It’s quiet now. Too quiet. The kind of quiet that creeps in after years of noise and chaos have sunk into the walls, leaving only echoes behind. For so long, my house was alive with energy—kids running around, friends visiting, arguments and laughter colliding in the corridors. Now, my wife Kathy’s out for groceries. She says it’s just groceries, but she has a habit of picking up something extra: a new cushion, a picture frame, maybe even something small for me. All these years, 24 to be exact—no, scratch that, in a month we’d be at 25—she’s put little surprises into everyday life.

But the house feels different lately. Our children, Jack and Emily, left for college. Jack’s finishing his senior year; Emily is in her sophomore year. The place used to hum with Jack’s music playing too loud or Emily practicing speeches for debate club. Their friends constantly paraded in and out, and Kathy and I had to manage the chaos. Now, in the emptier hallways, their absence resonates like a hollow drumbeat. I can’t decide if this emptiness is a relief or a warning sign.

I force myself out of bed, telling myself I can’t just loaf around like a retiree when it’s barely mid-morning. Kathy would laugh if she saw me like this, especially because I used to be the early riser, the one who brewed coffee at dawn and went for a quick run before the day began. Now, I’m fighting a stifling sense of apathy. I reach for my vitamin bottle on the nightstand, pop the cap, and shake one out. Of course, it bounces off my palm and rolls under the bed. I mutter a few words I’d never repeat in polite company.

Dropping to my knees, I sweep a hand under the bed. It’s darker than I expect. The mild smell of dust hits my nostrils—maybe I should’ve vacuumed here a long time ago—and my fingers graze bits of lint, an old sock that once belonged to Jack. My hand closes over something crinkly. I tug it out, expecting maybe a lost receipt or some candy wrapper. Instead, I find a condom wrapper.

For a moment, I go completely blank, just staring at it like I’ve fished an alien artifact out from under my bed. Who left a condom wrapper there? I rack my brain. Jack slept in our bedroom for a couple of nights while painting his own room last summer. Could it have fallen out of his pocket? But I also feel a stab of dread. I had a vasectomy after Emily was born. We agreed that two kids were plenty. Kathy and I haven’t used condoms in forever.

A sour taste clings to my tongue. The simplest explanation—that it’s Jack’s—doesn’t quite fit. Why would it be here, now, of all times? I can’t suppress a darker thought: Is Kathy cheating on me? In the next instant, I twist up my face in denial. That can’t be right. Kathy and I have had our ups and downs, sure, but I never suspected anything that severe. She’s always struck me as faithful, sincere. Still, the wrapper in my hand speaks volumes. I decide I need more than speculation before I turn my whole life upside down.

I get dressed in a hurry, throw on my jeans, and pocket the condom wrapper. My house, the same old place I once found comfort in, now feels suffocating. The furniture, the photos on the wall, the accent rug Kathy insisted we install in the living room—it all looks suspect, as though everything might be in on a terrible secret. I step outside into the crisp mid-morning air and drive downtown to see my oldest friend, Davy Jones.

Davy’s no pirate, though he picked up that moniker in the Navy. After leaving the military, he became a private investigator. A great one, actually—methodical, discreet, and honest. He keeps his office in a small building with tinted windows. When I walk in, Davy’s got his feet propped on his desk, sipping coffee from a chipped ceramic mug. He sets it down when he sees me and jumps up.

“Ben Miller,” he says with a broad grin. “Long time, no see.”

We shake hands, and then his smile fades when he notices the tension in my posture. I drop onto the worn leather chair across from his desk. Davy pulls his feet from the desk and sits up straight. “What’s going on?” he asks quietly, eyeing me with concern.

I exhale slowly. “Found this under my bed.” I place the protection wrapper on his desk, flattening it as if it’s a piece of evidence in a murder case. “I’m worried Kathy might be messing around.”

Davy’s face hardens. He nods but doesn’t say anything, letting me blunder through my explanation: how I discovered it, how we haven’t used condoms since forever, how Jack crashed in our room but that was months ago. He remains silent until I’m finished. Then he leans back.

