I had been married to Janet for twelve years. We’d known each other since we were only ten, inseparable from the start, nearly like best friends who happened to become lovers in our teen years. I’d never been interested in college when I graduated high school, so I took an entry-level job at Desmond Engineering. Janet and I married a year later. The following year, she gave birth to our twin daughters, Bethany and Britney. We scraped by at first—she wanted to be a housewife, so she never worked outside the home, but money was just enough to keep us going.

Despite the early struggles, things gradually improved. I became a higher-grade draftsman at Desmond, so my pay increased. We bought a small house on a quiet street and managed to get two used but decent cars. Janet was five feet tall, with dark brown hair and bangs that gave her a passing resemblance to Marie Osmond. She’d gained a little weight since giving birth to the twins, but she still took decent care of herself, and so did I. My build hadn’t changed much from high school—back then, I was the right tackle on the football team, broad-shouldered, not flabby, strong enough to look imposing if I wanted.

About four years ago, Billy Martin moved to our town from Lancaster and took a surveying job with Desmond. Billy and I found out we’d played football against each other in high school, so we hit it off. He was the kind of guy you could have a beer and watch a game with on a Sunday afternoon, no pretense. He’d married his own high school sweetheart, Sarah—red-haired, busty, and always wearing a mischievous smirk. Sarah and Janet became instant best friends. They had no children, so Sarah would sometimes help watch Beth and Brit if Janet needed it. The four of us often got together: Billy and I would talk sports, the women would chat about their next shopping spree.

Six months ago, I started noticing irregularities with Janet. Her schedule seemed different. She started saying the PTA had changed from monthly to weekly meetings, which made no sense. And Sarah—who wasn’t a mother—kept going along to these supposed PTA gatherings. Suddenly, they were hitting Tupperware parties, Magic Chef parties, cosmetic demonstrations, sometimes two or three times a month. They often came home without having bought anything but raved about how “amazing” the products were.

I tried to laugh it off, but I saw other suspicious signs. Janet’s lingerie collection got bigger and more provocative—lacy, black sets, things I never saw her wear for me. One evening, after she got home from a so-called “basket party,” I discovered she had taken a shower before leaving and took another right after arriving home. Odd. When she was in the bathroom, I checked her hamper and found those black lace panties had a sticky spot in the crotch area, definitely not from normal discharge. I pocketed them, horrified by the texture and smell.

Soon as I had that sinking feeling, I snooped in Janet’s phone. Call after call after call, half of them to Sarah, the other half to a few mysterious initials: “KC,” “KH,” “KW.” Then I saw how Sarah’s number was stored: Sarah S (cell), Sarah H (home), Sarah W (work). Same pattern with “K.” Each named K-something for cell, home, work. The addresses for K matched the format for Gilbert Engineering, Sarah’s workplace. The extension was different, so I guessed Janet was calling and getting calls from a man who worked with Sarah, presumably connected by her.

I dialed “KW” from Janet’s phone. It was after hours at Gilbert, but I got his voicemail: “You’ve reached Ken Sanders’s desk. I am not available at the moment. Leave your name and number, and I’ll return your call.” Everything clicked. Ken Sanders. She was messing around with him.

That night, I didn’t confront Janet. Instead, I tossed and turned on our living-room sofa, too angry and hurt to sleep in our bed. My mind spiraled with questions: How long had it been going on? How deep was it? Could we fix it? Or was it too late?

In the morning, the girls were already off to school when I finally cornered Janet in the kitchen. She acted like it was any other day. She sipped her coffee and said, “You never miss work. Are you sick?”

I replied, “Not sick. Not going in. I need you to be straight with me, Janet. I know about Ken Sanders.”

She blinked, eyes wide. “Who? John, I have no idea—”

I felt my temper flare. “Stop lying.” I tossed the panties onto the table. “Explain why they’re filthy with another man’s stuff.”

She went pale. “What are you even talking about?”

“Tell me, or I swear to God—”

I never finished my sentence. The silence was enough. She became defensive, still trying to deny it. She used old lines: “We’ve been married for twelve years! How could you accuse me like this!” Over and over. She stuck to her story that the PTA was real, that Sarah and she just had ‘harmless drinks’ with some people, that I was inventing conspiracy theories.

