The sweat cooling on my skin felt like a second layer, slick and intimate under the dim bedroom light. Kelly sighed beside me, a sound of pure physical release, her breathing slowly evening out. We'd crossed the finish line together this time, a frantic, desperate climb after I’d already gotten her there twice. For a stretched moment, the world was just the tangle of our limbs, the scent of closeness, and the heavy peace that follows a storm.

Her eyes fluttered open, finding mine in the near-dark. I leaned in, kissing her softly, a gesture that felt almost automatic, ritualistic. Rolling onto my back, I pulled her head onto my shoulder, her damp hair clinging to my skin. As the adrenaline ebbed, replaced by a creeping unease I couldn’t immediately name, my mind drifted back, rewinding the tape of the night, searching for the first tremor that led to this precarious calm.

It had started innocently enough, or so it seemed. Our usual last-Friday-of-the-month ritual with Chuck and Beverly Conrad. Legal Sea Foods first – oysters, chowder, the comfortable rhythm of shared histories and easy complaints about work. Then, Phoenix Landing. The bass thrummed through the floorboards, a physical presence in the crowded room, lights strobing across faces flushed with alcohol and anticipation.

We’d downed the first round fast, a mix of beers and elaborate cocktails. A few obligatory dances followed, swapping partners with the Conrads, laughing maybe a bit too loudly. Back at the high-top table, waiting for the waitress, the vibe in the club shifted. A ripple of whispers, heads turning, phones subtly angling for pictures.

"What's going on?" Beverly craned her neck, her eyes wide.

Then we saw him. James Wilson, the Patriots' shiny new quarterback, golden boy incarnate, striding in with an entourage that radiated importance. They commandeered a VIP section across the room, a magnetic pole pulling the club's attention. Things settled slightly, a low buzz replacing the initial wave, until another entrance caused a second stir. Briana Brown. Local TV host, former Miss Massachusetts, a Miss America finalist. Objectively stunning, with rumors swirling about network offers, bigger markets. Her group settled closer to us, near the DJ booth.

Beverly practically vibrated, her gaze fixed on Wilson. "Good *God*," she breathed, fanning herself dramatically. "He could park his boots under my bed. Tonight. Right now."

"Mine too," Kelly murmured, her eyes glazed with the same star-struck avarice. A knot tightened in my gut.

Chuck shifted beside Beverly, his jaw tight. "Easy there, Bev."

I tried for levity, forcing a grin. "Uh, ladies? Need a reminder about the whole 'married' thing?"

"Oh, relax, Matt," Beverly waved a dismissive hand, already scanning the crowd again. "It's just fantasy."

"Yeah," Kelly added, a sly smile playing on her lips. "And even if it wasn't… just one night? A chance like that? What's the harm?"

My forced smile evaporated. "The harm?" I felt my voice rise, heat prickling my neck. "The harm is it blows up a marriage, Kelly. That's the harm."

Chuck nodded grimly. "She's got a point, Matt. How would you guys feel if it was us drooling over Briana Brown over there?"

Kelly scoffed, a short, sharp sound of disbelief. "Yeah, like *that* would ever happen."

"Why not?" I countered, irritation sharpening my tone. "You think Wilson hitting on you is more likely than Briana talking to us? Chuck and I clean up okay, you know. We're not exactly trolls."

Both women laughed, a shared, slightly condescending sound that grated on my nerves.

"Seriously, Matt?" Beverly leaned forward conspiratorially. "Kelly and I have probably been asked to dance six times already tonight. How many women have hit on you guys? Let me guess… zero?"

"That's because women usually don't ask," I retorted, feeling defensive. "Especially when guys are clearly with their wives."

"Doesn't matter," they chorused, rolling their eyes in near-perfect synchrony.

Okay, fine. Kelly and Beverly *were* hot. Not just 'mom-hot,' genuinely striking. But Chuck and I weren't exactly slouches either. We hit the gym, owned decent clothes, could manage a two-step without causing injury. The conversation limped back towards safer territory – work, the latest stupid reality show – but the undercurrent of tension remained, a low hum beneath the music.

