

After I Heard My Stepbrother's Cruel Revenge Plan c 1

I made coffee the way Kayden liked it. Two sugars. No cream. Hot enough to burn.

It was Tuesday night, almost eleven. The penthouse was quiet. My mother and Kayden's father had gone to some charity thing at the Met. I'd said I had a headache. Kayden had said he had work.

I padded down the hall barefoot, holding the mug with both hands. The marble was cold under my feet. I'd done this a hundred times before—brought him coffee when he worked late, sat on the leather couch in his study while he typed, left when he kissed my forehead and told me to get some sleep.

It was a small thing. But I liked the smallness of it. The quiet routine of caring for someone.

His study door was open maybe three inches. Light spilled into the hallway. I heard his voice and stopped.

"She doesn't know." Kayden's voice. Flat. Matter-of-fact.

I should have knocked. Should have called out. Should have turned around.

I didn't.

"Doesn't know what?" Another voice. Daniel Holt. Kayden's college roommate. Wall Street guy with too-white teeth.

"That it was never real."

The mug was hot in my hands. I stood very still.

"Jesus, Kay." Daniel sounded uncomfortable. "You've been doing this for five years."

"Five years is nothing." Kayden's chair creaked. "Her mother destroyed my family. Seduced my father. Broke up the marriage. My mother left because of her."

I knew this story. Kayden had told me once, late at night, his voice raw in the dark. I'd held him. Told him I was sorry. Promised him I wasn't like that.

"So you're...what?" Daniel asked. "Dating the daughter as some kind of revenge?"

"She's leverage," Kayden said. "Every night I spend with her is a debt collected."

My hands were shaking. Coffee sloshed over the rim of the mug. Burned my thumb. I didn't feel it.

"That's fucked up, man." Daniel's voice was quieter now. "Even for you."

Silence.

Then Daniel again: "Did you ever...I mean, did you ever feel anything real? For her?"

I stopped breathing.

The pause was so long I thought maybe Kayden wouldn't answer. Maybe he'd laugh. Maybe he'd tell Daniel to mind his own business.

"No," Kayden said.

The word was flat. Clean. Final.

I stood in the hallway until my legs stopped shaking. Until the coffee in the mug went cold. Until I could move without falling.

Then I walked back to my room. Set the mug on my desk. Closed the door with the kind of care you use when you don't want anyone to know you're breaking.

I sat on the edge of my bed in the dark.

I didn't cry.

By morning, something had changed.

I woke up at six. Showered. Dressed. Went downstairs and made breakfast like I always did. My mother was at the table reading the Times. Kayden's father was on a call in his office. Kayden came down at seven-thirty in a suit, hair still damp.

He kissed the top of my head in passing. "Morning."

"Morning," I said.

My voice sounded normal. Steady. I poured him coffee. Two sugars. No cream.

He didn't notice anything.

I went back to my room and opened my laptop. Typed: *UCL graduate photography program.*

I read the application requirements. Portfolio. Personal statement. Two letters of recommendation. Deadline in three days.

I had a portfolio. I'd been shooting since my father gave me his old Nikon when I was fifteen. I had professors who liked my work. I could write a personal statement in my sleep.

I opened a new document and started typing.

Three days later, I hit submit.

That same week, I called a wedding photography agency in Brooklyn. They needed weekend shooters. I told them I was available. They sent me a contract. I signed it.

I opened a new bank account. Just my name. No joint access. I deposited my first paycheck from the agency. It wasn't much. But it was mine.

I started keeping a list. Every dinner the Montgomerys paid for. Every piece of furniture in my room. Every flight, every dress, every doctor's appointment over five years. I went through credit card statements my mother had forwarded me once for tax purposes. I called the penthouse accountant and asked for records, saying I needed them for financial aid applications.

The number, when I finally had it, was thirty million dollars.

I stared at the figure on my spreadsheet for a long time.

Then I saved the file and closed my laptop.

Six weeks later, the email came.

Congratulations. You have been accepted into the Master of Arts program in Photography at University College London.

I read it once. Closed the laptop. Put on my coat. Went to Midtown to shoot a corporate gala.

That night, I sat on my bed and pulled out my phone. Scrolled to a contact I hadn't called in two years.

Rosa Franklin. My father's best friend's wife. The woman who sent me birthday cards with handwritten notes inside. The woman who'd told me once, at my father's funeral, that if I ever needed anything, I should call.

I pressed dial.

She picked up on the second ring. "Lena?"

"Hi, Mrs. Franklin." My voice was steady. Calm. "I'm sorry to call so late."

"It's never too late, sweetheart." Her voice was warm. Concerned. "Is everything all right?"

"I got into UCL," I said. "The graduate program. I'm moving to London."

"Oh, Lena." She sounded genuinely happy. "That's wonderful."

"I was wondering..." I paused. "Does Nathaniel still have that flat near Bloomsbury? The one with the extra room?"

Silence.

Then, quietly: "He does."

"Would it be..." I stopped. Started again. "Would it be possible for me to stay there? Just until I find my own place. I'll pay rent. I just need—"

"Lena." Rosa's voice was firm. Gentle. "It's already yours."

I closed my eyes. "Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me," she said. "You don't have to explain anything either."

I didn't.

That night, I booked a one-way flight to London. Eight weeks away. January sixteenth.

I started packing. One box at a time. I rented a storage unit near JFK and moved things there on weekends when everyone thought I was shooting weddings.

Kayden didn't notice.

No one did.

I was very, very careful.