My wife cheated on me during quarantine. I feel that I have to give a bit of context leading up to the cheating. If not for you, then for me.

I know, in theory, every story has two sides... but living through it? That’s a whole different thing.

Let’s rewind. I have a daughter Flora, she’s fourteen now, from a previous marriage that fell apart in the worst way. It wasn't just messy; it was toxic. Her biological mom wasn’t stable, and I knew I had to protect my daughter — emotionally and physically. The court agreed and gave me full custody. A few weeks later, her mom disappeared. Moved from Texas to somewhere in Europe and basically abandoned her.

Even though my daughter was only eight and both of us were wrecked, I kept trying — calls, video chats, anything. She just faded. Not total silence like with her two older sons — they haven’t heard from her in over a decade — but close.

Life had to keep going. It took me about three years — rebuilding brick by brick — before I met Linda.

We met in a Target. Flora had just turned eleven, and we were in the awkward, confusing section with all the training bras. She was embarrassed, didn’t want me anywhere near that aisle. I stood back, useless.

That’s when Linda stepped in. She was wearing a red hoodie, yoga pants, no makeup, just... confident.

“You guys look like you’re drowning,” she said with a smile.

Flora looked up at her, half-horrified, half-relieved. “He’s my dad,” she whispered like it explained everything.

“I figured,” Linda laughed gently. “Mind if I help?”

I blinked. “Please. I have no idea what I’m doing.”

Linda crouched beside Flora, held up a few, and smiled. “They’re just fabric. Not that scary.”

Flora giggled — first time all day.

After a few minutes, she picked a couple out, and Flora turned to me with a smile I hadn’t seen since before the chaos.

As we walked out of the aisle, I looked at Linda and said, “Thank you. Seriously.”

She shrugged. “You looked like you needed a lifeline.”

I laughed. “Yeah, I was definitely drowning. I’m Sam, by the way.”

“Linda.”

That was it. Simple. Unplanned.

And somewhere between gratitude and hope, I convinced myself she might be that person.

At first, Linda seemed amazing. Strong, smart, driven. I thought maybe she could be the kind of positive female role model my daughter never really had. That was something missing, and it mattered to me.

We got married two years later.

I’ve always had this thing — maybe it’s a flaw — where I try to see the best in people. Sometimes that means I ignore the red flags, because honestly, I know I’ve got my own.

I thought I saw the real her — that hardworking, no-nonsense woman she seemed to be — and I fell for it. Big time. And I’ll be honest: she *is* the hardest-working person I’ve ever met. Like, nonstop. Almost to the point of obsession.

She worked as a sales manager at a large company.

Blending the family wasn’t smooth. Not even close. Despite of my wishes, there was tension between Linda and Flora. Linda pushed too hard, and Flora was too stubborn.

Around the time things got serious with Linda, Flora’s mom vanished even more — no support, no calls. Flora was heartbroken, acting out, shutting down.

And I was stuck right in the middle — trying to comfort a kid who couldn’t understand why her mom had disappeared, and also trying to build something stable with a woman who had no patience for any of it.

“She’s manipulating you,” Linda would say.  
“No, she’s hurting,” I’d try to explain.  
“She needs structure. You’re too soft.”  
Sometimes it was, “You let her get away with everything.”  
Always in that tone — like she knew better.

The next few years piled on the pressure. And then — despite of everything — we had a son Danny.

We didn’t plan him as a fix, but holding him felt like hope. For a while, we were a team. Late nights, passing him back and forth half-asleep. I’d heat up bottles while Linda rocked him in the living room. We'd sit in the kitchen together, just watching him scrunch his face when he sneezed.

Flora, to her credit, tried. She’d bring him a blanket, hand him toys without being asked.

Those first few months, we were holding it together. Barely, but still — it felt like a family.

Then everything started piling on again.

My stepmother — the only real mother I ever had — lost her fight with lung cancer. Before we could even catch our breath, my dad got diagnosed with emphysema. Then he lost his house.