Then Beverly started doing this weird, hyperventilating clap, bouncing in her seat like she was trying to resurrect Tinkerbell. "Oh my god, oh my god, he's coming *over here*!" she hissed, eyes glued over my shoulder.

"Who?" I started to ask, turning.

And there he was. James Wilson, making his way through the tables, pausing for selfies, flashing that million-dollar quarterback smile. He was working the room like a politician, shaking hands, radiating effortless charisma. Finally, he stopped at our table, his gaze sweeping over us before landing on Kelly.

"Excuse me," he said, his voice smooth as bourbon, directing the question ostensibly at me but his eyes locked on my wife. "Would you mind terribly if I asked your lovely wife for a dance?"

He *asked*. Points for feigned politeness, I guess. A spiteful part of me wanted to say, *Yeah, actually, I do mind. Piss off.* But then I saw Kelly. Her head was already nodding, bouncing like a dashboard bobblehead, a delirious grin plastered on her face. Defeated, I gave a curt nod. He didn't even need to verbally ask her; she was already sliding out of her seat, her hand eagerly finding his outstretched one. They moved towards the dance floor, and I watched them go, a bitter taste flooding my mouth.

I had to admit, they looked good together. Him tall and athletic, her radiant and clearly thrilled. But when the DJ switched to a slow jam, Ed Sheeran crooning something about perfection, and she melted into Wilson's arms, pressing herself against him, her head tilting back to look up at him… something hot and ugly coiled in my stomach. Pure, unadulterated rage.

I was halfway out of my seat, ready to do something monumentally stupid, when a warm hand landed gently on my shoulder.

"May I have this dance?" a melodic voice inquired.

I spun around, probably looking like a slack-jawed idiot, straight into the most startlingly blue eyes I'd ever seen. Briana Brown. Standing right there. Smiling at *me*.

It felt surreal, like I’d slipped into an alternate timeline. Numbly, I stood, letting her lead me towards the dance floor. The same slow song was playing. She wrapped her arms around my neck as we started to move, her body fitting against mine with an easy confidence. Her breasts, perfect and firm beneath the thin fabric of her top, pressed against my chest. Instinctively, I placed my hands on her waist, cautious. She took my hands, guiding them lower, onto the curve of her back, dangerously close to her phenomenal ass. Okay then.

"Sorry," I mumbled, feeling foolishly star-struck and utterly confused. "Not to sound ungrateful, but… why me? There have got to be ten guys here more in your league."

Her laugh was low and musical, genuine amusement sparkling in those incredible eyes. "I saw what happened," she said softly, nodding towards where Kelly was still fused to Wilson. She must have seen the thundercloud form on my face. "Your wife and the quarterback. I understand how you're feeling. I've seen it before." Her expression sobered. "It rarely ends well, I'm afraid."

"What do you mean?"

"Almost every weekend," she explained, her voice barely audible over the music. "A guy like him, in a place like this. He picks someone. And more often than not, the woman leaves with him. Husband, boyfriend… left standing there, looking like a fool."

The rage I felt towards Kelly was momentarily eclipsed by a cold dread. "You think she'll…?"

"Sometimes," Briana conceded, "they come back to their senses. Go home with the one they came with. I was hoping maybe… maybe seeing you dance with someone else might nudge her towards the right decision."

"But why?" I asked, bewildered. "Why do *you* care? Who are we to you?"

A shadow flickered across her face. She looked away for a beat, and I could have sworn I saw the brief glint of a tear before she blinked it away. "Long story," she murmured. "Maybe I'll tell you sometime. Depends how the night goes." She offered a small smile. "Briana, by the way."

"I know," I managed. "I recognized you. Matt. Matt Smythe."

She raised an eyebrow. "Smythe? With a 'Y' and an 'E'?"

I grimaced. "Yeah. Sounds pretentious as hell, right? Parents are originally from England. Wanted to keep a 'connection'," I finished, making air quotes.

The song ended. I mumbled thanks, escorted her back towards her table, feeling dazed, and retreated to mine.

Kelly was already back, her eyes spitting venom. "Well, well. The conquering hero returns," she sneered, her voice dripping sarcasm. "Enjoy your little spin with Miss Local News?"