I erupted, slamming my coffee mug at the microwave. It cracked the display in a mighty crash, scattering shards. She froze with this look of sheer terror. I had never thrown anything in my life, never shown that side. But now she saw me, red-faced and shaking, beyond anything she imagined.

“Who the heck is Ken Sanders?” I hissed.

She stepped back, trembling, tears blossoming in her eyes. “He’s just a friend from Sarah’s office. That’s all.”

“Did you have intimacy with him?”

She refused to look at me, so I roared, “Tell me! Did you sleep with him?”

She answered in a whisper, “Yes. Please, John, don’t—”

The phone rang, cutting her off. She didn’t move. The caller ID read “Ken Work.” My heart pounded. I tapped “speakerphone.”

“Morning, sugar,” came a man’s bright, smug voice. “Just got to the office and saw your missed call on my work line. You forget something here, Janet? My sweet…?”

Janet closed her eyes, horrified. She said nothing. I decided to speak. “Ken, buddy, you’ve got some nerve. She’s not available. I’m her husband, but I’m sure you guessed that. I’m going to see you soon. Keep an ambulance on speed dial.”

Ken let out a confused grunt, but I hung up before he could respond. I shoved the phone in my jeans pocket and turned to face Janet. Her face was wet with tears. She folded her hands, trembling.

“You need to leave,” I said. “Pack up. My mom can stay with the girls for now. I don’t care where you go, just be gone. And I don’t want to talk to you. No more lies.”

She pleaded, “What about the girls? They’re at school. Please, John—”

I cut her off. “They’ll understand. I owe them the truth, or at least enough of it. You can figure out your living situation on your own. I’m done.”

She was breaking down, quietly sobbing. Fury roiled in my chest. I slammed the back door so hard, a pane of glass rattled. I got in my car, not sure where to go first. The only person I could think of was Billy, since we both suspected his wife Sarah might be part of all this.

I called Billy: “Hey, I’ve got bad news.”

“What’s going on, John? Are the twins okay?”

“Yeah, they’re fine. It’s about Janet. She’s cheating on me.”

He was silent a few seconds. “Wait. With who?”

“A guy named Ken Sanders at your wife’s workplace. And it’s not just Janet. I think Sarah is cheating on you, too, with some guy named Calvin Bostic. Possibly some group arrangement with Ken also involved. I don’t know the exact details, but Sarah’s name is all over Janet’s phone, hooking them up.”

Steady breathing. “Tell me everything.”

I did. Billy sounded disbelieving at first, but by the end, he said quietly, “Calvin was in our graduating class. He must be the same guy. Sarah never said anything about him. This is messed up. I’m going to talk to her. Thank you for letting me know.”

I hung up and headed into Desmond Engineering to let HR know I needed time off. Then I planned my next moves. Cancel the joint credit card, lock the bank accounts, see a lawyer. All the practical steps. It amazed me how quickly I could pivot from heartbreak to cold organization.

Janet’s phone started buzzing in my pocket, showing Sarah’s number. I pressed speaker. “Janet?” came Sarah’s anxious voice. “What the heck happened? Billy just called me, said something about you and—are you there?”

“Sarah,” I said calmly, “this is John. I’m sure you were expecting Janet. You’ll want to warn your buddy Ken that I’m on my way. Oh, and tell your pal Calvin to watch out for Billy. He’s on the warpath.”

A dead silence, then a frantic gasp. “No, John, you don’t understand—” She hung up in panic.

I felt no pity. Let them squirm. I closed our joint credit card. I changed the ATM PIN. Then I swung by my mother’s house, explained the situation, leaving out the worst. She agreed to stay with me tonight, to be there for the twins when school got out. Next, I drove to Gilbert Engineering, hoping to find Ken.

The drafting department staff talked excitedly about a man named Billy Martin who’d stormed the building earlier that morning. Turned out Billy had tried to corner Calvin in the parking lot, attacked him physically, and ended up tased by security. Calvin was carted away in an ambulance. Billy was taken away in handcuffs. The rumor mill said Sarah had shown up at the hospital and run into Calvin’s wife and kids, which triggered an enormous row. Meanwhile, Ken had apparently resigned from Gilbert that same morning—he was seen rushing out with half-packed boxes. I got Ken’s home address from a helpful, chatty guy in drafting.

