

The-Heiress-Revived-from-the-Ashes

Chapter 1 She Was Finally Free

The cold iron gates of the prison in Haverdale creaked open.

Sunlight fell on Lauren Bennett's gaunt, sallow face.

The clothes she had worn when she was incarcerated now hung loosely on her frail frame.

She had endured five dark, endless years in prison. Today, she was finally free.

Dragging her legs, Lauren hobbled out of the prison, step by slow step.

She moved sluggishly, not because she didn't want to walk faster, but because she simply couldn't.

A black Bentley was parked by the roadside. The window rolled down, revealing a man's deep-set, brooding face.

His gaze swept over her injured leg. He let out a cold scoff, the mockery in his eyes blatant. "After five years in prison, you're still putting on an act."

Lauren's heart clenched unexpectedly, and a sour sting rose in her eyes.

Elliot Bennett was her biological brother.

Ever since she had been brought back to the Bennett family from the orphanage at fifteen, she had done everything she could to please him.

Yet for the sake of an adopted sister who wasn't even related to him by blood, he had personally falsified evidence to convict her of attempted murder.

Five years had passed, and he was still as sharp-tongued and as disgusted with her as ever.

Lauren swallowed the bitterness, pretending not to see Elliot as she limped forward.

Elliot's face stiffened.

She had ignored him.

In his memory, Lauren had always clung to him, eager to please.

When he came home, she would bring him his slippers.

When he was tired, she would massage his shoulders.

When he had trouble sleeping, she would bring him chamomile tea every night.

When work kept him too busy to come home for dinner, she would wait outside his office with a thermos, undeterred by rain or shine.

During the three years she had been in their home, his chronic stomach issues had eased. But ever since she went to prison, he had often woken up in the middle of the night from the pain.

Today, he had actually felt a hint of joy when he heard she was being released. He had even postponed an international meeting to pick her up.

He had expected her to be overjoyed at seeing him, had even prepared himself for her to break down and complain about the suffering she had endured.

He had never imagined she would greet him with nothing but silence and indifference.

The admiration in her eyes was long gone. All that remained was distance.

A strange, hollow feeling rose in his chest, irritating him. His grip on the steering wheel tightened, veins bulging on the back of his hand.

His voice came out harsher than he intended. "Get in the car."

The moment the words left his mouth, he regretted them. With a frown, he forced himself to soften his tone. "Dad and Mom know you're out today. They've prepared a welcome-home dinner for you."

Dad and Mom. Such familiar yet foreign words.

In the orphanage, she had dreamed of having parents who would love her, who would spoil her like a princess.

She had waited and longed for it for fifteen years.

Fifteen years later, her wish had finally come true.

She had parents now, even a tall, handsome, and capable brother.

But the beloved daughter of the family wasn't her. It was the adopted daughter they had raised since childhood, Willow Bennett.

Those people weren't her parents. They were Elliot and Willow's parents.

Lauren scoffed at herself.

During those three years in that family, she had endured endless cold shoulders and humiliation. She had always known she was unwanted. There was no reason to go back and subject herself to it again.

Though she walked slowly, she never stopped.

Her indifference, her stubborn retreat, stung Elliot's eyes and ignited a nameless fury in his chest.

He pushed open the car door and strode after her, his long legs easily closing the distance. He grabbed her wrist and yanked her back. "Have you had enough of this act?"

Thrown off balance, Lauren crashed to the ground. Pain shot through her injured leg, her face turning deathly pale.

Elliot's anger flared. "Still playing weak? Is this your new trick?"

"Don't forget, you were the one who pushed Elaine down the stairs five years ago and left her in a coma. You even tried to frame Willow for it. Five years in prison, and you still haven't learned your lesson? Looks like it wasn't enough to reform you."

With that, he grabbed her and hauled her up without an ounce of care. His voice was laced with disgust. "Don't think your sentence erases your sins. As long as Elaine remains unconscious, your crime will never be absolved. And you still owe Willow an apology. Get in the car. Don't make me say it again."

Lauren only found it laughable.

She had explained before. Elaine Gray wasn't pushed by her. It was Willow.

But no one had believed her. They had all chosen Willow's side.

She was the biological daughter of the Bennett family, yet everyone had placed their trust in Willow's words instead.

She was guilty, indeed. Guilty of ever returning. Guilty of ever hoping for a love that was never hers.

She had learned her lesson. She would change.

She would leave, far away, and never again fight for the affection of a family that didn't want her.

Why is Elliot so displeased?

She calmly pulled her hand from his grip and took a step back, putting distance between them.

Her deliberate withdrawal made Elliot's chest tighten with frustration. His mind flashed with images of the old Lauren, the girl who had once followed him around, desperately trying to win his favor.

Suppressing his anger, he tried to soften his voice. "Come home with me."

Lauren lowered her eyes, her expression blank, as if she couldn't even be bothered to look at him.

Her lifeless demeanor made Elliot's rage boil over.

Five years in prison, and if she had learned anything, it was how to grow a temper.

Just as he was about to snap, a warm, gentle voice interrupted.

"Laurie."

Lauren's body tensed. Her heart, which had been numb for so long, clenched in an instant.

Even after five years, she recognized that voice immediately.

It was Lucas Reed, her childhood friend.

She saw a pair of polished leather shoes enter her line of sight. A deep, magnetic voice spoke above her.

"Laurie, congratulations on your freedom."

If anyone else had said that, she would have politely replied, "Thank you."

But coming from Lucas, the words grated on her ears.

Her most trusted childhood friend, Lucas, had taken on his first case after graduation as Willow's defense attorney, the one who had put her behind bars.

Before the trial, he had said to her, "Laurie, Willow has never suffered before. She wouldn't survive in prison. Can you take the blame for her?"

Willow couldn't suffer, but I could?

Just because she was used to hardship, she deserved to take the fall for a crime she didn't commit.

Sending the real Bennett daughter to prison had made Lucas famous overnight in Haverdale.

Five years ago, he had still been a fresh graduate, a little green around the edges.

Five years later, he had become one of the city's most renowned attorneys, exuding power and confidence.

They had grown up together in the orphanage, closer than real siblings.

When other kids bullied her, he had always defended her, swearing, "As long as I'm here, no one will ever hurt you."

He had promised that when he became a lawyer, he would put anyone who hurt her behind bars.

But later, when Willow had hurt her time and time again, he had dismissed her pain with a casual, "Laurie, you're too sensitive. Willow isn't like that."

In the end, it was he, of all people, who had protected the one who hurt her and personally sent her to prison.

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The air grew heavy with silence.

Lucas' smile slowly stiffened, but he forced himself to extend a hand toward her. "Laurie, I came to pick you up..."

Before he could finish, Lauren suddenly turned to Elliot. "You said we're going home, right? Let's go."