"Why is me dancing with Briana any worse than you grinding on Wilson?" I shot back, my own anger flaring.

"Oh, it's *Briana* now, is it?" Her lip curled. "Getting cozy fast. I bet you called him Mr. Wilson, didn't you?" She had the grace to blush slightly at that, a faint pink staining her cheeks.

"As you say," I muttered, sliding back into my seat.

We rejoined the conversation with Chuck and Beverly, but the air was thick enough to choke on. Every shared glance felt loaded, every laugh forced. About an hour crawled by, fueled by more drinks I barely tasted. Then Kelly announced she needed the restroom. Usually, Beverly would trail her like a pilot fish, but tonight, Bev just nodded.

"Actually," Beverly said, standing up herself, "I need to grab my wrap from the coat check. Getting chilly." She headed towards the club's entrance.

Beverly returned a few minutes later, settling back at the table, looking oddly flushed. But Kelly didn't reappear. Five minutes stretched into ten. Fifteen. The knot in my gut tightened into a fist.

"I'm gonna go check on her," I said, pushing my chair back. Beverly shot me a wide-eyed look, almost fearful, but didn't say anything.

My path to the restrooms led past Briana Brown's table. She saw me coming and stood, intercepting me with a hand gently placed on my chest. The contact sent a jolt through me.

"Please, Briana, I just need to see if Kelly's okay—"

"Matt," she said softly, her eyes full of pity. "I don't think she's in there. Wilson headed towards the back exit around the same time she went to the restroom. Neither of them came back." She gestured towards the restrooms anyway. "Go ahead. Check the men's. I'll check the ladies'. But… I don't think we're going to find them."

She was right. Both restrooms were empty. A sick, heavy certainty settled in my stomach. We walked back to our table. Chuck's eyes widened seeing Briana with me again, but Beverly looked even more panicked than before, avoiding my gaze.

"Beverly," I said, my voice dangerously low. "Kelly seems to be gone. Did she leave? Do you know anything about this?"

Chuck, finally tearing his eyes off Briana, swiveled towards his wife. "Bev?" he prompted, his tone sharp. "What did you do?"

Beverly wrung her hands, her face pale. "I… I got her coat from the check," she stammered. "Met her by the front door. Gave it to her."

"How did you know she needed it?" I demanded, the pieces clicking into place with sickening clarity. "Why did she need her coat, Beverly?"

"The way she looked at me… when she went to the restroom," Beverly mumbled, tears welling up. "She… she needed it to leave. With Wilson."

If I hadn't already been standing, I would have shot out of my chair. "You *helped* her? You thought that was a *good idea*? Why?" My voice cracked with disbelief.

"It's… it's James Wilson!" Beverly defended weakly. "This might be her only chance! A real celebrity! It's once in a lifetime!"

"'A real celebrity'?" The phrase echoed Kelly's earlier words, mocking me.

"Come on, Matt," Beverly tried, attempting a shaky laugh. "It's not *that* big a deal. Besides," she added, glancing pointedly at Briana, "looks like you didn't exactly go home alone either."

I'd almost forgotten Briana was still standing there, a silent observer. "I wouldn't be so sure about that," Briana said quietly, her gaze meeting mine. Then, with surprising force, she grabbed my hand. "Come on, Matt. Let's get out of this place."

She towed me towards the exit, a lifeline in the churning sea of my humiliation and rage. We collected our coats. As I held hers for her, the absurdity of the situation hit me.

"Thanks," I said numbly. "For the… the ego rescue attempt back there. Guess I'll just head home now. To my empty house. Figure out how to un-marry myself."

"Why do you assume it's over?" Briana asked, watching me closely.

"This wasn't just some drunken mistake," I said, bitterness coating every word. "This was… calculated. And Beverly helped her. This is a whole new level of disrespect."

"Let's take your car," Briana said suddenly, a determined glint in her eyes.

"What? Where are we going?"

"Why should Kelly be the only one having a 'once in a lifetime' experience tonight?" She looked at me, not teasing, but with a strange, intense sincerity. A warm, bright smile bloomed on her face.