Ken’s house was a small ranch-style place with a white Lexus in the driveway. As I pulled up, he dashed inside, clearly panicked. The trunk was open, boxes half-stacked in the back seat. He was fleeing. I walked in after him, the door left ajar.

“Ken?” I called. “Too scared to say hello?”

No answer. The living room was in disarray. I spotted his wallet, passport, and a small pile of personal documents on the coffee table, plus a phone that might have been a personal or work cell. Without thinking too hard about legality, I snatched them as leverage. I left everything else untouched. I did flatten one tire on his Lexus, letting out the air to slow his escape. It felt petty, but I was beyond caring.

For the next few hours, I drifted, stopping only for a Taco Bell lunch. Then I drove to the jail to see if Billy was all right. He was making arrangements for bail with his brother. Calvin was still in the hospital with a broken nose, bruised ribs, minor concussion. Billy’s brother promised to handle the bail, so I headed back home.

My mom was already there with the twins, cooking dinner. I retreated to my den with Ken’s phone, passport, and the small laptop I’d found. On that laptop, I found emails—and more photos—confirming the depth of Janet’s affair. She and Ken had an ongoing plan. Ken had been hired for an alternative energy project in Spain, starting in six weeks. The messages strongly suggested Janet intended to divorce me, take our daughters with her, and move to Spain. They were strategizing how to label me “unfit.” That single word made me want to smash the screen.

Instead, I printed out everything, tears of rage silently pouring down my cheeks. The twins wandered in, curious. They had their own suspicions but needed clarity. Bethany confronted me first: “Why did Mom leave? Is it true she’s with another man?”

Britney seconded: “We heard rumors at school. Some kids even took pictures of her at a restaurant with a strange guy, but we said that couldn’t be Mom. Guess we were wrong.”

I felt a twinge of shame that they’d known before me, or at least suspected. “I’m sorry, girls. I don’t have all the answers. But yes, she has been…unfaithful. She might want to separate you from me, so if anyone tries to talk you into something, you come talk to me first. I will fight too. You’re my everything.”

They nodded, hugging me. They had tears in their eyes but seemed more angry at Janet than at me.

Later that evening, Ken’s phone buzzed with a text: “dks sry4 safu L YJ.” I recognized it as: “Dear Ken, sorry for the trouble, love Janet.” So she was definitely in direct contact with him, probably trying to salvage the Spain plan. I typed back, “TJ. Thanks a lot, John.” Let her know I had the phone; let them stew.

The next day, I sought out Family Services, worried Janet might try legally to remove the twins from me. I had no experience with the system, so I asked for a case worker. The official who stepped out to greet me was a surprise: Jodie Mitchell, a woman I vaguely remembered from high school, once an artsy, goth girl. Now, she looked like any professional social worker, but she recognized me instantly.

“It’s been a long time, John,” she said, scanning her computer. “There’s no file on you or your wife. What’s going on?”

I explained everything: the affair, the phone evidence, the emails suggesting Janet wanted to paint me as unfit. She listened quietly, took brief notes, and asked, “Why come here if there’s no official complaint from her yet? Are you anticipating one?”

I exhaled. “I’m almost certain she’ll try something. I want to protect my daughters.”

Jodie nodded. “Come back tomorrow. Let’s talk again.”

I left, still anxious. My next stop was a divorce lawyer. Paid him a flat fee for the works, told him to expedite everything, demanded joint custody at minimum, or full if possible. I was done with illusions. Let Janet do her worst.

My phone buzzed with a call from Billy. “John, guess what? Sarah tried visiting Calvin in the hospital. Calvin’s wife was there, and security had to escort Sarah off the premises. Meanwhile, I got out on bail. My brother arranged it. I’m done with Sarah. She packed her stuff or maybe she’s staying with her parents—who knows, who cares.”

That afternoon, I got a call from Janet’s father, Cameron Wilcox. He wanted me to come to their house and “talk things out.” He promised it would be just him, Janet’s mother Martha, and Janet’s sister Carla. Reluctantly, I agreed. On arrival, I found them all in the living room, tension thick as tar.

Cameron cleared his throat. “We wanted to hear your side, John. Janet says—”

I cut him off. “Let me guess. She told you I forced a confession out of her, that none of it is real?”