I brought it up one night after the baby finally went down. I was leaning on the counter, watching Linda rinse a bottle at the sink.

“I think my dad has to move in,” I said.

She shut the water off. Stood there a second.

“No,” she said.

I looked at her. “Linda, come on. He’s got nowhere to go.”

“So we’re just a shelter now?” She finally turned, arms crossed. “We’ve got a screaming baby, a pissed-off teenager, and you want to add your sick father to the mix?”

“I’m not letting him die alone.”

“You already decided, didn’t you?”

She gave a short laugh — not amused, just bitter. “Of course you did.”

“He’s my father, Linda.”

“And I’m your wife.”

She walked out of the kitchen without another word.

But two days later, she was helping me clear out the guest room.

She didn’t bring it up again, but she didn’t talk much either. Not to me. Not really.

I was stuck in the middle, constantly. Between Linda and Flora. Between Linda and my dad. Like I was living between two slow, never-ending wars.

I started gaining weight. Anger and resentment kept building, boiling inside me. And Linda only added to the pressure: “Control your daughter,” or “Your father’s being disrespectful in my house.”

Sometimes I yelled at Flora. A lot. Got in her face. It got bad.

So then Linda gave birth to our second son. Intimacy was rare. Maybe thirty times in three years, and even then it felt more like something we had to do than something we wanted to. She’d mention my weight gain, or say she wasn’t comfortable because of stuff from her past. And I accepted it. What else could I do?

We started marriage counseling. Both of us did individual therapy too. Right before Christmas 2019, things were still rough, but I really felt like the therapy was helping me.

Then came the flu apocalypse — Christmas 2019.

It started with our youngest boy. We ended up in the ER right before Christmas Eve. He was admitted and didn’t get discharged until almost midnight on Christmas Day.

Then Linda got it. Then I got it — while sleeping on that godawful hospital couch that feels like it was designed to break spines.

Then my dad died from complications.

And just to make the whole thing complete, Linda’s mom was visiting. And yeah — she got sick too.

Happy holidays.

I was stuck at the hospital with our sick toddler, sleeping upright, telling Linda to rest.  
She didn’t. Instead, cold as ever:

“I just can’t rely on you,” her voice had that familiar edge —cold and disappointed, like always. “Someone has to be the responsible one.”

When we came back home-totally exhausted-I asked.

“Why would you say that? I was there. Right there with him the whole time.”

She just waved me off. “Please. You check out whenever things get hard.”

The pressure, the flu, the hospital nights, the baby crying, her voice — that flat, cutting tone — it all blew. There was a spare car seat by my feet, and I snapped. I grabbed it and launched it across the room. Not at her — never at her — but I needed to do something. I needed it out of my hands.

I didn’t see her mother lying on the couch behind me until after it landed — hard, way too close. Didn’t hit her, but close enough to make everyone freeze.

Of course, this gave my mother-in-law ammunition.

“You need meds!” she screamed at me. “You’ve got anger issues!”

Linda just stood there. Said nothing. Let her mom go off on me like I was some wild animal. No support. No backup. Nothing.

I understood that needed to get control of my anger.

For the next seven months — right up until the pandemic hit — I really put in the work. I dug deep. Turns out my childhood wasn’t just rough — it was a mess. I started remembering things that happened when I was a kid. Inappropriate stuff from people who were supposed to protect me. People in my own family, neighbors, even strangers. There were also the beatings — from babysitters, and, yeah... even my mom.

Suddenly the anger I’d carried for so long actually made sense. And that messed me up — but it also freed me.

The outbursts? They almost stopped. I kept my cool. I thought before I reacted.

I was trying to be the dad I’d always wanted to be… the husband I thought she still deserved, even after everything.

I told Linda. All of it. Shared every painful detail. I was proud of how far I’d come, hoping it’d bring us closer.

I held onto the tiny signs — a touch on the shoulder, a shared joke, an okay night. I even started writing again. Not just journaling — real stuff. About my progress, about everything I’d survived and learned. I wanted to help people.

