

After I Heard My Stepbrother's Cruel Revenge Plan c 3

Estrella moved into the guest suite on a Saturday morning. She arrived with six suitcases and a decorator.

I was in my room editing photos when I heard her voice in the hallway. Bright. Cheerful. Talking to my mother about throw pillows.

I saved my work and closed my laptop.

By evening, the guest suite looked like a magazine spread. White furniture. Gold accents. Fresh peonies on every surface. Estrella stood in the doorway admiring it while Kayden leaned against the frame beside her.

"Perfect," she said.

He kissed her temple.

I walked past them to get water from the kitchen. Neither one looked at me.

The first incident happened on Monday.

I'd left my portfolio prints on the dining table to dry. Twenty prints. My best work from the last two years. I was submitting them with my UCL application as supplementary material.

Estrella was hosting a lunch. Four women from her charity board. I heard them in the living room when I came back from a shoot.

I walked into the dining room and stopped.

Red wine. Across all twenty prints. The liquid had soaked through the paper and pooled on the table underneath.

Estrella appeared in the doorway. Hand over her mouth. Eyes wide.

"Oh my God." She rushed forward. "Lena, I'm so sorry. I was gesturing and the glass just—I didn't see them there."

I stood very still. Looked at the ruined prints. Two years of work. The best frame I'd ever captured of a bride in Central Park. A street portrait in Chinatown that had won a small award. A sunset over the Brooklyn Bridge that I'd taken the week after my father died.

Gone.

"It was an accident," Kayden said from behind me.

I turned. He was standing in the archway. Arms crossed. Expression flat.

"I know," I said.

Estrella touched my arm. "I'll pay for reprints. Whatever you need."

"They were originals," I said. "There are no reprints."

Her hand dropped. "I really am sorry."

I picked up the least damaged print. Held it by the corner. Wine dripped onto the floor.

"It's fine," I said.

I carried the prints to my room. Laid them on my desk. Sat down and looked at them for a long time.

Then I opened my laptop and started editing backups. I had digital files. I could print new ones. It would cost money I'd been saving for London. But I could do it.

I worked until three in the morning.

The next day, I shot a wedding in Brooklyn. Deposited the check on my way home.

Balance: \$923,000.

The second incident happened on Wednesday.

I came home from a corporate event in Midtown and found my camera bag moved. It had been on the chair by the window in the living room. Now it was on the floor by the coat closet.

Estrella was on the couch with a magazine. She looked up when I walked in.

"Oh, I hope you don't mind," she said. "I tidied up a bit. There was so much clutter."

I looked at my bag. Then at the chair. My laptop case was gone too. I found it in the hallway closet. Under a stack of Estrella's shopping bags.

"The living room is a shared space," Estrella continued. "I thought it would be nice to keep it presentable. For guests."

Kayden walked in from his study. Loosening his tie.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

I pulled my laptop case from under the shopping bags. "Fine."

Estrella smiled at him. "I was just explaining that I tidied up."

He glanced at me. Then at her. "Makes sense."

I picked up my camera bag. Carried both to my room. Closed the door.

I didn't say anything.

I had six weeks left.

On Friday, I overheard her in the kitchen. Talking to one of her friends on the phone. I was in the hallway. She didn't know I was there.

"It's exhausting," Estrella said. Laughing. "She's always around. Kayden says she's the stepsister who never learned to take a hint."

Silence while the friend responded.

"I know," Estrella said. "But she'll be gone soon. She's applying to schools abroad. Kayden told me."

I stood in the hallway until she hung up. Then I walked into the kitchen.

She turned. Smiled. "Lena. I didn't hear you come in."

"I'm going out," I said. "I have a shoot."

"Of course," she said. "You're always working. It's admirable."

I picked up my keys from the counter. Walked out.

I shot a wedding in Queens. A small ceremony. Fifty guests. The bride cried during the vows. The groom held her hands and smiled.

I captured it all. Every frame clean. Every moment documented.

I deposited the check on Monday.

Balance: \$1,150,000.

The gala was on a Thursday.

I arrived at the rooftop venue at five. The space was already transformed. Crystal chandeliers. White roses everywhere. Tables set with gold flatware. The Hudson stretched out below, glittering in the last light.

Two hundred guests. All of them dressed like they'd walked off a runway.

I wore black. Comfortable shoes. My camera bag over my shoulder.

The event coordinator found me immediately. Handed me a shot list. "We need candid shots during cocktail hour. Formal group shots at seven. Then the highlight reel."

"What's the highlight reel?" I asked.

She checked her clipboard. "Kayden and Estrella. Center frame. A kiss. It's for the slideshow."

I looked at the list. Nodded. "Got it."

I worked the room. Captured guests arriving. Estrella greeting people at the entrance. Kayden shaking hands with men in expensive suits. The band setting up. The bartender pouring champagne.

At seven, I shot the formal groups. Estrella with her family. Kayden with his father. The two of them together, his arm around her waist.

I checked every frame. Adjusted lighting. Moved on.

At eight, the coordinator found me again. "We're ready for the highlight shot."

I followed her to the center of the room. Kayden and Estrella were already there. Waiting.

Estrella's dress was silver. Backless. Her hair pinned up. She looked like someone who'd been preparing for this moment her entire life.

Kayden wore a black suit. No tie. Top button undone. He looked at me as I approached.

I raised my camera. Adjusted the settings. "Whenever you're ready."

Estrella turned to Kayden. Smiled. Lifted her face.

He kissed her.

I looked through the viewfinder. Found the focus. His hand on her waist. Her fingers on his chest. The chandelier above them casting light across their faces.

I held his gaze through the lens for exactly one second.

He was watching me. Even with Estrella in his arms. Even in the middle of the kiss. His eyes were on mine.

Searching. Testing. Waiting for the crack.

I adjusted my focus to Estrella's jawline. Took three clean frames. Checked the preview screen.

Perfect exposure. Sharp focus. Everything in frame.

I lowered the camera. "Got it."

I moved to the next setup without another word.

I got home at midnight. The penthouse was dark except for the kitchen.

I set my camera bag on the counter. Pulled out my laptop. Started uploading the evening's files to the client drive.

The bathroom door opened behind me. Kayden.

He walked to the bar cart. Poured himself a drink. Stood at the floor-to-ceiling window with his back to me.

I watched the upload progress bar. Seventy percent.

Silence.

"You were good tonight," he said finally.

His voice was careful. Measured. Like he was complimenting a stranger.

Eighty percent.

"It's what you paid me for," I said.

Ninety percent.

He didn't turn around. Just stood there. Glass in hand. Looking at the city below.

One hundred percent.

I closed my laptop. Unplugged my hard drive. Packed my camera.

I picked up my bag and walked toward my room.

"Lena," he said.

I stopped. Didn't turn around.

Silence.

I waited. Five seconds. Ten.

He didn't say anything else.

I walked to my room. Closed the door. Locked it.

I set my equipment on my desk. Sat down. Opened my banking app.

Balance: \$1,220,000.

I had five weeks left.

I closed the app. Turned off the light. Lay down in the dark.

I still didn't cry.