

## Chapter 6 Grandmother

The Coleman family lived in shacks outside the city, a world apart from the Xander family's luxury.

The stench of rotting vegetables and garbage filled the air, made even worse by the summer heat. The smell was suffocating.

But Sierra's expression didn't change.

She had lived here for fifteen years. She was used to it.

Besides, prison had smelled far worse.

She wasn't sure if the Colemans still lived here.

After all, the Xander family had given them a hefty sum of money—more than enough to keep them comfortable for the rest of their lives.

Her foster parents had changed their phone numbers, leaving her unable to contact them.

Coming here was a gamble.

But it seemed luck was on her side.

As soon as she stepped into the alley, she heard her foster father, James Coleman, yelling in frustration.

"Crying again? That's all you ever do! What, you at a funeral or something? No wonder I keep losing money—it's gotta be your bad luck rubbing off on me!"

The sound of something crashing against the floor followed, along with a woman's pleading voice.

Sierra stopped in her tracks.

This scene was all too familiar.

For as long as she could remember, these sounds had echoed through the house.

Later, when the insults and blows had turned on her, all she had ever wanted was to escape.

She was lost in thought when—

Bang!

The front door swung open.

A drunken man stumbled out, cursing as he spat on the ground.

"Useless b\*tch... rotten luck... damn money-sucking—"

His ramblings came to an abrupt stop when he saw Sierra standing there.

Blinking a few times, he rubbed his bleary eyes.

When he realized it really was her, his dull gaze lit up with excitement.

"Sierra Coleman? My daughter! You came back to see me!"

James grinned, reaching out to grab her arm.

Sierra stepped back, effortlessly dodging him.

His expression darkened as if about to get angry, but something made him hold back.

Forcing a smile, he changed tactics.

"Come inside! Your mother's here too!"

"Yulia! Yulia! Our daughter's home! Come out here!"

Almost immediately, a woman with a swollen, bruised face ran to the doorway.

Sierra's foster mother—Yulia Lewis.

"Sierra..."

Yulia whispered her name, reaching for her hand.

But Sierra dodged her touch.

An awkward silence followed.

James scowled and shoved Yulia aside.

"Stupid woman, can't you see Sierra is a Xander now? You think just anyone can touch her?"

Then, with a smile, he turned back to Sierra.

"But Sierra, you've got a good heart. You still came back to see us. Unlike that ungrateful brat—gave birth to her, but she never once looked back!"

As he spoke, he cursed Denise under his breath.

"They say the one who raises you matters more than the one who births you. Guess that's the truth, huh? Don't you think so, Sierra?"

Sierra looked at James' eager expression.

She knew exactly what he wanted.

Curling her lips into a mocking smile, she said, "Mr. Coleman, I don't have any money."

James' fake kindness vanished in an instant.

His voice rose in anger.

"A Xander family daughter saying she has no money? You ungrateful little thing! I raised you for fifteen years—hell, even a dog would've learned some loyalty by now!"

Kicking over a nearby stool, he grabbed Sierra by the collar.

"I don't care—you're giving me money today."

"If you don't, I'll strip you naked and throw you onto the street! The Xander family wouldn't want that kind of humiliation, would they?"

Sierra's face remained expressionless.

"You could throw me onto the street naked, and they still wouldn't care."

Her voice was eerily calm.

"The Xander family already cut ties with me. Didn't you hear?"

James' grip slackened.

His curses stopped abruptly.

Clearly, he had heard about it.

His irritation grew.

He had assumed Sierra was here to bring them money.

But she had nothing.

Frustrated, he raised his hand to hit her—something he had done countless times before.

"You useless piece of—"

But before he could land the blow, Sierra grabbed his wrist.

Cold amusement flickered in her eyes.

"Try it."

James froze.

For the first time, he truly saw her.

She was taller than he remembered, nearly his height now.

She wasn't a defenseless little girl anymore.

"You think I spent three years in prison for nothing?"

Sierra rolled up her sleeve, revealing a long, jagged scar on her arm.

James gulped.

Only now did it sink in.

She had done time.

A chill ran down his spine.

He yanked his arm free and spat to the side. "Tch. Bad luck."

Then, shoving past Sierra, he stormed off—almost as if running away.

Only when he was gone did Yulia step forward hesitantly.

She looked at Sierra with a mix of wariness and hope.

"Sierra... are you okay? Let me see."

She reached for Sierra's hand again.

Sierra dodged it once more.

Hurt flickered across Yulia's face, along with something like guilt.

But Sierra didn't care.

"Where's Grandmother?" she asked.

Yulia hesitated.

"S-she's inside..."

Sierra didn't wait.

She pushed open the door to the innermost room.

The moment she stepped inside, the stench nearly overwhelmed her.

Even after everything she had endured, the sheer foulness made her stomach turn.

And then—

She saw the frail figure on the bed.

Her grandmother.

She was skin and bones, barely more than a skeleton wrapped in paper-thin skin.

Sierra's eyes burned red.

"Grandmother."

She rushed forward.

The room was tiny and airless, suffocatingly hot.

No fan. No air conditioning.

Her grandmother had been left in this suffocating, filthy space.

The frail woman stirred, lifting a trembling hand toward her.

"Sierra... Sierra..."

"Grandmother!"

Sierra quickly grasped her hand.

It was so thin.

Nothing but bones.

"You're finally back," her grandmother whispered.

She tried to touch Sierra's face but hesitated, glancing at her own dirt-streaked fingers.

"Let me see your leg," Sierra said softly.

Three years ago, her grandmother had needed surgery.

Avascular necrosis of the femur—rare, but treatable with the right operation.

She had begged Bradley for help.

And he had agreed.

But only if she took the fall for Denise.

She reached to lift the blanket off her grandmother's legs—

But her grandmother grabbed her hand.

"There's nothing to see. I'm fine," she said weakly.

"I'm just old. I don't like moving around much anymore."

Then, her gaze softened.

"Sierra... tell me the truth. Did anyone bully you in there?"

Sierra's heart clenched.

Two days.

She had been out for two days.

And of all the people she had met, her grandmother was the first to ask her that.

She wanted to say yes.

That she had been bullied, terribly so.

But instead, she smiled.

"No one bullied me."

"Really?"

"Really," Sierra lied smoothly. "You know me, Grandmother. I was always well-behaved. The prison guards took good care of me."

Her grandmother studied her face, then sighed in relief.

"That's good. That's all I needed to hear."

"Grandmother, come with me," Sierra whispered. "I have money now. I can take care of you."

"In three months, I'll be completely free. Move in with me then, okay?"

She had no family left.

Except for her.

Her grandmother didn't answer.

She just patted Sierra's hand gently.

"As long as you're doing well, I'm happy."

"I've been so worried about you. But now... I can finally be at ease."

Her voice sounded off.

Her hand was burning hot.

Sierra's expression changed.

"Grandmother?"

"I'm fine... just a little tired..."

But Sierra had already lifted the blanket—

And what she saw made her blood run cold.