And I really thought we were gonna be okay.

Then came quarantine. Both of us working from home, kids bouncing off the walls, no real escape. I thought the forced closeness might help us reconnect. But the tension just kept rising.

Over the next couple months, Linda was just… gone. Four, five nights a week. Said she was working out with her friend — the one from daycare. Or out getting drinks with coworkers.

She got weird with her phone — always keeping it tilted away, shutting things down the second I walked in. All the usual red flags.

The way we talked changed too. No softness, no warmth. Just these careful, clipped answers.

At first, I told myself not to jump to conclusions. But healthy suspicion slowly turned into something heavier. Something was seriously wrong.

It was a week before our anniversary.

She said she had dinner plans with Greg — a coworker we both knew. Seemed normal enough. I didn’t love it, but I let it go.

Around 7 PM, she came over, kissed me goodbye. She looked perfect. Hair done, makeup sharp, outfit like she was headed to something way fancier than burgers and drinks.

“Love you,” she said. The kiss lingered a second longer than usual.

By 9 PM, she still wasn’t home. That’s when the itch started.

10 PM came and went. At 10:30, I finally got a text:

“Hey! Dinner ran late. Going to shoot some pool with Greg at “Miller’s Tap”. Love you!”

Too many emojis. Too casual. Too fake. That wasn’t her voice.

I texted back: “Okay, be safe. Getting late.”

No reply. I called. Straight to voicemail.

Called again. Same.

By 12:30, I was pacing the house. The boys were asleep. The only sound was the clock in the hallway ticking louder than it had any right to.

I told myself it could be anything. Maybe she lost service. Maybe the battery died. Maybe.

I stopped guessing. Opened her Google account — the one we both had access to for family tracking. Clicked the location.

Ping.

She wasn’t at a bar. She was 40 miles away. In some random residential neighborhood I’d never heard of.

And right then, everything went quiet in my head. Just that one dot on the map — sitting still in a place she had no reason to be.

I grabbed my keys, didn’t even think twice. Got in the car.

The drive was a blur. Forty miles, middle of the night, nothing on the road but headlights and silence. I was driving straight into whatever truth was waiting.

I pulled into the neighborhood around 1 AM. Quiet street. Cookie-cutter houses.

Then I saw it. Her car.

Parked out front of some basic-looking two-story place.

She was inside.

And whatever I thought I believed about our marriage — about progress, about healing — it died right there at the curb.

Just then, my phone buzzed. It was Flora.

“Dad? Where are you?”

“Looking for Mom,” I texted back. Kept it short. “Worried. She’s not answering.”

Her replies came fast, way too fast.

“She’s fine, Dad. Probably just lost track of time.”

Then another.

“She’s probably at her friend Sarah’s house, you know how they talk!”

Lie after lie. The more she tried to calm me, the more obvious it became — she already knew. She was covering for her.

My wife hadn’t just lied to me. She’d dragged our daughter into it. Trained her. Rehearsed it. A backup alibi, delivered through our child.

I needed the truth. Now. So I pushed.

“This isn’t like her, honey,” I wrote, letting just enough panic bleed in. “Maybe something happened. Car trouble? Maybe I should call the police, report her missing?”

I hated doing it. Manipulating her fear like that. But I needed the wall to crack.

It worked. She went quiet. Then:

“Dad NO! Don’t call the cops! She’s okay. She’s… she’s with a guy. From that app.”

A second later — the address.

The same exact address I was parked in front of.

She’d coached her. They’d planned for this moment. In case Dad found out. In case he started asking questions. Say Sarah. Say anything but the truth.

I sat there, phone still in my hand, feeling the full weight of it. It was betrayal, top to bottom. Coordinated. Clean. Like I didn’t exist.

I got out of the car. The air hit my face sharp and cold. I walked slow circles behind her car. Just breathing. Trying to think. Trying not to break.

It was 2 AM.

Still no movement from the house. Just soft yellow light glowing behind the blinds.

I went out of a car, picked up my baseball bat.