“All right,” he says. “First, I want you to consider what’s at stake if we go down this path. If Kathy is cheating on you, are you prepared? Because it’s not just your heart. It’s your finances, your house, your entire life. You might want to see a lawyer. Know what your options are.”

I swallow. The mention of a lawyer makes my stomach knot. But I know Davy’s right. “I’ll do that,” I murmur.

He stands and squeezes my shoulder. “I’ll dig around. Give me a week, maybe less. I’ll let you know what I find.”

By the time I leave his office, I feel a little less alone but a lot more uncertain. I drive to a corner law firm known for its brutal efficiency in divorce cases. I never thought I’d step foot in a place like this—never believed Kathy and I would be at such a crossroads—but here I am.

Butch Reed, the best divorce lawyer this side of the county, greets me in his glass-walled office. He’s an imposing figure—tall, broad-shouldered, and sporting a neatly trimmed goatee turning silver at the edges. He hears me out, calmly taking notes on a yellow legal pad. Finally, he sets the pen aside and looks me straight in the eye.

“Ben, if you have to file for divorce in this state, you’re typically looking at splitting everything 50-50. Community property. That means half your cash, half your investments, half your house. Possibly even spousal support, depending on your earnings. There’s no easy path.”

It feels like the floor has shifted under me. Losing half of what I’ve built is a punch to the gut. But staying married to someone who might be betraying me? That seems worse. I rub my temples. “If it comes to that, I’ll accept it,” I say quietly. “I just can’t—” But I can’t finish the sentence.

Butch’s look softens, just a fraction. “Before we jump to anything, keep your head down. Don’t let her suspect. If she suspects you know, she might move money or prepare a separate fight, and then you’re in for a complicated battle. Do your best to stay calm.”

I leave with my mind spinning. Kathy’s a cheater. Maybe. I have no concrete proof except that damn wrapper. Yet deep down, that gut feeling is driving me crazy.

When I get home, she’s chopping vegetables in the kitchen. She gives me a bright smile as I enter. “Hey, how was your day?”

I force a casual shrug. “Fine. Busy.”

There’s a slight hitch in my voice that I hope she doesn’t notice. I toss my keys on the counter. “I’ve got a short work trip coming up,” I add, trying to sound normal. “Might be gone for a week.”

She sets the knife down. “Really? That’s sudden,” she says, but she doesn’t pry. She rarely does when it comes to my job.

That night, in bed, Kathy snuggles closer, tries to slip her hand under my shirt. For a moment, I’m torn—maybe I’m overreacting. Maybe this is the loving woman I’ve shared decades with. Then I remember the wrapper, and something inside me sours.

“I’m exhausted,” I mutter, rolling away from her.

A flicker of disappointment crosses her face. “All right,” she whispers. She turns off the lamp on the nightstand and faces the other way. The silence in the dark weighs heavily. In the gloom, my thoughts swirl. Could the wrapper belong to Jack? Did Kathy find it somewhere else and accidentally drop it? The possibility that she might be innocent keeps flickering, but the seed of doubt has lodged deep in my chest. And it’s growing.

I leave early in the morning, telling her I’ll be at a meeting for work in a nearby city. She doesn’t question me beyond a hug and a promise to call later. Once I’m free, I find a cheap motel, pay in cash, and hole up there, waiting for Davy’s call. The motel is unremarkable: a parking lot that shimmers under the midday sun, a peeling sign, a small front lobby that smells like stale cigarettes. Half the lightbulbs in the hallway flicker. Perfect place to stay off the grid.

Hours drag by as I stare at the stained ceiling, flipping the TV on and off, not really watching. A phone call from Davy finally jolts me to attention.

“She’s left the house,” he says in a clipped tone. “Checked into a motel.”

Ice slides into my veins. “Which one?”

He hesitates. “The same one you’re in, Ben. Next room over, in fact.”

