

He Left Me at Forty-Eight—Then Wanted Me Back

Chapter 1

My husband brought his mistress to my forty-eighth birthday dinner before I could light the candles.

My three children already knew.

And not one of them warned me.

The front door slammed hard enough to rattle the glass in the china cabinet.

I looked up from the cake with frosting still on my fingers. Daniel's favorite roast was steaming in the center of the table. Ryan's mashed potatoes sat under foil. Sophie's honey-glazed carrots shone beside Ethan's rolls with too much butter.

I had spent all afternoon making everyone's favorite thing.

Apparently nobody had thought to bring mine.

Respect.

Daniel walked into the dining room with a blonde on his arm.

She could not have been older than twenty-eight. Red dress. Tall heels.

Glossy mouth. One hand looped through my husband's elbow like she already knew where every room in my house was.

Nobody moved.

Ryan stared at the floor.

Sophie looked at me, then away.

Ethan stood near the hall with his backpack still hanging from one shoulder.

That was when I knew.

Before Daniel said anything.

Before the blonde smiled.

My children knew who she was.

I set the cake knife down.

"Daniel."

His expression carried irritation instead of guilt.

"This is Rachel."

Rachel smiled at me.

"Hi, Evelyn."

She said my name sweetly enough to make it cruel.

I looked at Daniel.

"Why is she in my house?"

His jaw tightened.

"Because this is no longer just your house."

Something inside me went silent.

The candles were still unlit.

The grocery-store roses I had bought myself that morning were already beginning to droop.

"You brought your mistress to my birthday dinner."

Rachel shifted. "I didn't want to do this tonight."

Women who do not want to be cruel do not dress for the execution.

Daniel tugged at his cuff.

"We need to stop pretending."

"Pretending?"

My voice rose.

"I cooked this dinner. I set this table. I have spent twenty-five years building this family."

"With someone who makes me happy," he snapped.

The room went still.

I turned toward Ryan.

"You knew?"

His throat moved.

Sophie answered.

"We all knew."

The back of a dining chair caught me before my knees could fail.

"How long?"

Daniel sighed as if I were making a scene at someone else's party.

"Long enough."

"Mom," Ryan said.

"No."

I looked at him.

"Did you lie to me?"

"I stayed out of it."

"There is no staying out of betrayal when silence helps it happen."

His face hardened.

Sophie folded her arms.

"Maybe this is better than dragging things out."

I stared at my daughter.

"Better for who?"

She looked away.

Rachel stepped forward.

"I think everybody deserves honesty."

I turned on her.

"You do not get to lecture me about honesty in my dining room."

Her smile disappeared.

Daniel moved between us.

Not to protect me.

To protect her.

That hurt more than anything Rachel could have said.

"Enough," Daniel said. "I'm filing for divorce."

Clean.

Prepared.

Probably rehearsed somewhere I had once believed he was working late.

I looked at my children.

Ryan's mouth was tight.

Sophie's chin was lifted.

Ethan looked sick.

I waited.

Dad, this is wrong.

Mom, are you okay?

Not like this.

Nothing.

Daniel rubbed his jaw.

"This marriage has been over for years."

"No. Your gratitude has been over for years. Your decency has been over for years. I was still here."

Rachel glanced toward the table.

"You can't force something to work because it used to."

I picked up the cake.

Daniel saw the movement too late.

The plate hit the floor between us.

White frosting exploded across the hardwood and splattered Rachel's red dress.

Sophie gasped.

Ethan jumped.

"Get out," I said.

Daniel stared at me.

"You're being dramatic."

I laughed.

"You bring your mistress into my home on my birthday and I'm dramatic?"

Ryan stepped forward.

"Mom, please calm down."

I wheeled toward him.

"Do not ask me to be calm when all of you stood here and watched this happen."

That put shame on his face.

Only for a second.

Daniel put his hand on Rachel's lower back.

Familiar.

Possessive.

Practiced.

I thought of school lunches and fevers. Of ironing his shirts before dawn. Of stretching groceries when his business was young. Of hosting his clients and remembering which wife drank chardonnay and which investor hated onions.

I had built invisible things until my family decided invisible meant worthless.
"I want you out of my sight."

Daniel shook his head.

"We're staying at the Beau Rivage tonight. My lawyer will contact you."
My lawyer.

Not I'm sorry.

Not we need to talk.

At the doorway, he looked back at the destroyed cake as if it proved something about me.

Then he left with Rachel.

Sophie grabbed her purse.

"Maybe everybody should cool off."

I looked at my daughter.

"Was there ever a moment when you thought about me?"

She could not hold my eyes.

Ryan muttered, "This didn't have to get ugly."

I turned slowly.

"It was ugly before I dropped the cake."

Ethan whispered, "Mom."

I could not comfort him yet.

Not when he had known.

I went into the kitchen and braced both hands on the sink.

Behind me, chairs scraped.

Low voices moved through the room.

Nobody touched me.

Nobody asked whether I was okay.

In the dark window over the sink, my reflection looked like a stranger

standing inside someone else's ruined life.

That was when the truth finally landed.

I had not only been betrayed by my husband.

I had been outnumbered in my own family.