I stared at her, processing. What the hell did I have to lose now? My marriage was already a smoking crater. "What the hell," I thought, a reckless impulse overriding the pain. I didn't have any better offers.

Numbly, I looped an arm around her waist, mirroring her earlier gesture, and we walked towards the parking garage. We found my car, a sensible sedan that suddenly felt incredibly inadequate.

"Where to, my lady?" I asked, trying for a lightness I didn't feel. She gave me directions to a high-end condo building downtown, the kind with concierge service and skyline views. The garage attendant looked ready to wave me off until he spotted Briana in the passenger seat. His demeanor changed instantly, waving me through with a deferential nod. Briana directed me to a reserved spot near the elevators.

Upstairs, her apartment was stunning. Floor-to-ceiling windows offered a panoramic vista of the glittering city lights. It screamed success, a world away from the suburban life I shared with Kelly. Briana tossed her coat onto a plush armchair, and I awkwardly followed suit.

"Drink?" she offered, heading towards a sleek, modern bar setup.

"Whatever you're having," I mumbled, still feeling slightly shell-shocked.

She poured two generous glasses of crisp white wine, handed one to me, and then patted the spot beside her on a long, low sofa. I sat, the silence stretching between us, punctuated only by the soft strains of jazz drifting from hidden speakers. I sipped the wine, the cold liquid doing little to numb the ache in my chest. What was her angle here? Did she seriously expect… this? Could I?

My mind replayed Kelly melting into Wilson's arms. The smug look on his face. Beverly's betrayal. Kelly's defiant sneer. My marriage vows felt like ashes in my mouth. Kelly had clearly torched hers. Could I? As Beverly had so helpfully pointed out, this *was* a kind of 'once in a lifetime' situation too.

Briana seemed to sense my turmoil, or perhaps just grew impatient. She shifted closer, leaning her head against my shoulder, her arm looping around mine. Her scent, something floral and expensive, filled my senses, a stark contrast to the familiar scent of Kelly I'd woken up with. I just sat there, paralyzed by shock, grief, and a confusing surge of attraction.

She finally broke the deadlock. Standing up, she pulled me gently to my feet. We started to move, a slow, hesitant dance in the middle of her living room, the city lights painting patterns on the floor. This time, there was no hesitation. She took my hands and placed them firmly on the curve of her hips, then slid them lower, onto her ass. Her message was unmistakable.

Resistance felt futile, pointless. A dark, vengeful part of me whispered, *Why not?* Deal with the fallout later.

This time, I made the move. Tilting her chin up, I met her startled gaze and crashed my mouth down onto hers. It wasn't gentle. It was fueled by anger, humiliation, and a desperate need to feel something other than pain. She responded instantly, her arms tightening around my neck, kissing me back with equal intensity. We stood locked together, kissing deeply, breathlessly, until we finally pulled apart, chests heaving. Her face was flushed, her blue eyes blazing.

Without a word, she took my hand and led me towards the bedroom. Soft music followed us. She sat me on the edge of the king-sized bed and began unbuttoning her blouse. My fingers fumbled with my own shirt buttons, my mind a chaotic whirl. Her blouse fell open, revealing delicate lingerie, then came off completely. Perfect breasts, taut nipples. She moved slowly, deliberately, her eyes never leaving mine, stripping away her remaining clothes with a practiced, seductive grace that simultaneously inflamed and intimidated me.

Then she was kneeling before me, helping me shed my own clothes, her fingers brushing against my skin, sending shivers down my spine. Her hands found me, warm and skilled, and I knew, with a sinking feeling, that I wouldn't last. The pressure built instantly, overwhelmingly.

"Briana… I think… I'm gonna…" I gasped out.

She just smiled, a knowing, predatory little smile, and increased the pressure. A second later, it was over. A raw, guttural groan escaped me as release shuddered through my body. I slumped forward, grabbing her head, pulling her up for another bruising kiss.

"Okay," she whispered against my lips when we finally broke for air, her voice husky. "My turn."