For a few seconds, I can’t speak. She’s here, next door? What does that mean? My hands tremble. Davy’s voice is in my ear again. “Don’t confront her. Just leave, get your head clear. If you go barging in, you risk everything.”

But I’m already up, checking the battered colt case I carry in my trunk. My father’s old Magnum. I haven’t touched it in years, but the anger surging through me is intense, almost uncontrollable.

“No, Davy,” I grit out. “I need to hear it.”

“Ben,” he says, frustration obvious, “I’ve got a camera set up. I’ll feed you proof. Don’t do anything stupid.”

I hang up without answering. My pulse pounds in my ears. Minutes later, I hear muffled voices through the thin walls. A man’s low baritone. Kathy’s lighter tone. Their words come into clarity: intimate, mocking, cutting.

I’m rooted in place, every muscle rigid. I hear the bed creaking, their gasps, her moans. My breathing becomes shallow, fury rising to a boil. Then I catch a snippet of conversation:

“…He’s old. He’s like a reliable dog,” Kathy says between breathless laughs. “I can feed him any excuse, and he’ll go along with it.”

The man snickers. “So why stay married to that loser?”

Kathy’s giggle stabs me like a knife. “He’s a good provider. He’s not a bad guy, but I hate how dull it’s been. One day, I’d love for him to watch us making love. Just to see his face.”

My vision goes red. I almost yank open my door. My fists clench so hard my nails dig into my palms. Then the door to my room creaks open, and I spin around, ready to attack. But it’s Davy. He rushes in, sees the rage on my face, steps forward, and physically blocks me from crossing the threshold.

“Don’t,” he growls. “Ben. Put that gun away.”

My eyes flick to the Magnum on the bed. I must’ve taken it out without realizing. “Get out of my way,” I growl.

“No,” Davy says. “You’ll destroy yourself if you do this. You want them punished? We’ll do it the right way.”

I stand there, breathing hard. Then my shoulders slump. “I want them both gone from my life,” I mumble. “I want them to suffer.”

Davy’s voice lowers. “They will. But not if you lose control. Let’s handle this carefully.”

Slowly, I nod. I set the Magnum aside. My entire body trembles with the adrenaline crash. Davy steps back, relief flickering in his eyes.

“We’ll record everything,” he says. “We’ll have more proof than you’ll ever need.”

He leaves quietly, promising he’ll keep watch. I fall back onto the bed, burying my face in my hands, silently replaying the vile words I just heard, how Kathy reduced me to an obedient dog. The walls feel like they’re closing in.

Two days later, perched in the same seedy motel, I’m on the phone with Davy. “They’ve been meeting regularly,” he tells me matter-of-factly. “I’ve got them on video at another motel, and also at the guy’s place. His name’s Roger Smith. Coworker of hers.”

My cheeks flame. Roger. Someone from her office. So all those late nights “at work” were spent rolling around with him.

On the third day, I meet Davy and Butch in Butch’s office. The blinds are drawn; the tension is palpable. Davy sets a flash drive on Butch’s desk. “Everything’s on here,” he says. “Videos, photos, timestamps.”

Butch slides the flash drive into his laptop as if handling evidence in a murder trial. I see the flicker of distaste in his eyes when he notices the clarity of the footage. “This is definitely enough,” he says. Then he looks at me. “Stay calm. Keep living normally at home until we decide the best moment to strike.”

I nod, feeling hollow. “Okay.”

I go home, slip inside quietly. Kathy’s bustling around in the kitchen. “You’re back!” she says, brightening at the sight of me.

“Yeah,” I manage. “The project wrapped early.”

She steps closer, as if to hug me, but I take a step back. “Wait,” I say quickly, “someone at work tested positive for COVID-19. I might have been exposed. I’m feeling a little off.”

Concern flutters across her face. “Oh no. Are you sure you’re okay?”

I swallow down the bitterness. She sounds so caring, so… genuine. “Probably just a sore throat. But let’s not take any risks. I’ll use the guest room for a while.”

She nods. “Right. Of course. Let me know if you need anything, okay?”

