She shuffled around, uneasy, but never demanded we talk.

That pattern lasted throughout the day. By dinner, I’d only had a snack. She tried to coax me to share a meal with her, and eventually we sat together. The tension was thick as gum. Light conversation about utility bills, groceries, her upcoming trip. She attempted to reintroduce normalcy, but I couldn’t unhear “What happens outside the house means nothing.”

The next few days were rocky. On Tuesday morning, she left for her flight. I offered only a curt “I’ll survive,” when she asked if I’d be okay while she was gone. She looked hurt. On her way out the door, she mumbled something about loving me, but I just nodded vaguely.

Immediately, I saw a lawyer to understand my rights if Debbie’s infidelity was confirmed. Texas courts could consider adultery when dividing marital assets. With no prenuptial agreement, I might get the bigger share if I proved she cheated. That pit of dread stayed with me, though. I was wrestling with heartbreak if it was true. I didn’t want to rehash every memory, reduce them to evidence in a court docket. But what she said to Jenny was so blatant. Deep down, some part of me hoped I was wrong—but I doubted it.

Jenny started texting me, wanting to talk. She was worried about Trev’s travels and probably my mood. I wasn’t in the frame of mind for chitchat. She ended up cornering me in the office parking lot after work on a Thursday. She gave me an earful, saying that Debbie had definitely implied something major last weekend.

“Where is she now?” Jenny asked, arms crossed.

“Supposedly, she’s in San Diego,” I replied. “Her itinerary says that’s where she’s staying. Maybe on to Seattle next?”

“Maybe you should call her office or her travel coordinators,” Jenny suggested. “Just find out if she’s actually there.”

I shrugged. “Haven’t yet. I didn’t really want to…might be easier to wait and see what the PIs find.”

Jenny stared at me for a long second, nodded, and sighed. “Carson, we need to do dinner when she’s back. All four of us.”

“Yeah,” I answered, “we do.”

Friday arrived, and Debbie was home by mid-morning. She seemed relieved but cautious as she walked into our place. I had already planned a group dinner for that night, shooting Jenny a text that said “tonight—it’s going down.” I was cooking stuffed peppers and orzo pasta, a Greek-inspired menu reminiscent of our honeymoon. How twisted it felt to create a romantic meal on the very evening I intended to blow up the façade.

Around 5:30 p.m., Debbie arrived from her last flight. She had come straight from a business meeting in Omaha. Usually, she’d be too tired to do anything but shower and lounge on the sofa. This time, I was waiting with a table set for four. Candles, wine chilling, the works. She gave me a surprised smile.

“Oh my God, honey,” she squealed, “you’ve outdone yourself. You made dinner?”

I forced a bright expression. “Yep. Thought we deserved a nice meal at home.”

She kissed my cheek—an automatic gesture of spousal glee. I allowed it, feeling like an actor in a cheap drama. “So it’s just us?” she said, scanning the table.

“No. Trev and Jenny are coming over too.”

The look of panic flitted across her features so fast that if I hadn’t been searching for it, I might have missed it. Her hands tensed. “Trev and Jenny?” she repeated. “Tonight? I—wait, I thought—”

I gave her a friendly shrug and a gentle smile, the kind that never reaches the eyes. “They’re on their way. Might as well get comfortable.”

She nodded, swallowing her hesitation. “Okay, sure. I’ll just change clothes real quick.”

I watched her ascend the stairs. The water in the shower hissed. She was likely in a mild state of panic. Which version of Debbie would I meet tonight? Guilt-ridden? Defensive? Apologetic? Confident?

When she emerged, she wore jeans, a casual white T-shirt, and pink bra straps showing. Flip-flops on her feet—relaxation mode. She approached, tentatively placing a hand on my shoulder. “How can I help?”

I motioned to the fridge. “Grab the wine and open it. Table’s set.”

She sighed, rummaged for the Zinfandel. Moments later, the doorbell rang. I said, “I’ll get it,” and left her in the kitchen. Before I could even say hello, Jenny walked straight in, gave me a peck on the lips—out of left field—and said, “Hey, stallion.” I guessed it was her put-on performance. Trev trailed behind her, looking sheepish.

“Carson,” Trev nodded. I nodded back. We judged each other for a moment, both suspecting that something major was about to break, though maybe not knowing exactly how far I’d go.

Deb emerged from the kitchen, plastering on a forced grin. “Jenny!” she said cheerfully. “Trev, hey!”