She pushed me back onto the bed. Whatever else I was, I knew how to please a woman. Kelly had taught me that much, ironically. Tonight, fueled by a toxic cocktail of rage and despair, I poured every bit of knowledge, every trick, into worshipping Briana's body. Soon, she was writhing beneath my touch, her moans echoing in the quiet room.

Afterward, we lay tangled together, the air thick with the scent of closeness. It wasn't lovemaking. It was something else – raw, desperate, maybe even mutually exploitative. Was it better than with Kelly? It was… different. Sharper. More dangerous.

"You said," I began, my voice raspy, needing to understand the 'why' of her, "you'd tell me why you helped me. Why you cared."

She turned slightly away, and again, I saw the unmistakable shimmer of tears in her eyes. "Five years ago," she began, her voice low and strained. "I was married. To a good guy. Solid. Like you seem to be. He believed in me. Supported my career when I was just starting out at a small local station."

She paused, taking a shaky breath. "We were at this industry gala. The station manager, big shot, powerful guy… he asked me to dance. Didn't even glance at my husband. And I… I went. Just like Kelly. Left my husband sitting there, looking small." Her voice cracked. "His name was Charles, but he insisted everyone call him 'Chuck'. Thought it made him sound relatable. He wasn't. He was a user."

"He didn't exactly sweep me off my feet," she continued, bitterness lacing her tone. "But he dropped hints. Big ones. About how he could 'help' my career. And to my everlasting shame… I left with him that night. Didn't even look back at my husband. Someone told me later he tried to put on a brave face, but he was crushed."

She swallowed hard. "I wish I could say the closeness was incredible, or that my career took off. Neither happened. It was… mechanical. Forgettable. He seemed to think just being *with him* should have been enough thrill for me. Meanwhile, rumors about us started flying. He was too high up for the dirt to stick to him, but the station… they let me go. Quietly. With just enough severance to keep me from making noise."

"My career took a hit," she admitted. "I clawed my way back, obviously. But my marriage… that was gone. I heard he remarried. Has kids now. The kids *we* used to talk about having." A single tear finally escaped, tracing a path down her cheek. She didn't bother wiping it away. I instinctively reached out, pulling her closer, my own eyes stinging unexpectedly, thinking about the future Kelly and I had planned, the kids we'd talked about naming. It all felt like a fantasy novel now.

Briana eventually drifted off to sleep, curled against my side. I lay awake for a long time, staring at the ceiling, the city lights casting shifting shadows on the walls, my mind a battlefield of conflicting emotions.

The smell of frying bacon and coffee woke me. I was alone in the massive bed. The clock showed it was late morning. My head throbbed. I stumbled towards the ensuite bathroom, catching my reflection – hollow eyes, stubble, the face of a man whose life had just imploded. In the kitchen, Briana stood at the stove, wearing only a long t-shirt that occasionally offered teasing glimpses of her perfect backside. She glanced over her shoulder, offering a tentative smile.

"Coffee's ready," she said, nodding towards a high-end machine humming in the corner.

I poured myself a mug, the hot liquid scalding my tongue, but the caffeine was desperately needed. She slid a plate loaded with bacon, eggs, and toast in front of me at the sleek breakfast bar. We ate in silence for several minutes, the unspoken question hanging heavy in the air.

"So," I finally broke the silence, pushing the eggs around my plate. "Where… where do we go from here?"

Briana took a slow sip of her coffee, her expression thoughtful. "First," she said carefully, "you and Kelly have to figure out where *you* go. Can your marriage survive last night? Can either of you?"

"And us?" The word felt foreign, absurd.

She gave a small, humorless laugh. "Matt, there *is* no 'us'. Not right now, anyway. We had… a night. Fueled by a lot of complicated emotions. We barely know each other. And until you figure things out with Kelly, you're still married, legally and maybe emotionally."

She leaned forward slightly. "If… *if* things with Kelly are truly over… maybe. Maybe we could see each other. See if there's anything here beyond… well, beyond last night. But I need to be upfront." Her gaze became serious. "My career comes first right now. If a bigger opportunity comes along, I'll likely take it. I might have to move. Could you handle that? A long-distance thing? And my job… it attracts attention. Gossip. Rumors. If we *did* become something, I promise you, it would *only* be gossip. But you'd have to be strong enough to trust me and ignore the noise."