“Sure,” I say, and I duck away. Everything about her posture screams worry, yet I know how false that is.

Days crawl by under this flimsy COVID hoax. She stays out of my way, occasionally knocks on the door to ask if I need soup or tea. I keep an eye on my phone. Davy texts me updates of Kathy’s routine. A lunchtime rendezvous at Roger’s place. An afternoon quickie at a motel. One time, they left the office together at 2 p.m. and stayed gone for three hours. My stomach churns every time. But I remember Butch’s words: keep quiet, keep your leverage.

And so I wait.

By the end of the week, Kathy’s concerned face meets me in the kitchen. “Should we cancel the anniversary party?” she asks. “It’s only a few weeks away.”

I shake my head. “I’ll be fine by then. Actually, let’s go forward. I’ll plan something big. It’s our 25th.” I force a tight smile.

She brightens, leaning in to place a tentative hand on my arm. “I’m glad you’re okay, Ben.”

“Me too,” I say neutrally.

A few days later, I step out of isolation with a renewed sense of purpose. I politely dodge her attempts at intimacy by playing the convalescent card. Then I quietly set about organizing an anniversary celebration that’ll be… memorable. I mail out invitations to family, friends, and even some of Kathy’s coworkers. Yes, including Roger. If I’m going to blow things up, I’m going to do it in front of everyone.

During this period, I see a doctor to get tested for STDs—just in case. The tests all come back negative, and I breathe a small sigh of relief. One less worry, at least. Then I meet with Butch again to finalize details. He’s drawn up the divorce papers, the lawsuits, the entire plan. I sign sealed envelopes for Kathy and Roger. Meanwhile, Davy arranges a “special surprise” for the day of the party, the final nail in the coffin of Kathy’s deception.

The night of the anniversary arrives. The house is buzzing with guests and chatter. Kathy is radiant in a sleek blue dress, her makeup perfect, her smile wide. She glides around from person to person, greeting them, playing the role of the gracious, loving wife. Everyone congratulates us on 25 years, remarking on how time flies.

I hover near the edge of the living room, sipping water I don’t want. My mind churns with the plan. Davy’s here, too, standing near the stairway, blending in. Butch is behind the scenes, waiting for his cue. Kathy’s parents are present, beaming with pride. My kids—Jack and Emily—came home for this event. We’re momentarily a perfect family in the eyes of the world.

Then I see Roger slip in with his wife. He’s a fit, smug-looking guy, just shy of 40, with a carefully trimmed beard. She’s a stylish brunette who appears polite but distracted. The tension in the air spikes. My eyes track him as he maneuvers around, steels himself, and makes small talk with Kathy. They try not to stand too close. They think they’re discreet.

Everyone’s here. Great. Time to set the scene.

I step to the front of the living room, picking up a wireless mic we set up for the evening’s toast. The lights dim just as we planned, and all eyes turn to me.

“Thank you all for coming,” I begin, my voice echoing through the room. The small crowd grows quiet. Kathy, near the front, closes in. “We’re celebrating 25 years, or so everyone thinks. But I have a small correction: it’s really been 24 years and six months of marriage. Because the real marriage ended six months ago.”

Confusion flickers across faces. Kathy looks alarmed. “Ben, what—?” she starts in a hushed tone.

I hold up a hand. “Let me explain. My good friend Davy has a gift for you, Kathy.”

Davy steps forward with a large, wrapped frame under his arm. The hush grows thicker. Kathy’s father helps her unwrap it. When the paper tears away, it reveals a blown-up still image of a hotel security cam shot of Kathy climbing on Roger in a motel bed.

Gasps rip through the air. Kathy shrieks in horror. Her father’s face contorts with rage and shock. “What the hell is this?!” he bellows.

I click a remote, and on the large screen we’d hung for a photo slideshow, a video file starts to play—Kathy and Roger, entangled and naked, and then the audio. People cover their mouths. Roger’s wife pales.

I speak over the stunned crowd. “You all see why 24 years and six months is where our marriage ended. Six months ago, my wife decided to start sleeping with Roger Smith.”