I stuck my hands in my pockets. “We’re doing dinner European-style tonight. We’ll sit around the table, chat, pair up—Deb, why don’t you sit with Trev? Jen, you can hang out with me.”

That arrangement landed like a lead weight. Debbie’s eyes flicked around as though searching for an escape, and Trev looked reluctant to sit next to her. Jenny just launched into her usual upbeat banter, probably to keep the pretense of normalcy.

We started eating. The conversation was stilted, though Jenny tried to keep the mood light. She joked about “European open marriages,” referencing Debbie’s earlier remarks. I added a few jabs of my own, fueling the tension. Debbie and Trev looked trapped, exchanging worried glances as if reading each other’s minds.

Finally, we cleared plates. Debbie and Trev had barely touched their food. Jenny and I carried the dishes to the kitchen, then returned. That’s when I said, “Let’s watch something interesting.” I reached for the remote.

Trev swallowed. Debbie gazed at me with wide eyes. Novelty? She must have known I had something planned. The TV flickered to life, showing grainy footage of a sunny street scene. That vantage point eventually zeroed in on a taxi pulling up at a hotel. With a minimal timestamp in the lower corner, I recognized the exact day from the detective’s notes. First, the camera caught the driver stepping out, opening the trunk. Then it showed Trev’s face, followed by my wife stepping onto the curb. They headed inside, holding hands.

Trev’s jaw clenched. “Carson, stop.”

But Jenny interrupted. “Shut up and watch.”

Onscreen, we watched them checking in, then stepping into the elevator, a little hand-holding, a kiss before the doors slid shut. My wife turned away from the screen, bursting into tears. A few elliptical transitions, and the next scene was them inside a hotel room. The detective had apparently bribed housekeeping or the building manager, because the vantage point was too perfect. They were kissing, clothes peeled back after some fumbling. There was no question about what they were doing.

I stared coldly. “You could’ve at least cheated with someone hotter,” I remarked.

Trev jumped to his feet, furious, and spat, “You asshole, Carson—” He didn’t get far because Jenny slapped him on the arm with a commanding “Shut up.” I was certain if he’d dared approach me, I’d have clocked him.

Debbie sank into the sofa, sobbing. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “I never wanted—”

Video cut to another snippet: Debbie slow dancing at a bar with some random guy in a different city, then heading to a hotel room with him. Trev’s face turned scarlet. “You witch,” he barked, eyes blazing. “Debbie, did you cheat on me too?”

Jenny and I burst into scornful laughter. The irony was rich. Debbie tried to speak, but I pressed another button on the remote. Now a Vegas hotel suite displayed on the screen. It was Trev in bed with a woman who left nothing to the imagination: tall, slender, and super hot. She said something along the lines of “Your wife, I bet, doesn’t do it like this,” then we heard some humiliating napkin noises off-camera. The expression on Trev’s face now matched Debbie’s misery.

“That’s enough,” I said, clicking off the TV. For a moment, a hush blanketed us. Helpless rage smoldered.

Debbie whimpered, “Carson…I—”

I pointed a finger at her. “You told Jenny: ‘What happens outside the house means nothing.’ That’s what gave you away. My brain started spinning as soon as you said that. Then I had those PIs follow you both. The rest was easy.”

Jenny jumped in, voice shaking with anger. “Trev, you lying pig. After everything we shared, you do this? I always gave you whatever you needed at home. You had to step out with my best friend’s wife and a stranger in Vegas?”

Debbie cast a devastated look at me. “I don’t know what to do. Please, Carson.”

I bit back a retort and forced calm. “It’s obvious neither of you respected your marriages. You had plenty of chances to talk about needing something else or even wanting an open marriage. You thought you could just do it behind our backs. So here we are.”

Trev nearly spat at me. “You’re so smug.”

I gave a sardonic laugh. “Smug? Because you got caught? Wake up, man.”

Jenny crossed her arms, ignoring a trembling Trev. “Carson and I have decided we’ll each be pursuing divorces. You two can kiss your illusions goodbye. No kids in either marriage, so that should make things easier in court—except Texas law doesn’t look kindly on adulterers, especially where finances are concerned.”

Debbie let out a tiny wail. “No, please… Car, we can stay married. I’ll fix this. I’ll do—”

I cut her off. “Deb, how could I trust you ever again? You talk about open relationships in Europe, but you never asked me. You just waltzed into it with Trev and random guys from bars.”

Trev turned red. “Don’t lump me in with them. Debbie was messing around with two other guys.”