Janet looked tear-stained, sitting with her head hung low. Carla perched on an armchair, arms crossed. Martha was silent, lips pressed tight.

Cameron said, “Yes. She says you misunderstood. She suggests it was a harmless friendship, you got jealous, and you threatened her. She wants you to let her come home.”

I gave a bitter laugh. “Stop. I have photos. Actual proof.” I opened my folder and handed them a half-dozen prints: Janet at the Olive Garden, Red Lobster, hugging Ken, cozy at some scenic overlook. I pointed out the date stamps. “Is this a misunderstanding?”

Martha’s eyes filled with shame. “Janet…my God.”

Carla studied each, her jaw tight. Meanwhile, Janet sank deeper on the couch, tears slipping down her cheeks.

I said quietly, “Your daughter’s not telling the truth. She’s not just having an affair—she’s making plans to take my daughters overseas. Look at this email.” I passed Cameron another sheet. “She and Ken are plotting to declare me unfit so they can take both girls to Spain.”

Cameron looked furious. “You…where did you get this?”

“Ken left his laptop behind in a panic. And I found a family passport application with the girls’ photos, so they’d be able to travel with their mother. I never consented to that. Think about it.”

Martha buried her face in her hands, weeping softly. Janet fled the room in hysterics. Cameron looked at me, voice shaking. “I’m so sorry. We didn’t know.”

Glancing at Carla, I said, “I’m finished here. Thank you for hearing me out. I’m leaving.” She called my name, but I didn’t turn back.

When I returned home, I found Billy in the office rearranging my foldout bed. He was temporarily crashing, and it didn’t bother me. My mother was busy in the kitchen. After dinner, I spoke to the twins about the situation more candidly: they were old enough to sense the crisis. They didn’t cry but wore expressions of betrayal and heartbreak. Then they retreated to their room to do homework.

The next morning, I revisited the Family Services office. Jodie Mitchell greeted me, said she had spoken to the twins briefly at school, and that they seemed quite protective of me. She also said, “I’m filing an injunction. We’ll restrict Janet from taking the girls out of state. She can see them, but she can’t take them away unexpectedly.”

I exhaled relief. Despite everything, a small corner of me felt sad. This was our life, once upon a time. But it was beyond repair.

Over the next few days, I busied myself with legal paperwork. My mother ended up moving in permanently, taking the guest room, so we had three generations in one house. Billy worked on divorcing Sarah, who had apparently started living with her parents in a nearby region called Afrata. Calvin was out of the hospital, rumored to be getting a divorce as well. Everything was unraveling fast.

Meanwhile, Janet floated around. She spent a few days with Carla, then apparently wore out her welcome. Carla tried to broker a deal with me: “She feels horrible. She says she regrets everything. She wants you to sign no-contest divorce papers. She’ll drop any efforts to relocate the twins. Please, John, if you could just give her the—”

I understood immediately. “The passports, right? She wants me to hand them over. So she can run off to Spain. Without the twins, presumably.”

Carla nodded, swallowing. “Yes. She wants her own passport. Just hers, not the girls’ version. She says she’ll give up custody, right? She just…” She trailed off.

I gave Carla a cold glare. “I don’t trust either of you. Tell Janet I’m proceeding with my own divorce filing. I will not help her. Now excuse me, I have laundry to do,” and I walked out.

That night, after the twins had gone to bed, I felt so spent. I sat on the porch with a beer, staring at the streetlight. My mother stepped out to quietly keep me company. Just as we were about to go in, a car pulled up. Jodie Mitchell emerged. She’d evidently taken a liking to my family, especially the twins. She said, “I served Janet earlier. She was furious, but that’s done. I wanted to check on you.”

I shrugged. “Just feeling numb.”

She sighed. “Divorces are never pretty. I have to say, your daughters are coping well.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I appreciate you coming by, sticking your neck out for us.” She gave a small smile, left shortly after. I noticed her lingering glance as she went, but I was too tired to read into anything.

A restless week passed. Billy’s divorce from Sarah was swift. Sarah never contested anything. She vanished from our story, presumably too ashamed to face him or deal with the fiasco involving Calvin. My own lawyer finalizing the papers asked, “Any word from Janet’s side?”