She stood up, walking around the counter to stand in front of me. "Now, go home. Face your wife. See if there's anything left to salvage." She placed her hands on my shoulders, leaned in, and gave me a warm, lingering kiss on the lips. "Here's my card. Call me. Let me know how it goes."

And just like that, she gently steered me towards the door, sending me back out into the harsh daylight to confront the wreckage of my life.

Pulling up to my house felt like arriving at a crime scene. Just as I killed the engine, a sleek black SUV pulled away from the curb – Wilson's car. Kelly was walking up the driveway, her stride defiant, though her eyes looked puffy. She smelled faintly of expensive soap and unfamiliar cologne. We reached the front door simultaneously. My key slid into the lock. It turned. I hadn't changed them. Not yet.

She brushed past me without a word, heading straight for the stairs. I closed the door, the click echoing in the sudden silence.

"Where were *you*?" she demanded, turning on the landing, hands on her hips, projecting accusation as a shield.

The audacity stunned me. *She* was asking *me*? After disappearing with another man? "I was with Briana Brown," I said flatly, the words tasting like poison.

Kelly burst out laughing, a harsh, ugly sound. "Oh, *please*, Matt! As if! You probably crawled into some cheap motel to lick your wounds."

The utter contempt in her voice snapped something inside me. "No. Ask Chuck and Beverly. They saw her ask me to dance. They saw us leave together."

"She probably felt sorry for you!" Kelly shot back, tossing her hair. "Put on a little show so you wouldn't look like such a pathetic loser standing there alone. I bet she ditched you the second you were out of sight!"

This wasn't going anywhere productive. There was no remorse, no apology, only deflection and derision. The hope that maybe, just maybe, we could talk this through, find some way forward, shriveled and died. This wasn't a crack in the foundation; the whole structure was rotten.

Without another word, I turned and walked towards the master bedroom closet. I pulled down a large suitcase, threw it open on the bed, and started yanking my clothes off hangers, stuffing them haphazardly inside.

Kelly watched me, her arms crossed, a smug, disbelieving smirk on her face. She thought I was bluffing. Her expression only began to falter when I zipped the bulging suitcase shut, hefted it off the bed, and walked past her towards the front door.

"Wait," she said, her voice suddenly uncertain. "You're not… you're not actually leaving? Just because I had one little fling?"

"'One little fling'?" I spun around, the suitcase dropping to the floor with a thud. "You humiliate me in front of our friends, you disappear with another man, you have your friend *help* you sneak out, and you call it a 'little fling'? No, Kelly. I'm leaving because of the complete, utter lack of respect. You have none for me. Maybe you never did." I took a deep breath, letting the next words land like blows. "And for the record? I *did* spend the night with Briana. And yeah, it was pretty freaking amazing. I came back here thinking maybe, *maybe* we could deal with our… mutual issues. But I see now that's impossible."

I picked up the suitcase again. "Don't call me. I'll figure out what's next."

I walked out, leaving the front door wide open behind me. I saw her standing there in the entryway, silhouetted against the light, watching me go. I didn't look back. I got in my car, drove around the corner, pulled over to the curb, and finally let the hot tears of rage and betrayal flow.

That night, fueled by cheap motel whiskey and a burning, destructive anger, I drove back to the house. The lights were off. Kelly must have gone to her parents' or Beverly's. I let myself in, the silence amplifying my fury. I went straight to her closet, pulling out armfuls of her clothes – the expensive dresses, the shoes she loved, the lingerie. I gathered photos of us from the walls, swept trinkets off her vanity.

I dragged it all out to the backyard, piling it near the old fire pit. Doused it with lighter fluid. The match flared, and the pile erupted in an angry orange bloom, sending acrid smoke into the night sky. I stood there, watching the flames consume the remnants of our life together, the heat searing my face. Then, I pulled out my phone. Recorded the bonfire, zooming in on a half-burnt photo, on a favorite sweater turning to ash. Sent the video directly to Kelly's number. No message. Just the flames. It felt brutal, ugly, but satisfyingly final.