“Shut your mouth!” she shouted, lunging at him. “You told me you didn’t want to share me with Carson, that he’d never be up for it. This was your idea. Then we kept it going.”

“Oh, so you’re playing blame games now?” Trev unleashed an ugly laugh. “You told me you’d had just one partner before Carson. Did that turn out to be a lie too?”

While they threw barbs at each other, I noticed Jenny’s shoulders shaking. Her eyes sparked annoyance and pity. I gently touched her elbow. She huffed, “I’m so done with these two.”

Then, from the corner of my eye, I spotted Trev’s arm jerk. He whirled toward Jenny, rage flashing across his face. He looked a half-second away from slapping her. Without hesitation, I lunged. My fist slammed into his jaw. The punch reverberated through my knuckles. He toppled into the couch, upending the coffee table and sending half a glass of wine splashing across the rug. Jenny jumped back, shouting, “Carson, oh my god!”

“Bastard,” I snarled, standing over him.

He tried to scramble up, arms flailing, possibly to retaliate. Fueled by adrenaline, I grabbed him by the collar and slammed him to the floor. Debbie shrieked. Jenny looked torn between stepping in and letting me handle it. He was stronger than I expected but dazed from the punch. He managed to bring a hand up to swing, but I dodged. My blood was pounding. I jerked open a drawer in the side table and found handcuffs—a novelty item Debbie and I had purchased at some adult store as a joke a while back. Furious, I snapped them around Trev’s wrists and pinned them behind his back.

“Carson!” Debbie cried. “Don’t—” She tried to pull me off him.

“Deb, stand back!” I roared.

Trev kept wriggling. “Get these cuffs off me!”

I was losing it, but some rational corner of my mind said the situation was about to get worse if I didn’t calm down. My heart hammered as I forced him facedown, pressing a knee into his back. “You try to smack your wife again,” I growled, “and I’ll break your damn arm.” Jenny hovered behind me, eyes wide. Slowly, I removed my weight, then rummaged in the same drawer for a short length of rope. I taped his ankles and glared at him. “You calm now?”

He spat onto the floor, cursing. “Screw you.”

“You’re not messing with Jenny. You want to fight me, we’ll fight, but leave her alone.”

Before I could continue ranting, Debbie threw herself between me and Trev, tears streaming. “Carson, please, this is insane. Just let him go. You’re going to end each other.”

I flicked my gaze to Debbie. “If he ever touches Jenny, so help me God…”

“I get it,” Debbie whimpered, hands up. “Can we please talk this through?”

“Fine,” I relented, stepping back. I bent down, untying his feet but leaving the cuffs on. Trev rolled over, wrists still secured, neck craned in anger. There was a tremor in his features but no more attempts to lash out. Jenny moved to stand somewhere behind me, a silent show of unity.

“Talk,” I commanded. “Let me hear what you two have to say for yourselves.”

Debbie was sobbing, rubbing her temples. “Carson—maybe if we just keep this quiet, we can pretend it never happened. We can go back to normal. You and I could talk about maybe—maybe an open arrangement or something. I’ll do anything. Just don’t humiliate me or show the videos to my parents. Don’t ruin my life.”

“Oh, so now you worry about that?” Jenny said, glaring. “You didn’t care enough when you were sneaking behind our backs.”

I turned to Trev, who was half-sitting on the floor, wrists still cuffed. “And you?” I asked.

He panted, eyes flicking between Jenny and Debbie. “I messed up, all right? But you think I’m the only one?”

Jenny barked a laugh that was almost a sob. “You messed up repeatedly. You told me you were a devoted husband, that you’d never step outside our marriage. I was a fool.”

Trev’s breathing steadied. “Carson, let me out of these cuffs.”

I studied him for a moment. “If you lay fingers on Jenny, it’s over. Understand?”

He nodded, glaring at me with venom. I hesitated, then retrieved the little key from the side drawer. Approaching him, I pinned him with a stare. “Don’t move.” I unlocked the cuffs. He rubbed his wrists, glaring up at me. My fists stayed clenched in case he tried anything.

“All right,” I said, chest heaving, “both of you—get the hell out of my house.” I thrust my chin at the door. “Or I call the police for assault, trespassing…whatever I can pin on you.”

Jenny piped up, “You heard him. Out.”

Debbie jumped to her feet, tears turning to panic. “Carson! Please, no! I live here. This is my home. Let me explain, let me—”

I stomped over to her, raging under my breath. “You think this is a home after what you did? Don’t you get it, Deb? You said you needed to ‘experiment,’ see what other men were like. Then you and Trev crept around, lying, betraying. I’m done.”