Not to hurt anyone. Just to have it in my hand. Just in case.

I kept pacing, phone still in my hand. Flora’s texts kept coming.

“Dad what r u doing”  
“Are you still there?”  
“Pls come home”

She was scared. Not just of what I might do, but of what I might find.

She was protecting Linda. Feeding her updates. I could feel it in every word.

Then I saw movement.

A shadow in the window. A guy. Shirtless, walking back and forth past the light like he owned the place.

I knocked. Firm, not aggressive. Just loud enough to be heard.

The door cracked open. A skinny guy, late twenties maybe, stepped into the light. His hair was messy, eyes wide and blinking like I’d woken him.

“Yeah?” he said.

“My wife is in your house,” I told him. My voice was steady, even though my pulse was pounding in my ears. “I need to get her.”

He froze for a second, then shook his head too fast.

“Wife? Nah, man. Nobody here like that.”

His eyes dropped to the bat. His posture shifted.

“Whoa, dude. What’s with the bat?”

I didn’t move. “I just need my wife,” I said.

He hesitated. Then exhaled, nervous.

“Look… maybe she’s with my roommate. Back room?” He jerked his head toward the hallway behind him. “You don’t need the bat, man. Seriously.”

He stepped aside, opened the door a little wider, and pointed toward a closed door at the end of the hall.

That was where she was.

**Ten seconds from the truth.**

My boots thudded across cheap laminate, every step louder than it should’ve been. I reached the door, tried the knob.

Locked. Of course.

The final stamp. No more guessing. No more doubt.

The roommate hovered behind me, eyes wide. He saw the shift in my shoulders, the change in my breathing.

“Don’t do it, man,” he whispered, like he could feel what was coming.

**I stepped back and kicked.**

The doorframe splintered, cracked inward. The noise echoed hard off the narrow walls.

And then I saw them.

My wife, tangled in the sheets, without clothes. A man next to her — also undressed — scrambling like he’d just remembered he left the stove on. The room smelled like sweat and cheap perfume. My heart was hammering, but the rest of me was still.

**Time stopped.**

It didn’t feel real for a second. Just a frozen frame from someone else’s disaster. Then it hit — the weight of it, the stink of it, the physical truth of betrayal in real space. Right in front of me.

“What the Heck are you doing here?” I heard myself shout.

She had the audacity to snap back.

“What am I doing here?” she shrieked, clutching the sheet to her chest. “What the heck are YOU doing here?!”

That stopped me cold.

The arrogance. The total disconnect from reality. Like I was the one who needed explaining to.

The guy was already getting out of bed, mumbling something I couldn’t make out, smirking as he walked past me like it was no big deal. No shame at all.

I saw my fingers gripping the bat, knuckles white.

I didn’t swing. Didn’t say a word to him. Just watched him walk away.

And her — she just kept going. “Get out! Get OUT so I can get dressed! You psycho!”

Psycho. Like I had invaded her privacy.

I couldn’t feel my face. Just that cold burn running through my chest.

“Fine,” I said, voice flat. “Get dressed. Now.”

And I backed into the hallway, bat still in my hand, the only solid thing left to hold onto.

I waited on the porch. Just stood there, staring out at the quiet street, trying to get air in my lungs. The cool night should’ve helped. It didn’t. My stomach was turning, chest tight.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw movement through a side window — the one by the garage.

The guy walked in first. Still half-dressed, like this was just a normal night for him.

Then, a second later, she followed. Fully clothed now. Calm. Composed.

She didn’t come out to talk to me. Didn’t rush outside in shame or panic or even fake remorse.

No. She walked straight to him. Put her arms around him. Hugged him.

And said something — I couldn’t hear the words, but I saw her mouth move. I saw the way her hands stayed on him a little too long. I saw the apology written all over her face.

To him. For me. Like I was the problem. Like I had ruined their little moment.

And that was it.

I snapped.

I charged the door. “Are you kidding me?! Get OUT here!”