The next morning, hungover and hollowed out, I called a divorce lawyer.

The confrontation Kelly initiated wasn't long in coming. A few days later, she showed up at the house while I was there packing more essential items. She hammered on the door, screaming my name. I’d anticipated this. I’d already had the locks changed the day after the fire. I opened the door just a crack, the security chain firmly in place.

"Matt! What the hell did you do? Let me in!" she shrieked, her face contorted with fury.

"Did you sleep with him, Kelly?" I asked again, my voice cold, detached.

"That's none of your freaking business!" she spat, trying to shove the door open. "What I do with my body is my choice! Now open this door!"

"Then you don't live here anymore," I stated flatly. I pulled a thick envelope from my back pocket – the divorce papers I’d had rushed. I pushed them through the crack in the door. "You've been served."

Her eyes widened in shock, then narrowed in pure rage. She snatched the envelope, ripped it open, glanced at the documents, and then launched herself at the door, clawing at the small opening, trying to reach me. "You bastard! You absolute bastard!"

I slammed the door shut, the deadbolt clicking firmly into place. Her fists hammered against the solid wood.

"You think you're winning?" she screamed, her voice muffled but still venomous. "You loser! You think this hurts me? Fine! Go! I'm leaving you for someone better anyway! Someone rich! Someone who isn't a pathetic little man like you! You'll be sorry! You'll regret this forever!"

I leaned my forehead against the cool wood of the door, listening to her rage slowly fade as she presumably stormed off. Regret? Maybe. But relief washed over me in a surprisingly powerful wave. It was done.

Life diverged sharply after that. Kelly, true to her word, started dating James Wilson publicly. Glossy photos appeared online – parties, charity events, her clinging possessively to his arm. It lasted maybe six months. Then the rumors started, followed by confirmation: Wilson was seen with other women, lots of them. Their breakup was messy and public. Kelly seemed to vanish from the scene after that.

I poured my energy, my pain, my anger, into writing. The novel I'd been tinkering with for years suddenly had focus, intensity. Briana and I started talking more regularly. Tentative calls became longer conversations. She'd read early drafts of my book, offering insightful critiques wrapped in encouragement. She never pushed, never pried about Kelly, just offered quiet support. When I finished the manuscript, she was the one who had a contact at a publishing house. She swore she just passed it along, but I suspected she'd championed it.

Battles Publishing bought it. The advance wasn't huge, but it was validation. The book, a thinly veiled fictionalization of betrayal and rediscovery, struck a chord. It sold surprisingly well. Then it sold *really* well. My editor wanted another. The second book did even better. Suddenly, I wasn't just Matt Smythe, the guy whose wife left him for a quarterback; I was Matt Smythe, the bestselling author.

Briana's career took off too. Chicago first, then New York for a national morning show gig. Our relationship deepened alongside our successes. We navigated the distance, the pressures of her visibility and my burgeoning fame. We learned to trust, to communicate. When the movie rights for my first book sold for a staggering sum, I quit my day job. I proposed to Briana in her New York apartment, not with a ring in a champagne glass, but with plane tickets and a lease agreement for a place together in the city.

We married quietly. My son Danny, growing into a thoughtful young man despite the divorce drama, was my best man. Life wasn't perfect – juggling careers, my weekends with Danny, the occasional pang of paparazzi intrusion – but it was full, and real, and happy. Briana got pregnant. Holding our baby daughter, Brittany, felt like rewriting my own history, healing a wound I hadn’t known was still so deep.

Years passed. Brittany was a toddler, a whirlwind of giggles and scraped knees. We were back in Boston for a visit, strolling through the high-end outdoor mall near Chestnut Hill on a crisp autumn afternoon. Briana pushed Brittany’s stroller, laughing at something I’d said.

And then I saw her.

Kelly.

She was sitting on a bench near a fountain, clutching a paper bag that looked suspiciously like it held a bottle. The transformation was shocking. Her once-radiant hair was lank and dull. Her clothes were worn, ill-fitting. Her face was puffy, etched with lines that weren't just from age; they spoke of hardship, of alcohol. She looked gaunt and brittle, a ghost of the woman I’d married.