Kathy tries to lunge at me, but I move aside. She looks wildly at her father, at her mother, at everyone. The raw betrayal in the room is suffocating.

Suddenly, Roger’s wife steps forward. Her face is livid, tears in her eyes. “You bastard!” she yells at Roger. She throws her drink at him, the red liquid staining his crisp white shirt. Roger stumbles back, then tries to grab her arm, but she wrenches free.

At that moment, an even bigger commotion snaps everyone’s attention: Kathy is confronted by Roger’s wife. The two women stand inches apart, raging. Roger’s wife hisses, “You destroyed my family!”

Kathy fires back, “Don’t act like you’re perfect. He hates you!”

Here it comes—the fight. Roger’s wife lunges forward, fingers tangling in Kathy’s hair. Kathy screeches, clawing at Roger’s wife’s arms. People rush in, but they can’t immediately separate them. The scene veers into outright chaos. Roger’s wife shoves Kathy against a table, sending plates clattering to the floor. Someone tries to restrain them, but Kathy hurls a half-full bowl of fruit salad at her.

Screams erupt. Roger’s wife grabs the first thing she can reach—a tray of shrimp cocktail—and flings it. pink tails and sauce flying across the living room. Kathy ducks, runs forward, and slams a glass pitcher of water onto the floor near Roger’s wife. Water and shards explode everywhere, soaking ankles. The entire party is spinning out of control.

“Stop it!” one of the guests shouts. But it only escalates. People scramble to avoid broken glass and flying food. Kathy’s father tries to separate them, but he slips. The brawling wives knock him down in the process. The living room looks like a war zone. Kathy claws at Roger’s wife’s hair again, yanking with a feral intensity. Roger’s wife, drenched in water and sauce, scrambles loose and slaps Kathy across the face. The sound rings out like a gunshot.

If this were any other day, I might intervene. But I don’t. A small, dark satisfaction coils in me as I watch them hurl each other around. My supposed best friend of 25 years is revealed to be a stranger, a cheat, and she’s reaping what she sowed.

Finally, some of the guests manage to pull them apart, each woman breathing hard, hair askew, elegant dresses stained with food and water. Roger’s wife tries to rush in for one last slap, but an older aunt restrains her. Kathy’s father stands in the middle, panting, face red with fury. The betrayal in that moment is so thick it’s practically tangible. Family members stare in horror.

Through the crowd, Butch emerges, solemn as ever, accompanied by a process server in a black suit. The server steps up to Kathy, her parents still holding her back, and hands her a manila envelope. “Mrs. Miller,” he says calmly, “you have been served.”

She just gapes, open-mouthed. Then he turns, locates Roger, and thrusts a second envelope out. “Mr. Smith, you have been served.”

The server is methodical. He next hands an envelope to Roger’s CEO, standing near the door, stunned. “Mr. Thompson, you have been served,” the server intones. The CEO nearly drops his drink, confusion unraveling his earlier composure.

A hush settles as I speak again, voice cold and clear: “That’s a lawsuit for letting your employees break the company’s code on company time. Consider it a warning to set better moral standards.”

The CEO opens his mouth, but no words come. I pivot to Roger. “Mr. Smith, you’re served for alienation of affection—and for destroying my marriage. I’m sure your wife will have more to say about your own divorce.”

Then I fix my gaze on Kathy, who stands rattled, blood trickling from a scratch on her cheek. “And you,” I tell her, “are served with divorce papers as well. Perhaps you can explain your hormone imbalance to the judge.”

Murmurs ripple through the onlookers. Kathy looks at me, tear streaks cutting through her makeup. “Ben,” she whispers, “you’re blowing this out of proportion. I—”

I harden my voice. “My real marriage ended six months ago. I’m no dog for you to feed scraps of love. Get out of my house.”

The party is in utter ruins. Roger stands drenched in shrimp cocktail sauce, his wife’s eyes blazing. Kathy’s father shouts at me, calling this a disgusting stunt, while her mother pleads. The guests murmur about calling the police or running from the madness. My kids stand off to one side, stunned into silence.