She fell to her knees right there on the floor. “Please, please! Give me a second chance. I promise I’ll change.”

Trev muttered something I couldn’t make out. He stood up, but Jenny pressed a hand against his chest, pushing him toward the front door. He tried to resist, but then realized it was pointless. Debbie was still on her knees, sobbing, as I strode into the bedroom. I yanked open the closet, grabbed one of our suitcases, stepped outside, and heaved it onto the bed.

“You want your things?” I shouted. “I’ll pack them for you.” My hands shook as I started grabbing her clothes from hangers. She made a pitiful sound, lunging to stop me. “Carson, no, let me do it—”

“Too late.” I shoved a handful of blouses into the open luggage. “You can come back for the rest later.” I zipped the case violently, walked to the door, and threw it onto the porch. The suitcase bounced on the wooden boards. She stood behind me, stunned.

“Carson, you can’t just throw me out like this.”

“Yes,” I hissed, “I can. Hell, I’ll call your dad if you like. He can pick you up so you’re not wandering the street with your boyfriend over there.”

Debbie flinched at the word “boyfriend.” Then her eyes flicked with a desperate idea. She whipped out her phone, quivering as she tapped the screen. “Daddy, come help me.” Her voice escalated into hysterics. “He’s throwing me out—no, no, I need you here now!” She abruptly ended the call and glared at me.

It didn’t take long. Ten minutes, maybe fifteen, and her father’s sedan roared up the driveway. He was ex-military, a gruff man in his late fifties who’d always frowned upon me as the unworthy guy who married his princess. The moment he stormed through the front door, I knew trouble was coming. Tall, broad, and furious, he cornered me in the hallway.

“What the hell is going on?” he bellowed.

I raised my voice just enough to stand my ground. “Ask your daughter.”

“She said you’re throwing her out. Why?”

“Because she cheated on me,” I snapped. “Multiple times. And now I want her out of my house.”

He moved so fast I barely had time to react. He grabbed my shirt collar, intent on pinning me against the wall. His voice thundered. “Don’t you dare put your hands on my daughter’s things without giving her a chance to talk.”

I shoved him off, adrenaline spiking again. “Back off, old man. She can talk all she wants, but she can do it outside.”

We glared at each other. He was about to lunge again, so I shoved him in the chest, making him stagger. Then I stormed across the room to a small lockbox near the bookshelf. I popped it open, rummaged inside, and yanked out my registered Magnum revolver. I swung it up, not pointing directly at him, but making sure he saw it.

“Get out,” I warned, voice shaking with anger. “I have every right to defend my property. If you lay a hand on me again, or refuse to leave, I’ll call the police and let them sort it out. You want that? If you try to assault me, I can use force. That’s the law in Texas.”

He paled, eyes locked on the gun. Debbie screamed, “Daddy, please, no more fighting!” She ran to him. He held his hands up, breathing hard.

“You’re insane,” he growled.

“Maybe,” I said, heart hammering, “but this is my house. I’m pushing your daughter out because she wrecked our marriage.”

With trembling fury, he put an arm around Debbie and steered her to the door. “Come with me,” he ordered under his breath. “We’ll talk to a lawyer.”

She looked over her shoulder, tears running down her face. “Carson, please…I’m sorry.”

I said nothing. The door slammed behind them. Jenny was in the living room, hugging herself. Trev had slunk out earlier, presumably to avoid more of my rage. We heard Debbie’s father’s car roar off the driveway. I exhaled, setting the Magnum carefully back in the lockbox and securing it. Only then did I realize my entire body was shaking with adrenaline.

“Wow,” Jenny said softly. “That was—holy crap, Carson, that was intense.”

I nodded, leaning against the wall. My breath turned ragged. “I’m not proud of threatening him. I just had to protect myself. I wasn’t going to shoot him.”

She nodded, silent for a moment. Then, with tears in her eyes, she whispered, “What do we do now?”

Weeks of drama followed: I filed for divorce, citing marital misconduct (adultery). Debbie vacated the house. I demanded that she only return with prior notice, typically with her attorney, to retrieve anything else.The property was heavily in my name, but we had no prenup, so it was a question of who got what. Under Texas law, fault-based divorces could sway asset division. My lawyer said the evidence of Debbie’s infidelity might help me secure a larger portion of our marital estate.She threatened countersuits or to smear me, but the video evidence was damning.We hammered out an agreement: 70/30 in my favor, with no spousal support on either side. The entire process was messy, humiliating, and expensive.