A minute later, she came out, walking stiff, arms crossed, like she had been wronged.

The walk back to our cars felt like walking across a minefield. Every step heavy, electric. We didn’t speak. She just looked at me like I was filth. Cold fury, like I’d embarrassed her.

This was the woman who had kissed me goodbye. Told she loved me. This was the mother of my children. The woman I’d bled for, changed for, built a whole life around.

And she looked at me like I was nothing. Just dirt under her shoes.

The forty-minute drive home felt endless.

I didn’t turn on music. Just gripped the wheel and stared straight ahead, mile after mile, my thoughts spinning out like loose wires. Confusion, grief, rage — all slamming into me in waves, over and over.

When I pulled into the driveway, her car showed up right behind me.

And there was Flora. Tear-streaked. Pale. But standing straight. Stubborn. She wouldn’t look at me.

It was nearly 3 AM.

I turned to Linda — tried to keep my voice even, calm, controlled.

“We need to talk about this.”

She barely glanced at me. “I’m exhausted. I have to be online for work in four hours. We can talk later.”

Later. Like this was some scheduling conflict. Like I hadn’t just caught her in bed with another man.

That’s when Flora hit me with the second blow.

“I want to live with mom. I don’t want anything to do with you anymore.”

Just like that. No emotion. No hesitation. Just a clean break.

And I felt it — something inside me gave out. Breathing hurt. The sky tilted. My knees damn near buckled.

We walked in without saying a word. Linda went straight upstairs to the bedroom. I headed to the kitchen for a glass of water, trying to steady myself after the double betrayal I’d just taken. Then I walked into the living room — Flora was sitting on the couch, scrolling through her phone.

After a while, I asked, “Do you hate me?”

She kept scrolling. Then: “I don’t know.”

“Okay,” I said. “Fair… I’m not gonna yell. I just want the truth, kiddo. Whatever it is.”

Flora looked away. Her hands were tight around her phone.

“She told me to record you,” she said after a long pause.

“When?”

“Every time you lost your temper and yelled at me. She said if you freaked out, it’d help her in court.”

I nodded slowly. “Did you?”

“Yeah. I sent it to her.”

God.

“What else?”

“She said you were unstable. And showed me the texts from the guy she was cheating with.”

“Really?” I couldn’t believe.

“Yeah.” Her voice was barely a whisper now. “She said he made her feel alive again. That he understood her. Said you never really did.”

Then she added, almost like she hated herself for saying it: “She paid me.”

That made me turn. “What?”

“For stuff,” she said. “Talking to you. Hugging you. Saying goodnight.”

I just stared.

“She gave me… fifty bucks if I started a conversation. Sixty if I gave you a kiss on the cheek before school. A hundred if I made it through a weekend without complaining.”

It hit me harder than any of the rest. My chest physically ached.

“She turned you into an actor,” I said. “She bought you to play my daughter.”

Flora’s voice became cold. “We deserve to better life. Without you.”

“It’s not your thoughts... but her.”

She got up from the couch. "It doesn't matter. I want to live with her, and I don't want you in our life."  
Then she walked away, and I just stood there — alone, in the middle of a house that suddenly didn’t feel like mine anymore.

I sat in the kitchen all night. At 6 a.m., Linda came downstairs for coffee. Dark circles under her eyes.

“I was going to adopt Flora,” she said casually, like we were talking about groceries. “Finalize it. Make it official.”

“You were planning to adopt my daughter and then leave me?”

She didn’t hesitate. “That was the plan.”

I stared at her. “You’re serious.”

“Yes. Why wouldn’t I be? She needed stability. You were unraveling. And I—”

“You were cheating on me!”

She didn’t even flinch. “You lost Flora long before that.”

“No,” I said, voice shaking now. “You took her. You told her to record me.”

“I told her to protect herself,” she said coolly. “You get scary when you're panicked.”

I took a step back. “You were never planning to stay. You were planning your exit for years.”