I turn my back on all of them. The revenge is complete. Or so I think at that moment, though a part of me blazes with a thirst for more.

The next few months pass like a drawn-out nightmare. Kathy’s desperate pleas to salvage the marriage fall on deaf ears. She tries to concoct excuses—a hormone imbalance that drove her to want more closeness, my alleged lack of attention, blah, blah. Our kids, Jack and Emily, want to stay neutral, but they hate how public I made the humiliation. Now they hardly speak to me or to Kathy. Their mother cheated, but to them, I’m the monster who orchestrated the spectacle. They withdraw from both of us, focusing on college.

Financially, the divorce settlement is exactly as Butch predicted: half of everything. The house goes on the market, the savings are cleaved. I see the bitterness in Kathy’s eyes when she realizes the affair’s public revelation does not spare her from the legal reality of a 50-50 split. But I don’t feel pity. She did this to us, so I tell myself.

Roger’s life unravels too. His wife divorces him, sues him for emotional distress. He tries to keep afloat at the company, but the lawsuit I filed against the CEO puts pressure on the management. Roger eventually resigns to avoid further scandal. Sometimes, that knowledge warms me on sleepless nights. But not enough. My anger evolves into something sharper, uglier.

A few weeks after the final divorce hearing—where the judge just nods to the inevitable—Davy meets me for coffee. “So this is it,” he says. “Fresh start. The baggage is behind you.”

I grip the paper cup tightly. “Not quite.”

He arches an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

I hesitate. Part of me knows how wrong it is, but I can’t let go of the burning desire for an even deeper reckoning. “I want him to pay more,” I finally say, voice trembling with pent-up rage. “He humiliated me. He laughed about it.”

Davy’s expression darkens. “Ben, you’ve already humiliated him. He lost his marriage, his job—”

I cut him off, eyes filled with venom. “Not enough. I want him to feel powerless.”

Davy sighs. “You’re letting hatred poison you.”

“I’m done reasoning,” I snap. “I found a group of guys who’ll handle it. I just need to pay them.”

He stares at me like he doesn’t recognize me. “You’re crossing a line. You realize that, right? This is assault, it’s illegal.”

I grip my cup as if it’s Roger’s throat. “I don’t care.”

Without waiting for his response, I stand and walk away.

Arranging that “favor” is easier than I thought. Money opens doors. The group I contact—small-time ex-cons, more or less a street gang with a reputation for intimidation—accepts the job without blinking. We meet on a deserted block of warehouses, late at night. I hand them a thick envelope of cash, still feeling the heat of my own heartbeat in my ears.

“You do this right, no permanent damage,” I say. “I just want him scared, humiliated.”

One of them flicks through the bills casually. “We’ll handle it. Don’t worry.”

A few nights later, I get the call while pacing in my half-empty condo. The leader of the gang—Damon, a big guy with a scar over his left eyebrow—speaks in a low drawl. “We got eyes on your target, man. Following him now.”

My heart drums. “Do it.”

I sit in silence, phone pressed to my ear, listening to the faint background of roaring engines. Then the call cuts off. I can’t believe how far I’ve sunk, but it feels unstoppable.

Thirty minutes crawl by. Then my phone buzzes, and Damon’s voice returns. “We cornered him. He got out of a friend’s house, hopped in his car. We blocked him on a side road. No police around. Gave him the lesson you paid for.”

I press for details, my mouth dry. “Tell me what happened.”

Damon gives me a rundown: They forced him to pull over on a desolate stretch, headlights forming a ring around Roger’s car. “He was stuttering and panicking,” Damon reports with a slight chuckle. “We dragged him out. Slapped him around a bit. Poured that green paint you wanted all over him. Ruined his fancy ride too. Cut his tires. Smashed headlights. It was real messy.”

My skin tingles with a grim satisfaction. “Good,” I manage.

Damon says, “We got it on video, if you want proof we did the job.”

