

Chapter 1 Bloodline

"Prisoner 00061, take your things. Someone's waiting for you outside. Sign the papers, and you're free to leave. As a parolee, you'll be under a three-month supervision period. If you break any laws during this time, you'll be sent straight back."

So I can finally leave?

For the first time in a long while, a ripple of emotion surfaced in Sierra Xander's otherwise lifeless eyes.

Clang.

The iron door slowly shut behind her, leaving a frail, slender figure standing alone.

The scorching summer sun blazed down, its intensity almost unbearable. Any normal person would shy away from the heat, but Sierra tilted her head back, letting the sunlight wash over her face. She hadn't felt the warmth of the sun in so long.

The golden light highlighted her pale, delicate features, making her seem even smaller, almost fragile. Her long, curled lashes trembled slightly, like a startled butterfly.

Soon, fine beads of sweat formed on her skin. The heat was suffocating, but it made everything feel real.

She was finally out.

Not far away, a sleek black Maybach was parked in the shade.

The window rolled down, revealing a cold face filled with impatience.

"Sierra."

Sierra lowered her head and finally noticed the car and the man inside—her eldest brother, Bradley Xander.

She hadn't expected him to come.

Oh, right. He was her assigned supervisor. He had to be here.

She had wasted his time. He was probably pissed.

As soon as she got in the car, Sierra spoke before Bradley had the chance. "Sorry for keeping you waiting."

She wasn't about to get sent back again. Her supervisor had the power to return her at any time, and she needed to make it through these three months without any trouble. Apologizing? She was used to it.

Bradley had been ready to throw out a sarcastic remark, but her words caught him off guard. He hesitated for a moment before his face darkened. "You don't have to apologize. You're my sister—picking you up is the least I can do."

"Thanks," Sierra replied politely.

His words sounded nice, but she didn't believe them.

When she was first brought back to that house, she had thought they genuinely welcomed her.

Later, she realized that no one in that house wanted her—not even her own mother.

She was their real daughter, yet everyone preferred the child that had been switched at birth.

Her mother told her, "Denny has been with us since she was a baby. It's hard for us to adjust right away, but it'll get better. You're our real daughter. As long as you behave and stay obedient, why wouldn't we love you?"

So Sierra did what she was told. She was well-behaved, careful, and tried her best to fit into the family.

But when she got first place in school, there were no words of praise—only criticism.

"Don't mention your grades in front of Denny. Are you trying to show off?"

"Denny isn't worse than you. She just has health issues."

"You're hurting her feelings."

She stopped talking about her achievements. Getting first place lost all meaning because no one would be happy for her.

Back then, she still thought she had to be the bigger person.

She was the older sister. She had to give in to her younger sister.

Her parents and brothers just needed more time to accept her. If she was patient, if she behaved, they would treat her like they treated Denny.

But in the end, all her waiting led to was Denise Xander driving without a license, causing an accident that killed someone, and forcing Sierra to take the fall.

"Denny isn't well, and she doesn't have a license. She'll get a heavy sentence. You're the only one who can help her."

Sierra refused, but Bradley brought up her grandmother. "You know your adoptive family's situation. Your grandmother is still in the hospital. Her treatment is expensive, and they can't afford it."

Bradley continued, "If you agree, I'll get the best doctors for your grandmother. I'll hire the best lawyers for you. You won't be in any real trouble—at worst, it's just a few months in prison."

Bradley tried to persuade her further. "I would never let anything happen to you. You're my real sister. Trust me."

She had still held onto hope back then.

She had waited.

And waited.

She spent three years waiting for someone to take her home.

Now, she wouldn't believe them again.

The atmosphere in the car was suffocating.

Bradley glanced at Sierra through the rearview mirror. She was sitting quietly in the farthest corner of the backseat, taking up as little space as possible. His brows furrowed.

She hadn't been like this before.

She used to trail behind them all the time, always trying to find something to talk about.

If they so much as spoke a few words to her, she would be happy for days.

But now, she was completely silent.

Thinking about the three years she had spent locked up, Bradley felt an unfamiliar pang of guilt. He tried to make conversation.

"Dad's on a business trip, but everyone else is home. They're all waiting for you. Aren't you happy?"

Happy?

If she had heard this before, she would have been ecstatic.

But now, she felt nothing.

She had long since stopped hoping for their love.

She didn't respond to Bradley's question. Instead, she asked in a soft voice, "Can you take me to see my grandmother?"

Right now, the only person she wanted to see was her grandmother—the only person in the world who had ever been good to her.

After that, she needed to find a way to get back to school. She didn't care about family anymore. She just wanted to resume her studies in chemistry and biology.

Only by developing more medications could she gain the ability to bring her grandmother out of that hospital—only then would she have the power to stand against the Xander family.

Bradley's face instantly turned cold. "Sierra, we are your family. Everyone is waiting for you, and you want to go see an outsider?"

Sierra's eyes flickered. She lowered her gaze. "Alright, I understand."

Seeing how "obedient" she was being, Bradley felt like he was punching cotton. Irritated, he snapped,

"You don't have to be so stiff. I'm your brother."

Sierra smiled faintly but said nothing.

No, you're not my brother. I don't have a brother. I don't have a family.

The black Maybach pulled up in front of a large private estate, but Sierra didn't move.

She had never been here before.

So... they had moved?

Bradley walked a few steps before realizing she hadn't followed. He frowned impatiently. "What are you standing there for?"

Sierra snapped out of it and quickly caught up.

After walking a few steps, Bradley suddenly remembered—two years ago, they had moved.

She had been in prison back then.

Looking a little uncomfortable, he said, "The old house wasn't a great environment. You know how Denny's health is. We thought it was best to move."

He hesitated before adding, "And... you were locked up at the time, so we didn't tell you."

Sierra lowered her gaze, hiding the mockery in her eyes.

Of course. It was for Denny.

She had originally wanted to study chemistry and biology, but they said Denny wasn't in good health.

They told her she was the older sister, so she had to take care of Denny.

So she had been forced to major in literature instead.

On her eighteenth birthday, her only wish had been for her family to take her to an amusement park—something she had never experienced.

But in the end, they stayed home because Denny wasn't feeling well.

She was always the one left behind.

She was used to it.

Bradley grew impatient. "If you have something to say, just say it. What's with this attitude? Acting like someone wronged you."

No wonder they didn't like her. Compared to Denny, Sierra was just dull and irritating.

Losing interest, Bradley walked ahead, assuming she would follow.

After all, she had always been obedient.