

After I Heard My Stepbrother's Cruel Revenge Plan

Chapter 4

I took the subway to Green-Wood Cemetery on a Tuesday morning. The columbarium was in the older section. Marble and stained glass. Quiet.

I came every year on this day. Brought white chrysanthemums. My father's favorite.

The space was empty when I arrived. Just me and the rows of urns set into the walls. I found his. Third row. Center. The brass plate still shone.

Jared Mitchell. Beloved father and friend.

I set the flowers in the small vase beneath his name. Sat on the bench across from him.

"Hi, Dad," I said quietly.

I told him about London. About the acceptance letter. About the flat Rosa had arranged. I didn't tell him about Kayden. He already knew. I could feel it in the stillness.

I sat there for twenty minutes. Maybe longer. The light through the stained glass made patterns on the floor. Red and gold and blue.

I heard heels on marble before I saw her.

Estrella walked in like she'd been invited. White coat. Black gloves. Hair perfect.

She smiled when she saw me. "Lena. I thought I might find you here."

I stood slowly. "How did you know I'd be here?"

"I saw it in your calendar," she said. Casual. Easy. "On the kitchen iPad. You'd circled today's date."

I said nothing.

She moved through the space with her head tilted. Examining the urns like they were art in a gallery. Her gloved fingers traced the edge of a marble shelf.

"It's smaller than I imagined," she said. "For someone who apparently meant so much."

I kept my hands folded. Kept my eyes on my father's urn.

Footsteps behind me. Heavier.

Kayden.

He stopped in the doorway. Looked at Estrella. Then at me.

"You texted me," he said to Estrella.

She turned. Smiled. "I thought you'd want to be here. For Lena. It's a difficult day."

I didn't look at him. I sat back down on the bench. Looked at the chrysanthemums.

Estrella moved closer to my father's shelf. She leaned in. Pretended to read the inscription.

"Jared Mitchell," she read aloud. "What did he do? For work?"

"He was a photographer," I said quietly.

"Oh." She straightened. "That's where you get it."

She stepped back. Her heel caught on nothing. The stumble was slow. Practiced. A half-second too long.

Her shoulder hit the shelf.

My father's urn tipped forward.

I lunged. Too late.

The ceramic struck the marble floor. The sound was clean. Final.

It shattered.

Ash spread across the white marble in a gray arc. Pieces of ceramic scattered. The brass nameplate skidded toward the wall.

I dropped to my knees.

My hands were shaking. I reached for the ashes. Tried to gather them. But they slipped through my fingers. Dust. Nothing.

Behind me, Estrella gasped. High. Pained.

"My ankle," she said. "I think I twisted it."

I kept my eyes on the floor. On the gray dust that used to be my father.

Kayden moved past me. I felt the air shift.

He didn't look at the ashes. Didn't look at me on my knees. He crouched beside Estrella.

"Let me see," he said.

His voice was soft. Concerned. The voice he used to use with me.

Estrella leaned into him. "It hurts."

He slipped one arm under her knees. One behind her back. Lifted her like she weighed nothing.

"I've got you," he murmured against her hair.

He carried her toward the exit. She rested her head on his shoulder. Her eyes were closed.

At the door, he paused.

Not to look back at me. Not to say anything.

Just to adjust his grip.

Then they were gone.

I knelt alone on the marble floor. Ashes on my hands. Pieces of ceramic cutting into my knees.

I tried again to gather the dust. Cupped my palms. But there was nothing to hold. Just gray powder that stuck to my skin and disappeared.

The light through the stained glass had shifted. The red pattern stretched across the floor now. Across the ashes. Across my hands.

I don't know how long I stayed there.

Eventually, a staff member came. An older man with kind eyes. He brought a small brush and a container.

"Let me help," he said gently.

I moved aside. Watched him sweep the ashes carefully into the container. He worked slowly. Methodically. Got every bit he could.

When he finished, he handed me the container. "I'm very sorry for your loss."

I took it. The weight was wrong. Too light. But I held it carefully.

"Thank you," I whispered.

He nodded and left me alone again.

I sat on the bench. Held the container in my lap. Looked at the empty space on the shelf where my father's urn used to be.

The chrysanthemums were still there. White petals against dark marble.

I stayed until the light changed again. Until the columbarium was dim.

Then I stood. Picked up the container. Walked out into the cold.

I took the subway home. Held the container against my chest the entire way.

When I got back to the penthouse, it was dark. Everyone was out.

I went to my room. Set the container on my desk. Sat down and looked at it.

Then I opened my laptop. Checked my flight confirmation.

January sixteenth. Four weeks away.

I opened my banking app.

Balance: \$1,220,000.

I closed the laptop. Turned off the light.

I lay in bed in the dark. Stared at the ceiling.

And finally, for the first time in months, I cried.