

Chapter 2 Why Didn't They Come?

Lauren knew she couldn't escape.

Lucas had once been the person she trusted and relied on the most. Now, he was the one she loathed and least wanted to face.

Rather than confronting Lucas, she chose the next best option—going with Elliot.

At least, from beginning to end, Elliot had always despised her.

The first day she went back to the Bennett Residence, Elliot had warned her, "Even if we share the same blood, in my heart, I only have one sister, and that's Willow. You'd better behave yourself. If I ever catch you bullying Willow, I won't let you off."

He never gave her hope, so she never had too much disappointment. In front of Elliot, the psychological wounds she suffered could at least be minimized.

It was better than being utterly destroyed by the one closest to her.

Prison had taught her a lesson.

When lacking power, status, or support, survival depended on minimizing harm by any means possible.

So, when her cellmates toyed with her and made her choose between disfigurement and a slap, she chose the slap.

When they made her choose between being beaten and kneeling, she chose to kneel.

When they made her choose between drinking toilet water and barking like a dog, she chose to bark.

She had fought back desperately before, but the more she resisted, the worse the beatings became. To stay alive, she threw away her dignity and let herself be used.

Even when thrown among the most vicious criminals, she had still managed to survive, barely hanging on, by knowing when to avoid harm.

Lauren walked toward Elliot's black Bentley.

As she brushed past Lucas, her expression remained indifferent. She didn't even spare him a glance.

The loose T-shirt skimmed past Lucas's fingertips. The emptiness of the touch didn't feel like fabric draping over a person. It was more like cloth hanging on a lifeless mannequin.

Lucas' hand froze midair. In that instant, it felt like the air around him had solidified, leaving only that cold, hollow sensation at his fingertips.

Pain and desolation flashed through his eyes, and his heart felt as if an invisible hand had clenched it tight, every beat throbbing with dull agony.

Once, her gaze had always followed him, full of trust and dependence.

They had grown up together in the orphanage, supporting each other. Whenever he called her name, she would always smile and answer, "Luca, I'm here."

But now, time had changed everything.

She looked right through him, as if he didn't exist, unwilling to even meet his eyes.

Lucas' lips trembled slightly. He wanted to speak, but his throat felt blocked, unable to make a sound.

Lauren got into the car and sat in the back seat. Everything in sight bore traces of another woman.

The passenger seat had a fluffy pink cushion. The dashboard was lined with an entire row of adorable bear figurines. In the rearview mirror, the woman's reflection looked more mature than five years ago, more alluring.

She was beaming, the kind of smile that only someone raised in comfort and luxury could have.

That happiness on her face was like a silent taunt, mocking Lauren as the fake heiress.

She had thought she could face all this indifferently. But seeing it with her own eyes still left a bitter sting in her chest.

Lauren withdrew her gaze, but her eyes inadvertently landed on the handbag beside her.

Inside was a pristine white gown. Even without seeing the whole dress, the intricate feather embellishments hinted at its elegance.

Her fingers unconsciously rubbed against the rough denim of her jeans.

Every detail inside the car reminded her that she didn't belong here.

From head to toe, she wasn't even worth as much as the gown in that handbag.

She turned to look out the window. The scenery blurred past in a rapid retreat.

Elliot, still driving, didn't forget to warn her, "Mom and Dad have missed you so much these past five years. They cried over you every day, their hair turning gray with worry. When you get home, keep your temper in check. I don't want to see you scheming against Willow again, making things difficult for them. As long as you behave, the Bennett family won't treat you unfairly."

Silence followed his words.

Hearing no response, Elliot frowned in displeasure and glanced at her through the rearview mirror.

"Lauren, I'm talking to you. Did you hear me?"

Lauren finally looked up at him and spoke the longest sentence she had since leaving prison.

"According to Article 48 of the Prison Law, inmates are allowed visits from family or guardians once a month, for thirty minutes to an hour. I was imprisoned for five years; that will be sixty months. If I had one visit per month, I could have seen them sixty times. But I never saw them once. You say your parents missed me. Then why didn't they come? Were they so busy that they couldn't spare even thirty minutes a month?"

Her voice was calm, but every word was a blade, slicing through his lie without mercy.

Guilt and panic flickered across Elliot's eyes. The reprimand he had prepared was caught in his throat, unable to come out.

Avoiding her steady yet piercing gaze, his fingers instinctively tightened around the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white from the pressure.

"It... It's because you were too hard to discipline. Mom and Dad didn't visit you because they wanted you to focus on correcting your bad behavior. They did it for your own good."

*For my own good? Letting me take the fall for Willow, making me suffer in prison... So, that's their idea for my own good. What a joke.*

Lauren felt drained, utterly uninterested in arguing anymore. She turned her gaze back to the window.

Before long, the car pulled into the Bennett Residence garage.

Elliot seemed pleased. He grabbed the handbag from the back seat and hurried off.

A few steps away, he suddenly remembered Lauren. His body stiffened, and when he turned back, there was still a trace of awkwardness on his face.

"Go change into a proper gown and head to the banquet hall."

With that, he left without looking back.

After five years, this house was still as unfamiliar to Lauren as ever.

She had never felt an ounce of warmth here.

This place wasn't even as good as the orphanage.

At the orphanage, she hadn't had a private room, but at least she had shared a sunlit dorm.

When the sun rose, light would pour through the windows, filling the room with warmth.

Back then, she loved the scent of blankets basked in sunlight. It made her feel like she had a home.

But after returning here, she realized that her so-called home wasn't the scent of sun-warmed blankets.

It was the damp, musty stench of a place the sun never reached.

She pushed open the door.

The room was small, windowless, and packed with clutter.

The only two pieces of furniture were a single folding cot and an old desk.

This was the storage room that served as her bedroom for three years.

Elliot had told her to wear a proper gown.

But she had never owned one.

For years, she had only had one set of her high school uniform. The T-shirt and jeans she was wearing now had been bought with money she earned from a holiday job on Amazon, for five bucks total.

She still remembered the day she had happily put them on and asked Elliot how she looked.

His brows had furrowed in disgust.

"What the hell are you wearing? Can't you learn to dress elegantly and properly like Willow? Take it off and get rid of it! Don't embarrass our family."