Jenny initiated the same with Trev. She had a mountain of humiliating videos as well. He tried to claim entrapment, but it was nonsense. She ended up keeping their house, paying him a one-time settlement so he’d vanish. He did. No kids were involved, so child custody wasn’t an issue.

It took three months for both divorces to finalize. Through it all, Debbie sometimes texted me, apologizing or begging to talk. I ignored most of it. I was battered emotionally and not ready to hear more excuses. Meanwhile, Jenny and I maintained a mutual support system. Yes, we found solace in each other’s company, and eventually we ended up living together, though not with any illusions of a perfect union. We were too shaken by betrayal to jump directly into a new marriage. But the bond was there, and the option was open.

EPILOGUE.

Two years passed. In that time, I never saw Trev again. Rumor had it he moved to another state, maybe Arizona or somewhere on the West Coast. Jenny used her portion of the divorce settlement to refinance or rearrange her life. I took out a small loan to buy Debbie’s share of my home. I repainted the walls, rearranged furniture, changed the décor—made it mine (and partly Jenny’s). Debbie? She kept working in marketing, traveling around. I heard she lost a slew of clients after some company gossip got out about her “extracurricular activities,” but she managed to hold on to a job. Life has a way of moving on, and eventually the chaos melted into ordinary routines again.

Jenny and I started talking about seeing the world—using all those airline miles we had. The trauma left scars, but we felt hopeful about forging a future. For a while, it looked like Debbie had quietly disappeared from my life, and that was fine by me.

But then, late one night—almost half a year after the final divorce decree—I got a call from a number I didn’t recognize. I picked up to hear a shaky female voice.

“Carson?” she said.

I froze. “Debbie?”

She coughed. “Yeah.”

A long pause. I wondered if she was hurt, lost, or just feeling lonely again. Why was she calling me in the middle of the night?

“What do you want?” I asked. My tone was clipped, though not outright hostile.

Her breathing hitched. “I—I’ve got an STD,” she said, voice trembling. “It’s bad—I tested positive for chlamydia months ago, took some meds, thought it was gone. Then I tested positive for something else. I might need more treatments, see a specialist or do something expensive. I’m…not in a great financial place right now.”

I leaned against the kitchen counter, pressing a hand to my forehead. “Are you serious? Why are you telling me?”

She sniffled. “Because I need money. My insurance is crap. I have medical bills piling up. My dad offered to help, but I can’t face him again with this. He’s already so disgusted with me. I thought maybe you—”

I let out a hollow laugh. “Maybe me, your ex-husband, can pay for your STD treatments? The STD you likely got while screwing other guys behind my back? You’re unbelievable.”

She fell silent, except for a faint gasp of breath. “I…I’m sorry for everything. You were so good to me, and I—I messed it all up. Please, Carson, I’m desperate.”

I considered her words. Part of me felt pity. Another part of me recalled her kneeling on the floor, the father charging at me, the humiliating videos, the heartbreak. Jenny, battered by her own betrayal, asleep in the next room. My ex-wife was calling to ask for a bailout. A wave of cold anger passed through me.

“Debbie,” I said quietly, “I’m not a heartless monster. But consider what you did to me—why the hell would I do you any favors now?”

She choked on a sob. “Because I—”

“Because you what? Because you’re sorry? Sorry isn’t currency. You used up any goodwill you had. Goodbye, Debbie. Don’t call me again.”

“No—Carson, wait, can’t we just—”

Click. I ended the call, breathing heavily. The phone vibrated in my hand a couple more times. She tried calling back, but I blocked the number. Then I slumped down at the kitchen table. Jenny padded in, wearing pajamas, hair mussed from sleep.

“Car? Who was that?”

“My ex-wife,” I said, exhaling old bitterness. “She wanted money for medical expenses because she got an STD.”

Jenny’s eyes flickered with surprise, then sadness. “God, that’s…awful.”

“Yeah,” I whispered. “But I’m not paying for her mistakes.”

We locked eyes. She nodded, wordlessly coming over to me. I slid an arm around her waist, pulling her close. We’d both lost so much from the fiasco. We were raw, hesitant to trust. Yet here we were, forging something new from the ashes.

In that quiet moment, I realized how far I’d come since the day I first heard Debbie’s fateful words in the kitchen: “What happens outside the house means nothing.” She’d been so wrong. It mattered so damn much.