

The South family's power was nothing to scoff at. Before long, a small boat came gliding toward the shore.

The bodyguards stood stiff-backed, hands behind them, eyes sharp and watchful as they forced Keira and Lewis down to the waterline. Once the boat steadied, the two were shoved aboard.

They glanced around, puzzled.

The boat looked small from the outside, but inside it was surprisingly well-equipped—plenty of food and water for nearly a week, life jackets, tools for navigation, even gear for emergencies at sea.

It wasn't much bigger than the vessel they'd taken to get here, but the design was just as complete, maybe even safer.

Keira exchanged a look with Lewis. Something was off.

Just moments ago, they'd been mocked as untrustworthy mainlanders, and now they were being handed a boat stocked like a rescue craft?

Was this really how the South family treated outsiders? If someone didn't know better, they'd think they were family. Surely Thomas wasn't doing all this just because Scarlet called them friends.

Family.

The thought struck Keira like lightning. She looked at Lewis, and he gave the faintest nod.

Her fingers, hidden behind her back, twisted slightly, and the rope binding her slipped free. She stepped quickly off the boat before it could shove off, lifted her chin, and called out, "Mr. South, may I have a word?"

Thomas's brow furrowed. His voice was cold. "There's nothing to say. Get out of here. This isn't your place."

"If you still want us gone after I speak, I won't argue," Keira said quickly.

He hesitated, frowning, clearly torn. At last he waved a hand, and the bodyguards parted to make way.

Keira jumped down, walked up to him, and in a voice only he could hear, said, "Uncle."

Thomas's eyes flickered with alarm, but he recovered fast, lowering his voice with a scowl. "What did you just call me?"

Keira smiled faintly. "Uncle. I know you recognized me."

He took a step back, letting out a short, cold laugh. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Don't think pretending closeness will change anything. I'm not as easy to fool as Scarlet."

Keira chuckled softly. "Then why stock that boat so carefully? Since when does the South family care this much about the safety of a couple of nobodies?"

His brow creased. "That was just the boat available."

"And if you really wanted us gone, you could've just thrown us out of the compound," she pressed. "Why insist on escorting us away? Uncle, what is it you're afraid of?"

Thomas had no answer. After a pause, he said curtly, "We're done here. Leave."

He turned as if to go.

"Uncle, I know you recognized me. Even if you send me away today, I'll find a way back," Keira called after him, her voice firm and unshakable.

Thomas stopped and looked at her. A long sigh escaped him. She was his sister's daughter—how could he not see it in her face, in that same quiet strength?

The South family's world was a tangled mess. He had schemed for years and still couldn't free his sister. What chance did Keira have, with no footing here? Keeping her close might only destroy her. That was why he wanted her gone.

But he hadn't expected her to be this sharp, this resolute. So much like her mother.

"Uncle, running away won't solve anything. And I will take my mom away," Keira said, her eyes cutting through him.

"Your mother wouldn't want you in danger," Thomas muttered.

Keira smiled faintly. "I'll take care of myself."

They stood in silence, staring at each other.

Though this was their first meeting, Keira felt a jolt of something deeper. The bond of family.

Surely her uncle had fought hard to rescue her mother too.

Just as the thought crossed her mind, dozens of armed men suddenly appeared, surrounding them.

Machine guns leveled, muzzles trained on Keira and Thomas.

"Don't move!"

Keira froze. In the next second, Thomas stepped in front of her, shielding her. Lewis moved quickly to her side, the two men boxing her in protectively.

Then a sleek car rolled up and stopped. Out stepped Lena South and a middle-aged man, both looking smug and self-assured.

Lena jabbed a finger toward Keira and Lewis, her voice shrill. "Dad, those are the two outsiders who bullied me! Kill them!"