“None,” I said. “It’s weird. I guess she’s just waiting to sign.”

In the meantime, my father fell critically ill, so my mother had to split her time caring for him. The twins ended up spending weekends at my parents’ place, weekdays with me. Time blurred. Jodie started popping by more often, sometimes under the guise of “checking on the girls,” sometimes with groceries, or a bottle of wine. One quiet night, after the twins had gone to watch a movie in their room, Jodie and I sat in the living room. She touched my arm. “John, I know you’re going through hell. I’m not stepping out of line, am I?”

I, feeling the swirl of emotions, answered with a shaky voice. “You’re not. I guess we’re just…seeing what happens, right?”

She leaned in and confessed softly, “I care about you. About your girls, too. But I also have to maintain some professional boundaries.”

In the hush that followed, she kissed me, a gentle brush of lips that made me flush. The memory of Janet welled up, her betrayal overshadowed by the comfort of contact with someone who might actually be honest.

I didn’t resist. We ended up softly entangled, mindful not to make noise that the twins could hear. Some hours later, as dawn neared, she slipped out, both of us feeling guilty, uncertain, but also a bit relieved. The next day, the girls were all smiles, and they gave me these sly looks as if they knew exactly who had been over. They were too perceptive for their age.

Around that time, Janet finally reappeared, or at least made contact, scheduling a meeting at the high school to see the twins. She tried to be affectionate, but the girls were cold. They told me later how she said, “I love you. I want to fix this,” but they refused to go anywhere with her. They didn’t trust her. She told them she was leaving for Spain soon, that she’d call them on birthdays and holidays, send postcards. They realized she was essentially walking away from them for good. It hurt them, but it also hardened them toward her.

A couple days after we learned she’d left town, her parents visited me again, apologizing, wanting to remain in their granddaughters’ lives. I said yes, of course. I wasn’t cruel enough to deny that. Martha was tearful, Cameron stoic. They admitted they’d asked Janet to leave their home. They recognized she’d done too much harm. They practically disowned her. That left Carla, who was also furious with Janet.

Shortly afterward, I finalized the divorce. Neither Janet nor her lawyer contested. I guess she just wanted to be free to chase Ken or whatever dream she had in Spain. I took the girls. No alimony and no child support from her. I’d carry everything if it meant no more drama.

We learned Sarah had sold her share of the house she had with Billy. She presumably left for California, which was rumored among neighbors. Calvin was teaching electronics at a vocational school. Billy joked about wanting to pay him another visit, but thought better of it. Billy and I decided to start our own surveying-and-drafting business, with financial help from my mother. It was a success. It occupied time, gave me a positive focus.

Even so, Ken’s involvement haunted me. Some rumored he’d started working stateside, but no one knew exactly where. The strangest part: postcards continued arriving from Spain, addressed to the twins. But they were always from Janet, never from Ken. Then a painting arrived—windmills in La Mancha—and the only text was, “Thinking of you.” Daughters tossed it aside, unimpressed.

I began to suspect Ken had vanished. For a while, there was no mention of him, until rumors circulated that he’d never even begun the job in Spain. Another rumor: “He resigned from everything, tried to vanish.” No official word. Not from Sarah, obviously. She was gone. Not from Calvin. Not from Janet, as all she ever wrote or called about was how “Spain is beautiful” or “I’m working in a travel agency now.” She never updated us about Ken.

But one day, we got the biggest shock. Carla, who’d tried to stay neutral, arrived at my door, frantic, wanting me to come to the Wilcox home to “end this once and for all.” I was confused. She babbled about some “police involvement” and “Ken’s family looking for him.” Reluctantly, I followed her back.

The entire Wilcox family was in the living room—Cameron, Martha, plus Carla, pale with worry. Janet herself stood near the window, face drawn. On a small table sat a police file with photos: Ken’s shoes were found near a wooded area off a hiking trail. A fisherman discovered them next to a muddy bank. As of now, Ken was listed as a missing person.

Janet raised her eyes to me, trembling. “Did you…do anything…to Ken?” she asked in a thin voice.

I felt a bizarre mix of disgust and triumph swirl. “Are you seriously implying I might have ended him?”

Carla spoke, “John, please, calm down. His family can’t find him. They suspect foul play.”