“I was surviving,” she snapped. “Living with you felt like drowning in emotional noise. So yeah, I planned an escape. And I planned to take the one person in this house who still mattered to me.”

I looked at her. Really looked. “No shame,” I said. “None at all.”

She shrugged. “I want you to leave. Next time meet in the court”.

And she just walked out. I sat there for another hour, not moving. In that time, I mapped out my next steps. First, I packed my things and moved into a motel. Second, I found a family lawyer.

I found Marla’s office through a friend who went through a brutal divorce a few years back. No website. No fancy branding. Just a plaque on the door and a quiet waiting room.

She didn’t waste time on small talk. Just looked at me across the desk with those sharp, tired eyes and said: “You know this isn’t gonna be easy, right?”

I nodded. “I’m not doing this for revenge. I’m doing it for Flora.”

She leaned back in her chair. “Is Flora your biological daughter?”

“Yes. From my first marriage. I’ve had full custody. Her mother disappeared.”

“And your current wife? What’s her legal tie to the child?”

“None yet. But she’s been pushing to adopt her. She’s been turning Flora against me.”

Marla tilted her head, watching me. “How old is your daughter?”

“Fourteen.”

“Her opinion will carry weight. Especially if your wife plays it right. If she pushes adoption through, then files for divorce… she could make a case for custody. Especially if she paints you as unstable.”

I didn’t respond right away. Just stared at the floor.

“Has there been yelling in the house?”

“Yes.”

“From you?”

“Yes.”

“Any physical violence?”

“No. Never.”

She nodded. “We’ll need to get ahead of that. Counseling records. School reports. Any witnesses who can speak to your parenting.”

“Then I’ll fight. I’ll fight like hell.”

Marla didn’t smile, but her voice softened just slightly.

“Then we’ll start now. Custody evaluations. Family court. We build your case brick by brick.”

She pulled a yellow legal pad toward her and started writing.

And just like that, the war began.

But a week before the final hearing, I got a voice message from Flora.

Her voice was cold. Controlled. Like Linda had written the script and Flora just hit “record.”

“I hate you. You ruined everything. And even if the judge gives you custody, I’ll run away to Mom. I’m not your daughter anymore. You’re nothing.”

I listened to it ten times. Then deleted it. But the sound of it never left.

At the next hearing, I looked Marla in the eye and said:

“I can’t fight anymore. Not against my own kid.”

Custody went to Linda. I got assigned child support. It hurt — financially and emotionally — but I didn’t argue. I found a small apartment, started over, picked up freelance jobs.

Rebuilt from zero.

I kept writing to Flora. And to my sons. Holiday gifts, birthday cards, messages.

No replies. Not even a read receipt.

But I didn’t stop. I couldn’t. They were **my children.**

Two years passed.

Then, one quiet evening, just as I was getting ready for bed, my phone lit up.

From: **Flora!**

“Dad… are you there? Can I come stay? I… I didn’t know. She never told us. She used us. I’m sorry.”

I recalled her immediately: Come to me.

It was past midnight when the headlights pulled into my driveway.

I opened the front door before she even knocked.

She stood there with a duffel bag slung over one shoulder, hoodie zipped up to her chin, hair tied back in a messy bun. Grown up. But also not. Her eyes were red.

She walked past me, quiet.

“You hungry?”  
“No.”  
“Want tea or something?”  
“I just… I don’t know.”

I nodded once and sat down on the couch. After a second, she dropped her bag and sat too — not too close, not too far.

“You look different,” she said finally.  
“So do you.”  
“Skinnier.”  
“Stress diet.”

Her breath hitched.

“Mom started drinking. With that young guy she was seeing — I don’t even remember his name. She lost her job. She was drunk all the time. Now she got pregnant again… different guy. Some personal trainer, I think…”

I didn’t stop her. Flora hesitated.

“She started getting… weird with me.”

“Weird how?”

“Jealous. Like… mean. She said I was trying to 'steal' her boyfriends. Today she told me “Pack your stuff. Get out!”

