

## After I Heard My Stepbrother's Cruel Revenge Plan c 2

Kayden brought her home on a Thursday.

I was in the kitchen when I heard the elevator. My mother was arranging flowers at the island. White roses. She looked up when the doors opened.

Kayden walked in first. Then her.

Estrella Garza was taller than I remembered. Dark hair swept over one shoulder. Red dress that probably cost more than my camera. She smiled at my mother like they were old friends.

"Mrs. Montgomery," she said warmly. "It's been too long."

My mother set down the roses. "Estrella. What a lovely surprise."

"I hope you don't mind." Kayden's hand rested on the small of Estrella's back. Proprietary. Deliberate. "I wanted to share some news."

He looked at me then. Held my gaze. Waited.

I was holding a coffee mug. Still warm. I set it down carefully on the counter.

"We're engaged," Estrella said. She lifted her left hand. Diamond the size of a knuckle. "As of last night."

My mother made a soft sound. Surprise or pleasure or both. She moved around the island to embrace Estrella. Said something about how wonderful it was. How happy she was for them.

Kayden was still watching me.

I picked up my mug again. Took a sip. The coffee had gone cold.

"Congratulations," I said.

My voice was steady. Calm. I looked at Estrella when I said it. Not at Kayden.

Estrella's smile widened. "Thank you, Lena. That's very sweet."

I nodded. Set the mug down again. Started to turn.

"We're planning a party," Estrella continued. "My birthday's in two weeks. We thought we'd combine the celebrations. Engagement and birthday together."

"That sounds nice," I said.

"It's going to be at the rooftop venue in Tribeca," she went on. "The one overlooking the Hudson. Two hundred guests. Full catering. Live band."

I reached for the dish towel. Wiped my hands. "I'm sure it'll be beautiful."

"Actually—" Estrella tilted her head. "I heard you do photography now. Freelance work."

I looked at her. She was still smiling. Bright. Interested.

"I do," I said.

"Would you be available?" she asked. "For the party? We'd pay your rate, of course. I've seen some of your event work online. It's quite good."

My mother glanced at me. Something uncertain in her expression.

Kayden said nothing. His jaw was tight.

I folded the towel. Set it on the counter. "What's the date?"

Estrella told me. I pulled out my phone. Checked my calendar. The date was open. I'd kept it open on purpose. Flight to London was two days after.

"I'm available," I said. "Send me the details and I'll draw up a contract."

"Wonderful." Estrella clasped her hands together. "This is going to be perfect."

I picked up my camera bag from the chair. "I have a shoot in Brooklyn. I should go."

"Of course," my mother said. "Drive safe, sweetheart."

I walked toward the elevator. Pressed the button. The doors opened immediately.

Kayden's voice followed me. "Lena."

I stopped. Didn't turn around.

"Congratulations," I said again. Then I stepped inside and the doors closed.

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I didn't go to Brooklyn.

I went to the storage unit near JFK. Unlocked the door. Stood in the small space surrounded by boxes I'd been packing for weeks.

I sat on the concrete floor. Pulled my knees to my chest.

I still didn't cry.

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The next morning, I woke up at six. Showered. Made coffee. Sat at my desk and opened my laptop.

I heard the bathroom door open behind me.

I didn't turn around.

Kayden stood in the doorway. I could see his reflection in the dark screen of my laptop. He was wearing the shirt he'd worn yesterday. Hair uncombed. He looked like he hadn't slept.

"You're not going to say anything?" he asked.

His voice was different. Compressed. Hard. But underneath—something else. Something I didn't have a name for.

I zipped my camera bag. Checked the lens caps. "About what?"

Silence.

I stood. Slung the bag over my shoulder. Turned to face him.

He was watching me the way you watch something you're trying to solve. Figure out. Control.

"About Estrella," he said.

I looked at him. Really looked. At the man who'd slipped into my room at two a.m. for five years. Who'd whispered promises in the dark. Who'd held me like I mattered.

Who'd told Daniel Holt it was never real.

"She seems nice," I said. "I hope you'll be very happy."

I walked past him. Close enough to smell his cologne. The same one he'd been wearing the night I stood outside his study holding coffee that burned my hands.

He didn't move. Didn't reach for me. Didn't say my name again.

I walked out of my room. Down the hall. Into the elevator.

The doors closed.

I rode down forty-three floors in silence.

When I reached the lobby, I pulled out my phone. Opened my banking app. The separate account. The one with just my name.

Balance: \$847,000.

I had eight weeks left.

I put my phone away and walked out into the cold.