“Send it,” I reply hollowly.

True to his word, a clip arrives in my inbox. I watch it in the dark: Roger pinned against his own car, face twisted in terror, green paint dripping onto his hair, staining his shirt. One of the guys slaps him repeatedly, while another laughs. Another stabs a knife into his tires with quick downward thrusts. Roger’s car lurches as the wheels deflate, the body sagging. He tries to shield his face, cowering and whimpering. Finally, they yank him away from the vehicle, letting him fall to the ground. Paint-splattered, humiliated. They jump back into their SUV and peel out, leaving him there.

I click off the video with a trembling hand. My stomach churns. This is the retribution I wanted, and yet there’s a sick feeling in the pit of my gut. For a long moment, I stare at the dark screen.

I don’t know how I sleep that night. When I wake up, the memory of the video weighs on me. I get up, walk to the bathroom, and look at myself in the mirror. There’s a haunted look in my eyes. I think, so this is who I am now. A man who orchestrates brutality for vengeance.

I stand there with the fluorescent bathroom lights flickering. I rub my jaw, which feels stiff, as if I’ve been clenching it all night. My entire life has unraveled: the marriage, the job security, the illusions of love and trust. And I’ve done my best to destroy everything around me too. Is this victory or just mutual annihilation?

The fallout hits the following day. I see local news mention an incident of highway vandalism. They name no suspects, no arrests. Roger’s colleagues at the company probably hear a rumor: “He was assaulted by some thugs, left on the roadside.” But as predicted, Roger doesn’t dare point fingers publicly. He has no proof of my involvement. If he tries, he’ll have to explain why I targeted him. That leads to the scandal he’s already drowning in.

Davy calls me. “You did it, didn’t you?” he demands. “I saw on the local news that some driver was attacked, had paint poured on him, car tires slashed. That’s got to be Roger.”

“Stay out of this,” I reply. “It’s done.”

“You’re insane,” he says through clenched teeth. “We had all the revenge lined up in court or in front of family. Did you really have to stoop to assault?”

The line crackles with tension. I can’t form a response. Finally, Davy sighs. “I told you not to do anything stupid. Just remember: If he comes after you, I won’t lie for you. You’re on your own.”

“I know,” I say. Then I hang up.

In the months that follow, the consequences gather like storm clouds. Kathy moves in with her parents, eventually starting therapy. Roger’s rumored to be in hiding somewhere out of state, nursed by some friend, rarely showing his face in public. My kids want nothing to do with me. They are outraged I took the confrontation so far and blame me for stooping lower than even Kathy did. My daughter Emily calls me once, tears in her voice, begging to know why I had to ruin everything so dramatically. I can’t explain it to her. I can’t explain it to myself.

Jack sends me a text: “You went too far, Dad. Mom screwed up, but you became a monster.” After that, I hear little from him. If it was possible to hold onto any notion of being in the right, the look in my kids’ eyes shatters it.

The legal side ends with me losing half my assets in the divorce. Even though we displayed Kathy’s wrongdoing, the judge follows the standard lines: a 50-50 property split. The only difference is that my lawsuit rattled the CEO’s cage enough for him to quietly settle out of court. He offers me a million dollars to drop the moral-turpitude claim I filed against their company, which threatened to blow up into a massive PR disaster. I accept. The hush money feels tainted in my hands, a stark testament to how twisted everything has become. But I keep it anyway, telling myself it’s part of the price they all pay.

Three years pass. I find myself the owner of a small farmhouse in a quiet county. I bought it with a chunk of that hush money. The city’s too full of memories, too filled with people who whisper behind my back about how I destroyed my marriage and a man named Roger Smith.

The farmhouse is humble—white paint peeling at the edges, a wraparound porch with a squeaky swing, a few acres out back that slope down to a creek. I fill my days with chores: feeding the chickens, fixing fences, mowing the fields. I bought two German Shepherds, Max and Duke, who follow me everywhere. They’re loyal in a way I cling to desperately, hungry for something unwavering in my life.