Flora became to cry: “That’s when I found out…”

And she told me that all the letters, the gifts, the money I’d sent… Linda trashed them. Lied. Told them I didn’t care. That I’d ghosted them.

“She just… used us. To get money from you.”

I couldn’t speak. Not right away.

And for once, it wasn’t because I didn’t know what to say.

It was because after two years of silence, my heart — the part I thought was gone — heard her voice again.

That night I called to Marla Reed once again. I was going to fight for my children.

The courtroom was stuffy and windowless. My attorney, Marla Reed, stood calm and steady. No drama. Just facts. And every fact hit like a hammer.

“Your Honor,” she began, measured and cool, “we’re submitting financial records showing that the child support my client has paid over the last two years was not spent on the children.”

She handed the judge a stack of documents.

“Pages 8 through 13 include account statements from Amazon, Uber, Sephora, and three local gyms. Over 70% of these purchases are unrelated to childcare. Meanwhile, the children lacked basic necessities — including school clothes and medical checkups.”

The judge flipped through a few pages and nodded grimly.

Linda sat across the room, visibly pregnant, shifting in her seat. The tight dress did nothing to hide the way her jaw twitched.

“Your Honor, our first witness is Flora.”

My daughter stood up slowly. Her voice shook at first, but she didn’t break.

“She threw away his letters. Said he didn’t care. Said he’d abandoned us. But she was lying. She kept the money. She brought strange men to the house. One of them tried to… get close to me. I locked myself in the bathroom.”

The silence in the courtroom turned solid.

“You testified that you wanted to retain full custody, Ms. Summers?” the judge asked.

“I’m the only real parent they have!” Linda snapped.

Her voice rose, wild and sharp. She stood abruptly and knocked over a water bottle.

“This man is unstable! And that girl is lying!”

“Clarification,” Marla said coolly. “By ‘that girl,’ you mean the stepdaughter?”

“SHE’S BRAINWASHED!” Linda shouted. “SHE’S JUST TRYING TO HURT ME!”

The judge raised a hand. Linda dropped back into her chair, panting.

Then came the social worker.

“Your Honor, during our inspection of Ms. Summers’ residence, we found multiple health and safety concerns. Dishes left for days, food rotting, clutter in all rooms, alcohol containers in the master bedroom. The children’s bedrooms were disorganized and appeared neglected. The environment was described as emotionally unstable.”

The judge wrote notes without looking up. Then, she asked the final question:

“Any further evidence?”

Marla nodded once.

“Your Honor, we have witness statements from neighbors confirming Ms. Summers’ revolving door of adult male visitors, most of whom stayed overnight. We also have sworn testimony that the children were often left unattended.”

The judge leaned back. After a moment of silence, she gave her ruling:

“Primary custody is granted to the father. Ms. Summers may petition for supervised visitation, pending mental health review and compliance with CPS guidelines. This court finds sufficient evidence that the mother’s environment is currently unfit.”

Linda stared at me. Her expression wasn’t anger anymore — it was disbelief. Like she couldn't believe she'd lost.

The kids were handed over to me.

When I showed up to pick up their clothes, toys, and school stuff from Linda’s place, she screamed at me from the porch.

“You’re a thief,” she snapped. “A manipulative piece of crap. You twisted everything!”

I didn’t even look at her. Walked past with a cardboard box in my hands.

“You think this makes you a hero? Taking them from me?”

I stepped inside. The place looked worse than I remembered. Quiet. Cold. A mess.

She kept barking from the doorway, like she was performing for someone who wasn’t there.

“They’ll hate you one day. You know that, right?”

I didn’t answer. Not a word.

The kids didn’t ask to say goodbye. They didn’t even mention her on the drive home.

Six months later, I heard through someone that Linda had given birth. A baby girl, I think.

Child Protective Services took the infant. Her own mother adopted the child.

Linda? She hit rock bottom. Lives with some new guy now — younger, aimless. I didn’t ask for details. I never told the kids any of it.

They deserve a childhood that feels normal, even if it's built on the ashes of a broken one.