“You always did want John out of the picture,” I heard Martha mutter at Janet. “Now Ken is gone, and we’re in the middle of a police investigation.”

Janet started to cry. “I just want to know if John threatened him. That day you said on the phone—I remember—you threatened him. ‘I’m the danger’? Did you—?”

A hysterical laugh escaped me. “Janet, if your precious Ken never showed up in Spain or anywhere, it’s not on me. I only threatened him, yes, but do you really think I chased him into the woods for his shoes? Are you insane?”

Cameron stood abruptly, rage in his face. “That’s enough, John!” Before I could back away, he lunged, trying to slap me across the face. I caught his wrist and twisted him off-balance, fist gripping his collar. My teeth clenched.

I roared, “You gave me a cheat for a wife, you made all her excuses! And now you’re accusing me? You put your hands on me again, old man, and I’ll show you exactly who you raised.”

He quailed under my glare. For a second, I almost decked him. The entire room froze. Carla shrieked, “Stop, John, you’ll hurt him!”

I let Cameron go, shoving him aside. He stumbled. I loomed over him, fury pulsing in my chest. “I’m warning all of you. Keep me out of your paranoid nonsense. Ken was a scumbag who messed with the wrong people. If he’s missing, that’s on him. Or on Janet. Or God knows who else. But do not come for me.”

Janet stared with tear-filled eyes. “But you…you threatened him. I just need to be sure.”

“You brought this on yourself.” My voice was low, menacing. “If you keep blaming me, you’ll regret it.”

Silence rang. Then Martha, hands trembling, said, “I think John has a point. Let’s just let the police do their job. Janet, we accepted you back in once. But the stunts you pulled… None of this is John’s doing. Or do you have proof otherwise?”

Janet shook her head as if she suddenly realized how alone she’d become. She sniffled. “I have no proof. I just—couldn’t think who else would have… I’m sorry.”

“Come on.” I turned my back, heading for the door. The tension behind me remained so thick I could slice it. Carla opened the door for me, tears glistening on her cheeks. She whispered, “We shouldn’t have asked you over, I’m sorry. The police are searching for him anyway.”

I paused on the threshold. “Here’s your final answer: I don’t know where Ken is. I don’t care. As for you, Janet—stay away from me. If the girls want to see you, they’ll let me know. Now, I’m done.”

Then I left, fury still coursing through my veins.

EPILOGUE.

Ken Sanders never reemerged. The county sheriff’s office continued investigating, but all they found were his shoes near that wooded trail. No witnesses, no body, nothing. Some speculation arose that he might have faked his own disappearance to escape debts or start a new life. Others suspected he ran into the wrong person from his past or was taken down by a new enemy. A murmur or two pinned it on me, but it never stuck.

Janet, haunted by Ken’s vanishing, relocated and was never the same. She lived briefly with her sister, then hopped between Spain and the States for work in a travel agency. The postcards she sent to our daughters spoke only of scenic vistas, never giving a clue about Ken. She made no serious attempt to reestablish custody. The girls, stung by her betrayal and her attempt to separate them from me, never pressed for more contact.

Billy and I expanded our small survey-and-drafting operation, ironically picking up Gilbert Engineering as our biggest client. Even so, I never looked back in regret. The twins kept growing, thriving in school. They forgave me for my rage, or maybe they just understood it. They recognized I’d been driven to it by betrayal and heartbreak.

Sarah vanished too, rumored to have remarried in California. Calvin taught electronics at a vocational school in a small town. We heard Billy’s single punch had broken Calvin’s nose and ended his marriage—whatever illusions Sarah once had about building a life with the man were shattered.

I continued seeing Jodie Mitchell, who helped me dismantle walls of anger and guilt. She never pressured me. Gradually, we moved in together and eventually married quietly in a small ceremony across the state line. My twin girls considered her a mother figure, trying to teach her how to cook like Grandma (with limited success). In the process, we formed a strange but stable household.

Now, more than a year since Ken disappeared, investigators remain stumped. All roads lead nowhere, except for those battered shoes found in the mud. Rumor or not, some still whisper I had something to do with it. I let them whisper. Anyone who truly knows me and my daughters understands I’d never risk leaving them fatherless by sinking myself into a murder charge—no matter how furious or vengeful I might have been.