Our eyes met. Recognition flickered, followed by a wave of raw, complex emotion – shock, shame, maybe resentment. She saw Briana. She saw the stroller. She saw Brittany’s bright, curious face.

Kelly scrambled to her feet, stumbling slightly. She lurched towards us, her eyes wild, fixed on me.

"Matt?" Her voice was a harsh croak. "Matt… oh God, Matt."

She stopped a few feet away, her gaze devouring our little family unit. Then, her face crumpled. She sank to her knees on the pristine brick walkway, oblivious to the shoppers stepping around her.

"Matt, please," she sobbed, reaching a trembling hand towards me. "Please, take me back. I messed up. I messed up so bad. I see that now." Tears streamed down her ravaged face. "He cheated, Matt. They all did. I got… I got nothing left. I live in this… this crappy trailer out past Revere. Drinking too much." Her voice dropped to a desperate whisper. "Sometimes I buy food from the carts… that’s all I can afford. Please, Matt. I still love you. Help me."

Shock rendered me momentarily speechless. Briana stepped forward slightly, a protective arm instinctively going around my waist, her expression a mixture of pity and wary firmness. Brittany started to fuss in the stroller, sensing the tension.

I found my voice, shaky but resolute. "Kelly…" I knelt down, keeping a small distance. "Kelly, I… I'm sorry things turned out this way for you. Truly sorry. But… that life, *our* life… it's over. It's been over for a long time."

Her weeping intensified, harsh, ragged sobs. "But… but I made a mistake! One mistake!"

"It wasn't just one mistake, Kelly," I said softly, sadly. "It was everything that came after. Everything you said. Everything you did." I stood up, gently pulling Briana back. "I can't help you. Not like that. We have a different life now."

We walked away, leaving her kneeling there on the pavement, her desolate cries following us until we turned a corner. The encounter cast a long shadow over the rest of the day, a grim reminder of how different paths can diverge.

Life moved on. Hollywood came calling about my first book, turning it into a critically acclaimed, commercially successful film. More books followed. More success. More quiet, happy years with Briana and Brittany, punctuated by Danny’s college visits.

Then, one Tuesday afternoon, my phone rang. Caller ID showed an unknown number, but something made me answer.

"Matthew?" The voice was thin, reedy, instantly recognizable. Kelly's mother.

"Yes, Elaine?"

A choked sob came through the line. "Matthew… it's Kelly." Another sob. "They… they found her this morning. In her trailer." Her voice broke completely. "She… she wasn't breathing, Matthew. The paramedics… they said…"

I stood frozen in my sunlit office, the view of Central Park suddenly meaningless. A cold weight settled in my chest.

"Elaine, I… I'm so sorry," I managed, the words feeling inadequate.

"We need… we need help, Matthew," she pleaded, her voice thick with tears and something else… resentment? "For the… the funeral. She didn't have anything. No insurance, nothing saved. Please, Matthew. You're successful now. We saw the movie…"

Then her tone shifted, grief twisting into raw accusation. "This is your fault, you know!" she suddenly shrieked, the veneer of politeness cracking. "You threw her out! That stupid fire… you broke her! She was never the same after you left her! You destroyed her life! This is on *you*!"

I didn't argue. Didn't defend myself. What was the point? I listened silently as she vented her grief and blame, the words washing over me. Finally, her tirade sputtered out, replaced by ragged weeping.

"I'll send money, Elaine," I said quietly. "Whatever you need for the arrangements. Just… let me know where."

She mumbled the details through her tears. I wrote them down.

"Thank you, Matthew," she whispered, sounding utterly defeated. Then, a final, parting shot, "I hope you're happy."

She hung up.

I stood there for a long time, phone still pressed to my ear, the silence deafening. Sadness washed over me, profound and heavy. Sadness for the vibrant woman Kelly had once been, for the life she’d thrown away, for the ugly way it had ended. Maybe Elaine was right. Maybe some of it *was* my fault. The fire… the harsh words… But Kelly had made her choices too. We both had.

Slowly, I lowered the phone. Sat down at my desk. Pulled out my checkbook. And sent the money.